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The Fame and Failure of Kellyanne Conway

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By Carl Golden

Serving in a high level staff position in a presidential or gubernatorial administration is an exhilarating, dazzling experience. You are one of a select few privy to information others are not and able to exert influence over policies and decisions of far-reaching consequence.

Moving into a White House or State House office - steps from the epicenter of political and governmental power - where your advice and counsel is sought is heady stuff. Celebrity beckons, much as it does athletes and show business figures.

The media pays attention to your thoughts and opinions. You're recognized in public places, on the street or in restaurants. Television appearances and newspaper photographs become a part of your existence.

Invitations to address all manner of organizations or merely lend your presence to an event stack up in your inbox.

It demands a conscious effort to remain grounded, to forestall an expanding ego. The most effective checkrein on this level of self-importance is perspective - the natural instinct to realize your position's potential while also recognizing its limitations.

A failure to understand power and limits will lead to a two-step outcome - marginalization followed by irrelevancy.

This lesson is being played out very publicly in the case of Kellyanne Conway, counselor to President Donald Trump.

Conway currently occupies a political purgatory - between marginalized and irrelevant - awaiting a suddenly uncertain future.

She scaled political Everest, taking command of Trump's chaotic campaign and guiding him to an election victory which stunned the nation.

She stormed Washington riding a wave of acclaim and flattering profile pieces as the first woman to have chaired a successful presidential campaign.

Alas, her perspective seems to have deserted her.

She became a ubiquitous presence on Sunday morning television talk shows, frequently showing up on several networks on the same day, responding to questions and defending the Trump Administration.

Her high profile rankled other White House staffers who whispered to reporters - anonymously, of course - that she was a shameless attention seeker who didn't await network invitations, but promoted herself aggressively and offered to appear.

Inevitably, Conway flew too close to the sun.

She drew ridicule and disbelief with her assertion the Administration's press strategy was to provide "alternative facts" to coverage it found objectionable.

"Alternative facts" immediately took its place in the history of great rhetorical blunders alongside "I never had sex with that woman" or "it depends what the meaning of is is."

She criticized the media for failing to cover what she called the Bowling Green massacre, an event in Kentucky involving terrorist activity. It rapidly developed that the incident she described never occurred but simply involved the arrest of two individuals for allegedly plotting to obtain and supply weapons to a terrorist affiliated group.

In a later television appearance, she urged viewers to head to their local mall and purchase a clothing line endorsed by Ivanka Trump, the president's daughter.

Imploring consumers resulted in a complaint to the Federal ethics commission as a violation of a law prohibiting the use of a government office to promote a commercial product.

She insisted in an interview that the President had "full confidence" in National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, only to see Flynn fired within hours.

Her stumbles raised doubts about her ability to deal with the pressures of White House life and the unremitting scrutiny it attracts. Critics quickly pounced on her missteps and kept them alive for days and weeks as a reminder the American people had - at great risk - chosen an unorthodox, inexperienced individual as the nation's leader.

Conway's troubles are largely of her own making, products of seeking public attention and failing to recognize the pitfalls of ignoring the limits of her role.

She will, likely, survive, if for no other reason than Trump is indebted to her for playing a key role in his victory. A reward was earned and granted.

She would benefit, though, from dialing back her television appearances and embracing a more subdued approach. She is a capable person with energy, passion and commitment, qualities which would be better harnessed on behalf of the president rather than wasted on confrontations with talk show hosts.

An anecdote in the book "Late Edition," a memoir of his life as a newspaper reporter by Bob Greene, is instructive.

Greene had drawn recognition for his work and, in a conversation with his father, boasted: "I'm a household name."

"So is toilet," his father replied.

Perspective restored.

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