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UNPRESIDENTED

# Donald Trump is the emperor with no clothes—and the media's playing along

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📷 (Lorenzo Fonda for Quartz)

*Not so long ago, there was an Emperor so exceedingly fond of attention that he spent all his time making his subjects focus on him. He cared nothing about reviewing his soldiers, going to the theater, or going for a ride in his carriage, except to show off. He had a remark for every hour of the day, and instead of saying, as one might, about*

any other ruler, “*The King’s in council,*” here they always said. “*The Emperor’s tweeting.*”

Hans Christian Andersen’s “[The Emperor’s New Clothes](#)” was published in 1837, but versions of the fable have been told for a thousand years. Anderson based his version on [a chapter](#) (link in Spanish) of *Count Lucanor; or The Fifty Pleasant Stories of Patronio*, written in the 1300s. A similar Sanskrit tale is [believed to date](#) to the 10th century. Today, a new version of this story is playing out in the United States.

President Trump’s weakness isn’t fancy clothing, as in the original tale. It is the warm glow of attention and praise—from Americans both appalled and supportive, from global leaders and Republican counterparts, and from the press. His all-consuming need for adoration, and his inability to overlook that hunger to execute even basic governance, is portrayed in detail in Michael Wolff’s new book *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*. Trump’s insistence on Saturday that he’s a “[genius](#)” and a stable one at that, only ratcheted up fears that the book raised.

But the signs were there all along. This is a president, after all, who admitted [pardoning a despised convicted felon](#) during a hurricane, for higher ratings.

Just as with the fabled emperors, Trump’s political support system feeds him the attention he craves, while pretending nothing is wrong. Unlike the fable, though, the worst-case result isn’t a humiliating naked parade through the nation’s capital. It’s a world in which [America is left far behind](#) as the European Union [carries the torch](#) of Western democracy, the dictatorial Chinese Communist Party [creates a brand new framework](#) for the global economy, and [foreign manipulation of US elections](#) becomes a regular occurrence.

## Trump’s Cabinet and the GOP

According to the original story, the emperor is so vain that he orders imaginary clothes from a pair of swindlers who claim that only stupid people can’t see the

material. To protect their posts, the emperor's advisors pretend to admire it. In Andersen's words:

The Emperor undressed, and the swindlers pretended to put his new clothes on him, one garment after another. They took him around the waist and seemed to be fastening something—that was his train—as the Emperor turned round and round before the looking glass.

“How well Your Majesty's new clothes look. Aren't they becoming!” He heard on all sides, “That pattern, so perfect! Those colors, so suitable! It is a magnificent outfit.”

Then the minister of public processions announced: “Your Majesty's canopy is waiting outside.”

“Well, I'm supposed to be ready,” the Emperor said, and turned again for one last look in the mirror. “It is a remarkable fit, isn't it?” He seemed to regard his costume with the greatest interest.

The noblemen who were to carry his train stooped low and reached for the floor as if they were picking up his mantle. Then they pretended to lift and hold it high. They didn't dare admit they had nothing to hold.

As Trump marched through his first year in office, one question kept surfacing: Shouldn't *someone* have stopped him from say, [insulting Native Americans](#), gloating that his tax reform bill is a gift to rich families, [undermining the first amendment](#), [spreading fake videos](#), and [threatening nuclear war on Twitter](#)? Trump's cabinet picks are, after all, grown men and women. His White House advisors are political neophytes, not shrinking violets—they include military generals, wildly successful business people, and a slew of seasoned government veterans.

Don't hold your breath. Remember White House chief of staff John Kelly, who was held out as a possible sobering influence on the White House's unorthodox



ways? Sure, he seemed to cover his face in shame at Trump's promise to "totally destroy North Korea," last year at the United Nations—but he may just as well have been laughing into his palm.



**Kyle Feldscher**  
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John Kelly apparently went through some sort of existential crisis during Trump's UN speech.

6:56 PM - Sep 19, 2017

1,980

23,887

56,409

Nearly four months later, Trump rages on publicly and Kelly remains by his side. So does Trump's core group of Cabinet picks. Turnover in the Trump White House has been steady, but high-profile departures from the White House have been shown the door, not left in disgust. His staff, meanwhile, are so unwilling to confront him that they [cherry pick positive news](#) reports to try to keep him in good humor.

Congress Republicans are in lockstep, too. Early in Trump's presidency, much ink [was spilled](#) (at Quartz [as well](#)) on identifying GOP senators and representatives who might curb his authoritarian impulses, stem his unconstitutional campaign promises, and make the president act more "presidential." Nearly a year later, the overwhelming majority of Republicans in Congress have voted with Trump's agenda over 90% of the time, [according to FiveThirtyEight's calculations](#).

That's just politics, DC pundits argue. Harder to argue away is Republicans' frequent participation in [numerous cringe-worthy public sessions](#) where they lavish the praise and attention on the president. These salutatory gatherings evoke the cult of personality created around [North Korea's Kim family](#), or even Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. This one was on Jan. 4:

President Trump Meets with Republican Members of the Senate about immigration. ...



## The media is being played

So off went the Emperor in procession under his splendid canopy. Everyone in the streets and the windows said, “Oh, how fine are the Emperor’s new clothes! Don’t they fit him to perfection? And see his long train!” Nobody would confess that he couldn’t see anything, for that would prove him either unfit for his position, or a fool. No costume the Emperor had worn before was ever such a complete success.

At the White House Correspondent’s Association’s Christmas party in December, Trump press staff mingled with dozens of reporters over craft beers and a buffet, a CNN reporter traded compliments with a White House spokesperson, and White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders read a mock top 10 list of

books by correspondents. She made fun of a Fox News anchor's hair dye, took aim at former Office of Government Ethics head [Walter Shaub's complaint](#) about Conway's potential violations of the Hatch Act, and skewered one reporter [for objecting to being called "fake news."](#)

The room lapped up the jokes, and then raised an appreciative glass with Sanders at the end as she toasted to the "country that we love."

Since Trump has become president, right-wing news outlets like Fox News have transformed into full-fledged propaganda machines, while others from CNN to the Washington Post to NBC have become thorns in the president's side, relentlessly pursuing the White House's upsets, and investigating the Trump family's conflicts. But on nights like that December evening, it's hard not see a bit of performance in it all.

The Trump presidency has boosted reporters who once toiled in relative obscurity, and been great for the moribund American news business. This past year was CNN's [most-watched ever](#). The New York Times [beat earnings estimates](#) and attracted new investors. People are [paying for news online again](#), and political media [startups are raising millions](#).

Covering Trump's most outrageous remarks, and [giving airtime to his advisors](#), no matter where you are on the media spectrum, attracts readers and viewers. And that plays straight into Trump's hands, said a former government official who was briefly part of the Trump transition team, but has since become disillusioned with Trump's ability to govern.

The president's love of any kind of attention allows him to manipulate the media by constantly shifting focus from his failures to himself. "All news is good news as long as it contains the name Trump," said the former official. "He doesn't give a shit about NFL players taking a knee, but he rolled that conversation out for a month."

“You guys have breaking news journalists who just cover his tweets—and then you want to go on this shame campaign and say ‘I can’t believe you said that, it’s so awful’?”

If the media really were to hold Trump accountable as president, they’d focus on his lack of governance, on the federal budget, on the cost of the border wall with Mexico, on US job creation, he said. “That’s what the American people care about,” he added, “not your moral authority.”

## So how does this one end?

“But he hasn’t got anything on,” a little child said.

“Did you ever hear such innocent prattle?” said its father. And one person whispered to another what the child had said, “He hasn’t anything on. A child says he hasn’t anything on.”

“But he hasn’t got anything on!” the whole town cried out at last.

The Emperor shivered, for he suspected they were right. But he thought, “This procession has got to go on.” So he walked more proudly than ever, as his noblemen held high the train that wasn’t there at all.

In [the Spanish original](#) (Chap. VII), it isn’t a child but a black man who finally tells the ruler that he is riding naked through the streets. The King starts to beat the man, and stops only when the rest of the public tells the King the same.

Will anyone inside the White House, or from the Republican seats of Congress, risk a beating to stop the parade and tell the president that he’s failing as a leader? So far, it’s seeming unlikely. The House of Representatives is the primary government body that can start the process of unseating a US president, and last week its leaders decided to [investigate the FBI](#) as it probes Russia’s meddling in the 2016 elections instead.

Even if they move to intervene, something dark happens when aggressive leaders realize they are in over their head, Harvard Business School fellow William George [writes](#). “They become paranoid that someone else will try to knock them off their pedestal in the same way, or start to worry they aren’t good enough for the job.” In self-defense, they will

convince themselves and others that these problems are neither their fault nor their responsibility. Or they look for scapegoats to blame for their problems. Using their power, charisma, and communications skills, they force people to accept these distortions, causing entire organizations to lose touch with reality.

Just as the naked emperor decides to press onward through his parade, so might Trump double-down on his demands for adulation at the price of foreign and domestic policy, and on his scorched earth treatment of anyone who challenges the image he’s created for himself.

It’s a lesson that humans seem to need to learn again and again—a ruler who surrounds himself with sycophants will inevitably wind up naked in public.