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COLUMNIST

Trump: Villain, Martyr Or Both?

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Amid the howls of outrage and shouts of jubilation over the indictment in Georgia of former President Donald Trump on charges of attempting to overturn the 2020 election, a few cautionary voices were raised quietly expressing concern that government prosecutors appear to be piling on the ex-president and creating sympathy for him.

The kitchen sink Georgia indictment is the fourth this year and, at 41 counts and 19 named defendants, is by far the most extensive and complex.

The concerned expressions were neither excuses for Trump's rhetoric or condoning his actions. Most came from individuals who'd already judged him guilty of accusations he interfered in the election process by demanding the results be changed by whatever means necessary – including alleged extra-legal ones – to declare him the victor.

They continued to discredit his assertions the election was rigged, despite no evidence to the contrary, and publicly characterized him as a serial liar.

It was an acknowledgement of the risk of a backlash, conferring martyrdom on Trump and fueling the conspiratorial belief the indictments represented a deliberate and relentless use of unfettered government power to destroy a political opponent.

Fulton County, Georgia, District Attorney Fani Willis obviously believes her case is compelling and will win guilty verdicts.

There exists, though, a hint of self-aggrandizement – a desire to seize and hold the center of attention – surrounding her actions in announcing the indictment.

At 19 defendants, it is more than the others – two Federal and one state – and is unique in that it alleges a violation of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization (RICO) Act, a 1970 law used primarily to bring charges against organized crime figures. Georgia is one of seven states with a version of the RICO law.

Her demand that all defendants stand trial together guarantees high intensity media coverage with Willis at the center. Legal scholars have questioned the wisdom of such a massive trial and the potential for a carnival atmosphere – particularly if televised – and a logistical nightmare.

Willis' further demand for a March 4 trial date establishes her as the first prosecutor to place Trump in the witness chair, leapfrogging ahead of the Federal cases and placing her squarely in the center of attention.

Once again, legal experts have opined that her insistence on a start date is unrealistic given the preparatory time necessary, size and complexity of the charges and its potential to consume many months to the exclusion of the other pending cases. With as many as 19 attorneys involved, the number of motions, objections, and hearings will be staggering, dragging the proceedings out through the primary election schedule and possibly the November election.

Willis has amassed an enormous cache of evidence – much of it damning by Trump's own words – and is convinced of the strength of her case. She may very well be correct but avoiding any further actions or comments that could be construed as motivated by ambition or self promotion would be in her best interest.

Willis would not be the first to use an anti-corruption platform as a path to a political career – an accusation sure to be leveled by Trump supporters. It is ironic that one of the defendants, Rudy Giuliani, used his U.S. Attorney's office in New York to wage war on organized crime and rode it to the mayor's office in 1993.

As United States Attorney, former New Jersey governor Chris Christie used high profile corruption cases and courthouse steps press conferences to help punch his ticket to the governor's office in 2009.

Trump's legal and political team will likely level accusations of political advancement against her.

Trump has mastered portraying himself as a victim and can just as seamlessly slide into aggressor mode. He will use the Georgia indictment to support his contention of out of control government prosecutors engaged in political persecution (victim) while continuing to attack it as a witch hunt with no legitimate basis (aggressor).

He can play the martyr with equal aplomb.

His political support will not waver; he'll continue to lead the field for the Republican presidential nomination and may, in fact, secure it.

His lead in polling continues to reach extraordinary heights – a 50-point spread in some – while his competition barely breaks single digits. He remains either deadlocked or within one or two percentage points in a matchup with President Biden.

The indictments have had no impact on his candidacy and, in some cases, strengthened his standing.

The perception of an overreaching government that will stop at nothing in its quest to destroy him personally and politically – a perception he will actively and relentlessly promote – will solidify his support.

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