

Trump's first 100 days: A meaningless metric, but it's here to stay

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(Photo: Evan Vucci/AP)

In politics and government, symbols oft-times take on a meaning far out of proportion to their actual impact. Saturday – President Donald Trump's 100th day in office – qualifies as one of those moments.

Ever since Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in the dark and miserable depths of the Great Depression and sent Congress a blizzard of proposals in his first 100 days in office, that timeframe has become a benchmark against which his 12 successors have been measured.

Judging success or failure of a four-year and possibly eight-year administration by keeping score of accomplishments achieved in little more than three months is foolish on its face.

Still, driven largely by the media, the “first 100 days” has become so deeply embedded in the nation's political psyche that it's likely to survive long after Trump leaves office.

The president himself was caught up in the 100 days fervor when, as a candidate, he promised action on a broad variety of fronts – repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, reform the tax code and cut taxes, defeat ISIS, create thousands of new jobs, bring manufacturing back from overseas and “drain the swamp” of the insider conflict-ridden environment of Washington, D.C.

Before January was out, reality set in. He learned what many a candidate discovered upon winning an election: Campaigning is easy, governing is hard.

Recognizing that Jan. 20 to April 29 was a time frame far too constrictive to achieve what he'd promised only a few months before, Trump ridiculed the entire 100 days scenario as an artificial deadline without true or meaningful significance.

The fact that his assessment – harsh though it may be – is correct does not negate the reality that it exists and the media is obsessed with it.

For Trump, the first 100 days seemed to have passed quickly in a city and a government whose pace is considerably more leisurely. It takes at least 100 days for Congress to clear its throat and mutter “good morning” before heading off to a round of meetings while anticipating the next recess.

As a result, he's governed largely by executive orders rather than by legislative victories, a practice for which he criticized President Obama.

His first genuine foray into the thicket that is Congress – repeal Obamacare – embarrassed him when his own party splintered and ditched the proposal he supported without even taking a vote.

His executive orders barring or exerting greater control over immigration from majority Muslim countries led to a flurry of court challenges and the eventual overturning of the orders.

And, construction of a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border remains an architect's rendering and a multi-billion-dollar headache.

He scored an impressive victory with Senate confirmation of Neil Gorsuch to a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court, even though the Senate Republican majority was forced to change the chambers' rules to accomplish it.

He won considerable praise at home and around the world after 59 Tomahawk missiles rained down on an airfield in Syria in response to that government's dictator unleashing poison gas on his own country.

All newly-installed administrations hit speed bumps and potholes at the outset, but Trump's first 100 days were riddled with tales of continuous infighting among White House staff, jockeying for position and throwing sharp elbows at perceived competitors.

With a voracious media seeking the path of least resistance, the behind-the-curtains stories of back-stabbings, undermining of colleagues and unashamed currying of favor with the president played out on front pages, top of the newscasts reports and endless speculation among cable news talking heads.

That the American people dismissed the ongoing drama as inside baseball didn't lessen the media's disproportionate attention to it. For most of the country, the names being thrown around – Bannon, Preibus, Conway, Spicer, Kushner, et. al – didn't mean a great deal.

It was seen as all inside the Beltway gossip and brought to mind the acerbic comment by nationally syndicated columnist George Will: "It is impossible to over-emphasize the unimportance of these people."

Through it all, Trump never changed his style (although he changed his mind with great frequency), and charged relentlessly ahead insisting that all was well and functioning smoothly.

Setbacks and defeats were treated as minor annoyances, easily overcome by alternately optimistic or caustic tweets in the pre-dawn hours – just in time to hit the morning talk shows and dominate the narrative for the remainder of the day. And, his propensity for uttering untruths, half-truths and exaggerations continued unabated.

Trump will play the first 100 days game and his administration will issue an extensive list of actions and accomplishments, including meetings with dozens of foreign government leaders and assuming a more aggressive leadership role in world affairs.

It will make the case that re-positioning the United States as a global power with a willingness to use that power is an achievement that cannot be measured in traditional terms of legislation proposed and legislation enacted.

Trump's repeated assertions that the days of the United States being treated as an international doormat are over will be touted as a singular accomplishment that goes beyond his signature on a bill.

In the view of the administration, in fewer than 100 days the pledge to "Make America Great Again" was fulfilled. Match that, if you can.

The 100 days has elapsed, the countdown is over, new issues and crises await and the media is satisfied that it has fulfilled the mission thrust upon it by history to measure progress or lack of progress after three and one-half months.

It won't be much longer before speculation begins about the Trump re-election prospects and the 100 days obsession is mercifully and deservedly laid to rest. Not to fret, though, this particular symbol will rise again.

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