

Why Donald Trump's wild week matters. A lot.

By Stephen Collinson

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(CNN) — Here are some of the things Donald Trump did in a week that at first appeared to be an incoherent torrent of unrelated events but may end up being one of the most significant of his presidency:

He [tore at the fabric of the Western alliance](#), challenged [American values at home and abroad](#), [praised autocrats and adopted their rhetoric and positions](#). He blamed [Democrats for his own policy of separating kids](#) from undocumented migrant parents and [set off a trade war with China](#). After meeting North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in an epochal encounter in Singapore, he shocked the world by saying the murderous dictator [loved his people](#). And back home, [another round of primaries](#) and clashes with the cowed congressional GOP only served to cement his power over his party.

Yet while the President plunged into a staggering range of issues and controversies, there was a method to it all.

More than ever before, Trump imposed his personality and political will on Washington and the world. He went further than ever in crafting an alternative reality around his White House that may be misleading but has enthralled millions of people.

Trump's impromptu press conference on the North Lawn of the White House on Friday unfolded as a breathtaking display of charisma, misrepresentation, hubris and

salesmanship that has no obvious parallel in the modern history of Western democracies.

And Trump, as his West Wing staff begins to hollow out and his fascination with the techniques and personalities of global autocracy grows, appears intent on expanding the scope of his own power.

He was so confident he even let reporters in on his secret in Singapore when he said that he believed Kim would follow through on vague commitments to denuclearize but would just change his story if the North Korean leader fell short.

"I may stand before you in six months and say, 'Hey, I was wrong.' I don't know that I'll ever admit that, but I'll find some kind of an excuse," Trump said.

A different world

All politicians paint a version of reality that can inspire and motivate their followers. But few have gone as far as Trump in creating a different dimension that blurs established fact, defies accountability and knocks the rest of politics off its axis.

Trump constructed a world in which an inspector general's report from the Justice Department cleared him of collusion and invalidated Robert Mueller's investigation - it did not.

He claimed he had lifted the North Korean nuclear threat -- he did not -- and Pyongyang has so far done nothing after the summit to destroy its nuclear and missile program.

Trump claimed there were hugs and kisses at the end of the G7 summit -- in fact multiple diplomatic sources have described the meeting as the most acrimonious in the modern history of the West.

The President insisted that a law passed by Democrats required the separation of children from their parents when undocumented families cross the southern border. That is not correct.

The point about Trump's embroidered versions of truth is not that it's misleading but that it offers a narrative that his allies in conservative media and on Capitol Hill can inflate.

There aren't many dissidents in the Republican Party but [Tennessee Sen. Bob Corker -- who has the luxury of a looming retirement that permits him to critique the President -- warned the GOP risked becoming a "cult-like" situation.](#)

Throughout the week, Trump appeared to be sending up trial balloons on the nature of power -- sometimes flippant and sometimes sinister.

For instance in a Fox News interview on Friday, he noted that when Kim speaks "his people sit up at attention," adding, "I want my people to do the same."

He later insisted he was kidding, though it didn't seem like it at the time. After all, Trump had earlier in the week saluted a general from North Korea, where the armed forces are the instrument behind the world's worst human rights record.

The President also slammed US and South Korean military maneuvers as "provocative" and called for Russia to be let back into the G7/G8, continuing his odd habit of adopting the foreign policy positions of US adversaries in Beijing, Pyongyang and Moscow.

Another aspect of Trump's method of power projection that doesn't seem funny is his frequent musing over his pardon power and insistence that he could even wield it to absolve himself if necessary.

His top lawyer Rudy Giuliani also fueled an impression of a president willing to flex expansive power when he insisted that the inspector general's report meant the Mueller probe should be frozen then told the [New York Daily News](#) that the investigation could be "cleaned up" with presidential pardons.

Trump's explainers often accuse the media of taking the President's words too literally or of mistaking his sarcasm for intent when he slips into autocratic rhetoric.

Some Republicans say his unorthodox approach to North Korea, and his heavy flattery of Kim may be worth a try.

"We have a little window open and the President is trying to go through it in the way that he does things, some people don't like it, some people may think it's not appropriate. But we have got some sunshine where we had nothing," Scott Jennings, a former special assistant to President George W. Bush, told CNN's Jake Tapper on Friday.

"And I think most Americans are going to say -- well we are trying something different and maybe that's the answer."

The cult of the victim

But Trump's media appearances this week have also revealed another trait he shares with his autocratic friends like Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Kim -- a tendency to conjure a feeling of victimhood around himself, his followers and the nation.

For Trump, when the media fact checks his many falsehoods or points out that his summit with Kim produced no verifiable framework for North Korea's denuclearization, it's evidence of "unfair" coverage by "the fake news."

Any suggestion that his campaign colluded with Russia or that he obstructed justice is evidence of a "deep state" witch hunt against him.

His entire vision for diplomacy is based on a transactional calculation of dollars won and lost and the idea that America's oldest allies, many in the G7, have been ripping it off for years.

And by stoking resentment over immigration, he is making an implicit case to his supporters that their culture is being victimized by outsiders.

[Ruth Ben-Ghiat](#), a professor of history and Italian studies at New York University, has conducted in-depth studies of fascism and says that the idea of victimhood is an essential component of the methodology of many autocrats.

"It has two dimensions. First is the idea that the strongman is ... there to be a savior of a people who have been ripped off by other nations -- or mistreated ... 'we got a raw deal, other powers are taking advantage of us so we have to go it alone,'" Ben-Ghiat said, noting Trump's "America First" philosophy.

"The other dimension is because these rulers present themselves as embodying the nation, their own victimhood narrative (means) ... when you attack them you are attacking the nation."

Trump came close to embodying the second dimension, portraying himself as the personification of the United States in his response to the FBI raid on the office and residences of his personal lawyer Michael Cohen in April.

"It's an attack on our country in a true sense. It's an attack on what we all stand for," the President said.

Ultimately, the fate of Trump's efforts to test the limits on his power will depend on countering weight of institutions. He has already outfoxed his Republican critics. Democrats must mount a comeback at the ballot box if they are to thwart him.

America's allies in Europe are showing signs of fighting back -- though in the final analysis they depend on US might for their security.

Perhaps the most viable check on Trump is the law. And there were ominous signs for the President on Friday after his ex-campaign manager Paul Manafort was jailed for violating bail conditions -- a move that will hike pressure on him to cooperate with Mueller.

[CNN's Kara Scannell reported](#) that Cohen, stung by his treatment by Trump, has told family and friends he is willing to cooperate with federal authorities.

While those developments hint at potential threats to Trump, they could also tempt him to use the powers he has been publicly flexing. If he does, American democracy could face a fateful test.