

The rise of the American autocracy

Power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts, absolutely. You'll get no disagreement on that statement made by the British historian Lord Acton from Americans. We're seeing autocrats pop up everywhere these days, thanks to power grabs by our state governors. Many observers will point to the Coronavirus as the principal reason for the governors' actions, and while that may very well be true, it is not the only reason for the autocratization of our states' executives. The other is, quite simply - *it's an election year* - and Blue state governors have been encouraged by their Party's elders to push back at the Trump Administration in every way possible to secure a Democrat win in November.

Most of us are not surprised at this approach; it's happened before, but not to this extent. The governors may have been misled, however, by their national party bigwigs. By throwing in with - or giving in to - street thugs and mayhem-makers they may have actually lost some of their base' support instead of increasing it. The reason is simple. Gore somebody else's ox and it's a shame; gore mine and it's a downright attack. It's actually common sense 101. We respond in our own self-interest no matter how much we might support idealistic goals. When our personal situation is at risk like it is on our streets and in our cities, we start to question the wisdom of the autocrats to whom we have given power. That brings us to the question...who do we blame?

The answer is, we can only blame ourselves for giving our local leaders more power. Take our own state of New Mexico - a sparsely populated, largely rural one. In point of fact, we ought to have two governors, one for urban NM and one for our rural citizens, so different are their needs and their lifestyles. Those who strongly disagree with our governor's power grabs are probably saying, "Oh, my God, one of those is enough!" But hear me out. Too much power is vested in their offices which is why the system of checks and balances should be expanded in states with single-party domination like we have in New Mexico.

Granted, this is just wishful thinking on my part, but we do need to recognize that when power is concentrated too narrowly or rests in too few hands, the result is loss of freedom for the rest of us. How does one push back at autocrats, then? Ironically, we can look to the autocrats themselves for the answer. All autocrats start out as activists who subscribe to an ideology. There's nothing unusual about that. As activists, they generally have boundless energy and feel imbued with a strong sense of righteousness about their ideology that borders on zealotry. (*Their belief that their ideology is THE right one propels them to take extreme measures to force it on everyone else.*) Once they achieve a critical mass of support from other individuals, they form coalitions of like-minded groups to attack all areas of their perceived enemy's defenses.

They use the power of elected or appointed office, crises like the Coronavirus, public relations, the media, money from appropriations and money from wealthy contributors to further their concentration of power. They also routinely lie. Again, no surprise there. How then do we stop them from achieving their goals? They say that sunlight is the best disinfectant and while that may very well be true, it's hard for sunlight to reach the darkest corridors of power when autocrats have blocked up the windows which they often do. In a state like ours, where the Democrats outnumber the Republicans two to one and dominate the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches of government along with holding most of the important municipal and county offices, it would seem impossible to unseat the autocrats or minimize their control over us.

While that may be the case, the average person does have power, but that power is dispersed and not concentrated, especially when one looks at the Republican Party in New Mexico. It is splintered, loosely coordinated and poorly financed. The Party's principals do not choose to confront the opposition, directly, but prefer to soften their tone and treat the power-brokers with kid gloves, fearful of retribution to their personal reputations or their businesses.

Autocrats here have no problem in doxxing, going after open bidders for state business contracts, launching character assassination campaigns and the like. This is part and parcel of their playbook and it's why it makes them so dangerous.

To combat them, we must be stealthy and straightforward at the same time and take a few pages from their own battle plans and use tactics from their own favorite works like 'Rules for Radicals' and Machiavelli's 'The Prince.' This will be difficult for those who are used to playing by a set of socially defensible rules of engagement, but if the object of the game is to beat the autocrats instead of feeling good about the tactics we employ when we lose, then it's high time Conservatives revise their strategy. There's not much time left in this election cycle, but if we do nothing now we may never have another chance to do anything, later.

Stephan Helgesen is a retired career U.S. diplomat who lived and worked in 30 countries for 25 years during the Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush Administrations. He is the author of ten books, four of which are on American politics and has written over 1,000 articles on politics, economics and social trends. He can be reached at: stephan@stephanhelgesen.com