

The Fall of the Great Distractor?

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Donald Trump built his popularity by skilfully shaping public discussion with his scandalous tweets. But after Michael Flynn's arrest it's clear that the president's favourite weapon – which was instrumental in winning the presidency – may also bring him down.

'It must be horrible to cover American politics now', a renowned British journalist and a former Washington correspondent told me recently. For months now Trump has been steering public discussion and since he's the president every journalist needs to follow him whatever he says, tweets or even retweets. 'He's a genius', said my interlocutor with a strange mix of irony and awe in his voice.

It is true that Trump played the media game very adroitly but the logic of this game is usually misunderstood. It's often said the Republican candidate won because he managed to by-pass traditional media by establishing a direct relationship with his voters via Twitter. Nothing can be further from the truth.

Today, one year after the elections, Trump has almost 45 million followers on Twitter. That may look like an impressive number, until one realises Barack Obama's account is followed by more than twice that many people and the famous footballer Cristiano Ronaldo has over 65 million followers [plus over 100 million on Facebook]. If only social media decided on people's political choices, Obama's support of Hillary Clinton should have easily outweighed Trump's influence, especially since during the campaign Trump's Twitter community was half its current size.

The Republican candidate succeeded because he managed to combine his social media activity with his omnipresence in the traditional media. Every other message Trump tweeted as a candidate was immediately commented by major newspapers, radio shows and news channels. He managed to set the tone of the public debate well before he was elected.

After the victory Trump continued with his strategy. whenever in trouble because of his policy decisions, lack of support in the Republican dominated Congress, controversies surrounding his closest associates, or plain lack of any tangible achievements of his administration, Trump took to Twitter to change the subject. That was the main point of his long fight against NFL and footballers protesting police brutality, his derogative tweets aimed at the North Korean leader and his skirmishes with the London mayor or recently with the British Prime Minister. To avoid scandals erupting around him, the president has used only one solution – creating scandals of his own. Usually with the help of Twitter.

Although Trump is not a bookworm, to say the least, he seems to have intuitively understood one of Sun Tzu's lessons listed in his famous 'Art of War', namely that 'All warfare is based on deception'. What the president does not understand, however, is another maxim saying that 'He who can modify his tactics in relation to his opponent and thereby succeed in winning, may be called a heaven-born captain'. Trump has

repeatedly used the same answer to all the problems haunting his presidency. It worked so far but Michael Flynn's arrest – or more broadly Robert Mueller's investigation – clearly show limits to these tactics.

After Flynn, the former National Security Adviser, admitted to lying to the FBI, Trump again took to Twitter bashing his opponents, undermining the credibility of the media, and pointing to... Hillary Clinton and her e-mails. In his Twitter frenzy, however, the president not only failed to divert attention but made a statement by which he may have incriminated himself.

'I never asked Comey to stop investigating Flynn. Just more Fake News covering another Comey lie!' Trump tweeted on Sunday 3rd of December. This is a statement directly challenging James Comey's sworn testimony before Congress given back in May. Comey replied to the President's comment by tweeting: 'I want the American people to know the truth: The FBI is honest. The FBI is strong. And the FBI is, and always will be, independent.'

The way Donald Trump phrased his tweet makes it clear that either the president or the former FBI director is lying and it may be only a matter of time to verify who that person is.

If Mike Flynn – who has pledged to fully cooperate with Robert Mueller's investigation – challenges the President's claim this single tweet may be used as a vivid proof Donald Trump knowingly lied to the American people.

He president's strategy so far was to tweet his way out of every crisis. This time, however, the Great Distractor may have just fallen victim to his own weapon.