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THE TRUMPET OF THE DON

Must leadership be loud?

TOM PLATE

Stumped by Trump? Horrified by Hillary? Apprehensive about America?

As a therapeutic aid, dear distinguished reader, this column proposes to examine - and even appreciate - a totally different style of public leadership: the low-key. Yes, that kind.

Remember the old days? Remember Hu Jintao, the predecessor to China's current maximum leader Xi Jinping? The uber-quiet Hu was widely assessed as so low-key as to not even require a key chain. But maybe second thoughts are in order about this whole business of political peacocks the strut their stuff even if they don't have any.

Let's start with a little insight from the late, great American writer E.B. White, in his touching tale *The Trumpet of the Swan* (1970): "'All [trumpeter] swans are vain,' explained the cob. 'It is right for swans to feel proud, graceful—that's what swans are for.'"

Now apply this to the less graceful world of politics - as in: 'All politicians are vain, but it is right for them to feel proud - that's what politicians are for.' Like swans, perhaps we might say, politicians when they are in full crowing, obnoxious mode are simply being true to themselves. Expecting a political figure to be humble, as for a swan not to be vain, is to fight the nature of things.

And so this year, as almost everyone in the world knows, a bevy of American trumpeter swans have been winging their way toward The White House. Last week, one of the last still wedging forward - Hillary Clinton - did a sort of politician's swan dive from the heights of serious public policy to honk back at Donald Trump's many prior public insults. Originally billed as a foreign policy address, the speech was anything but. Many pro-Hillary commentators and her outright allies applauded, as in: *This lady can honk with the worst of them!*

Maybe, but as we see it: really, there's nobody that quite trumpets like The Don.

Perhaps all Clinton's swan dive proved is that birds of a political feather do flock together: In public politics, it sometimes seems as if nothing is too vulgar. The Don has already denounced the former U.S. secretary of state and First Lady as "crooked." What could be a worse charge than that?

Ah – there is at least one other calumny of consequence, far worse than "crooked." It is, in today's value system, the sin of being "colorless."

Colorless – we recall- is exactly what our hard-hearted, colorful Western media dubbed Hu Jintao, who, between 2002 and 2012, served as paramount leader of China – the Communist Party's General Secretary and the country's president. This meant that for ten years he was one of the two most powerful leaders on the face of the earth. But the man got scant respect, at least in the West. A U.S. newsmagazine once dubbed him "cautious, colorless and corporate ... the kind of guy you wouldn't think twice about."

It's time for a reappraisal of Hu's true hue – and of 'colorless' politicians in general – in a re-calibration of leaders whose colorlessness might simply hide (and even nurture?) a healthy measure of calm reflection. Maybe the Hu Jintao style, reflecting collective leadership, was less inherently colorless than properly cautious. "Colorful" flares can trigger explosive flare-ups; a low-key, stay-calm style can prevent relations from going off-key or gang-bang.

Here is one telling example: the little-known story of President Hu's state visit to the U.S. in January 2011. To almost everyone's surprise and relief - on both sides- it went quite well. For his part, China's president returned home impressed by the possibilities of reducing bilateral tensions and instructed the central government's Propaganda Department to tone down the anti-American stuff. That moment of good feeling did not last forever, of course. But the story illustrates the point that colorlessness is not necessarily the enemy of effectiveness. It might even be a symptom of a statesmanship that values quiet results over prideful flamboyance.

By contrast, the current, successor administration in China is anything but colorless. But all the pushing and shoving – rhetorical as well as naval, especially by Beijing, but Washington, too (swan diving?)– can make one nostalgic for the calming balm of calculated colorlessness. The escalating language over who owns what in the South China Sea is producing new tension, triggering an Asian arms race and coloring the very way America and China view each other.

As the experienced and extremely knowledgeable Susan Shirk, now a University of California professor, and former State Department star in the Bill Clinton administration, once pointed out in a discussion on the US-China relationship: "Over the past several years, Americans have noticed with apprehension a steady drumbeat of [mainland] media messages about America's supposed 'containment' of China that have undoubtedly been officially encouraged. The precedents of Germany and Japan show how this kind of commercialized semi-controlled media, by creating myths and mobilizing anger against perceived foreign enemies, can drag a country into war."

China is of course a nuclear power. The entire world would be better off, to be sure, if the U.S. relinquished a substantial portion of its nuclear vanity and compacted it down to China's more modest arsenal. But for that day of disarmament-control epiphany to ever come, considerably more mutual trust, reasoned discourse and deft diplomacy will be needed. That's one good reason to leave open the possibility of appreciation of political leaders that offer the calm of colorlessness rather than the trumpet of the Don. The non-grandstanding Hu style has so much more to say for it than perhaps heretofore acknowledged.

But you can always honk if you don't agree.

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