

IF TRUMP'S PROTESTORS DIDN'T EXIST HE WOULD HAVE TO INVENT THEM

Since last Friday's canceled Trump rally in Chicago, there has been quite a bit of discussion about protestors at Trump rallies – both the propriety of disrupting his events and some scolding about what a bad tactical move it was for protestors to shut down the Chicago event, as well as some sudden realization among the chattering classes that Trump really does espouse violence.

I'd like to take a different approach and look at how Trump uses protestors.

For months, Trump has made protestors an integral part of his schtick at rallies. A person of color, a woman in hijab, a woman with a walker shows up and either silently protests, perhaps holding or wearing an anti-Trump slogan, or does boo and call out. Purportedly in response to earlier disruptions, Trump instructs attendees *before any disruption* not to hurt the protestors, but instead to surround them, holding up Trump signs and chanting his name, until security comes to throw the protestor out. “Get him out of here!” Trump yells after his attendees have disinfected the herd. This is all part of the rhythm now of Trump’s rallies, a way to reinforce the mob mentality in a participatory way. Supporters become more than mere voters: they get deputized into reinforcing the purity of the herd, like drone bees cleaning out a hive.

I'm agnostic about the efficacy of protestors thus treated – they serve a useful function for Trump, sure, but given that every rally he does is covered on TV, they also serve as witness to the violence and assumed nativism of the rallies (not that the chattering classes seemed to take

all that much notice before last weekend). But any individual's decision to protest is their own choice, and I fiercely admire the courage it takes to walk into one of those rallies and serve as witness.

Of course, the neat formula Trump has long relied on depends on having – or rather, maintaining the illusion of – a majority. The “Silent Majority” has really become something closer to the “Silent 30%” or even “Silent 25%,” but at Trump rallies it appears as if those no-longer silent angry people are a majority.

On Friday, Trump lost control of that illusion.

I agree with William Daley, among others, who suggests that Trump chose to create a confrontation by scheduling an event at UIC. But I also think protestors got a sufficient mass of organized protestors to the event to thwart the managed confrontation Trump was hoping for, because they deprived him of the illusion of a majority. So he canceled the event before even showing up, falsely citing Chicago Police Department warnings.

I'm agnostic here, too, about the efficacy of this protest. One thing that has been largely – though not entirely – ignored (which itself testifies to something about the efficacy of speech rights in this country) is that the protest was part of a larger effort, including the effort to oust Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez in today's election; there were even “Bye Anita” signs at the protest. That is, the protest of Trump's speech was part of a larger effort to fight systematic abuse of minorities, and as such had an affirmative message as well, though I admit the message reinforced afterwards – by both the protestors and press – is that they shut him down. I believe Alvarez has been leading in the polls, so we'll see this evening whether the larger movement against her police cover-ups has achieved its goals.

But in questions of efficacy, I think it worth

remembering how the Black Lives Matter protest of the Netroots Nation debate between Martin O'Malley and Bernie Sanders last July (which seems to have been entirely forgotten as people feel sorry for Trump). O'Malley basically gave up his microphone willingly; Bernie was more perturbed. A lot of attendees in the audience (the equivalent of all the Trump supporters who were deprived of their opportunity to hear him speak on Friday) were really angry; but many of those same people also wrote pieces in the weeks later talking about how important a learning opportunity being discomfited in such a way was. And *that* protest was undoubtedly effective, as it made the criminal and social justice issues a key focus of the Democratic primary. That's not to say Trump protestors are as likely as Netroots Nation attendees to reflect on the privilege that attends uninterrupted speeches by white men, but sometimes protests do lead observers to rethink their own role (as, for example, mosque protestors in AZ who were invited inside only to learn about Islam in an unmediated way).

Let's look, however, at what has happened in the days since Friday. On Saturday, Trump canceled and then uncanceled an event in Cincinnati, citing Secret Service concerns. Also on Saturday, protestor Thomas DiMassimo rushed Trump on stage (something I don't defend, as it created real concerns about Trump's safety; DiMassimo is lucky he wasn't shot). Finally, in Kansas City, protestors achieved the result that Chicago protestors might have imagined: the sustained silencing of Trump, which he used to 1) claim Sanders supporters were the problem and 2) reinforce his love for the police.

Since then there have been reports of Trump finally doing what he chose not to do before (I argue, because protestors play a key function in his rallies): screening attendees of likely protestors, including profiling on race, which carries with it its own visual messaging that may even influence attendees. Yesterday, Trump retreated to his less visceral means of

reinforcing the bully structure of his campaign, again referring to Rubio as “Lil Marco” and publicly humiliating Chris Christie.

Here’s the underlying point, though. Amid all the discussions of both the law and norms surrounding interrupting speech, few have accounted for the way that well-managed spectacle is a key (arguably the key) to Trump’s attraction. That spectacle relies partly on Trump’s mock frankness – his ability and willingness to say anything he wants, including repeated promises he will address presumed grievances of his supporters. But it relies, at least as much, on his ability to mobilize a mob in a certain way, including to create the illusion for that mob that they are part of a coherent pure majority. That mob gives them the illusion of power they believe they have been illegitimately stripped of. It’s an illusion, of course, but Trump is a master at managing that spectacle to prevent cracks from forming in that illusion.

And this is why the response to Trump has largely been so ineffectual. Polls in FL showed that voters were more likely to support Trump given Friday’s shutdown (so on that level, at least, the protest may have backfired). But DC pundits scolding Trump has largely the same effect, reinforcing the sense of grievance. So if the DC press want to do something about Trump’s frightening power, they might do more reflection about how they have been a willing partner in it.

The way to weaken Trump is not to continue to magnify his spectacle, as the press has done non-stop for a year. This is tough for cable news to manage, because they are in the business of spectacle.

One way to weaken him is to reveal how Trump has exacerbated the grievances motivating his supporters, never addressed them. As a reminder, one of the only times Trump has really backed down over the course of this campaign was when Bernie attacked him for wanting to lower wages,

because that's a truth that, reinforced, might sow doubt.

The other way to is to disrupt Trump's manufactured spectacle of strength, because his supporters are only going to support him so long as they believe his bluster about always winning (which relies, in part, on the bullying he performs at his rallies). I'm not sure whether disruption of rallies does that or not. Magnifying the degree to which Trump is a fearful man would. Reporting on his many failures would. Certain kinds of reminders of his past weaknesses might (though some would reinforce the sense of grievance).

Side note, one spectacle that did not get shown by the press were the protests in Detroit in advance of the GOP debate there. So as people complain about protestors not simply standing powerfully outside, know that the press has chosen in the past to ignore that spectacle.

I suspect Marco Rubio's advisors had it right, even though they delivered it through the absolutely wrong messenger. Trump's reliance on guest workers (he likes to conflate skilled H1B workers, which have been a central part of GOP debates, with unskilled H2B workers he employed at Mar Lago) and his use of Chinese manufacturers for his campaign swag are both real vulnerabilities. And if someone wants to suggest Trump is operating out of some sense of inferiority because he has a small flaccid penis and small hands to match, that may well undercut the spectacle of virility that Trump has affirmatively cultivated.

I think Megyn Kelly (because she's a woman who has succeeded in making Trump look dumb, once Fox stopped letting Trump dictate her role in coverage), and – before Trump equated protestors with Bernie Sanders (maybe still, though I don't know) – Bernie, are two of the few people who have the ability to undercut Trump's power on mobilizing grievances. Probably some centrist union leaders have the same ability, as well as a select few faith leaders. There are

vanishingly few people who have the power position to call attention to the degree to which Trump has contributed to his followers' grievances, rather than done anything to alleviate them, but that evidence is out there.

I'm not sure what happens from here. Demographically, there should be no way Trump wins the general election; as I noted, the Silent Majority, to the extent it existed in Nixon's era, is a minority now. Assuming it will be a Trump – Clinton race, I don't know that we know, because Clinton will have a harder time addressing those grievances, and because the high negatives of both candidates will make turnout really unpredictable (though I also suspect Hillary will be an acceptable crossover vote for many Republican Neocons).

But there is one other unpredictable player here: the cops. For some time, both Ted Cruz and Trump have been feeding the perceived feeling of grievances of cops that they have been unfairly targeted by activists complaining about police violence. As noted, Trump hails the cops even as he dehumanizes protestors. Both Cruz and Trump have been buttering up the cops that may one day have the ability to turn the violence that has been simmering for some time in one direction or another (with the consequent spectacle). Though there were a few reports of heavy-handedness from Chicago cops, in general they did a good job of managing the tensions on Friday. I really, really worry that Cleveland's cops (who are getting some new war toys in advance of the GOP convention) won't exercise the same restraint.

Trump's power rests on spectacle. He will not be defeated, primarily, with a rational argument or some tut-tutting about norms about violence (that, in fact, the US neither culturally nor internationally really abide by in any case), in part because there are few credible messengers of the rational argument about how Trump has contributed to grievances. If his spectacle starts to crack, however, the investment in

Trump as a savior will dissolve. It won't go away – it'll get invested somewhere else, potentially even someone more violent (though that person is unlikely to have the soapbox Trump has). But his power depends on illusion.