

"Palace Intrigues" in Art and History.  
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Governing well is not easy, and governing well under a democracy is not the most efficient system. The ancient Greeks, such as Plato, tried to imagine how to set up a republic, speculating with his friends what running an ideal society should require. It is obvious that the most efficient system of government is a dictatorship; however, that efficiency is trumped when the dictator has a bad character. There are few "philosopher kings" in history; far more, even when beginning with good intentions, turn into tyrants and preside over injustice.

As Winston Churchill once said, "It is said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried." We Americans have a participatory form of government that throughout our history has seen unity and disunity, depending for survival on sterling and wise leadership. The disunity was most destructive when Abraham Lincoln was elected president and the southern half of the country rebelled to defend "states' rights" to enslave fellow human beings. Without that remarkable president, the United States might have permanently split into two nations and Black human beings might have continued in bondage for decades. (Consider that Brazil, another slave society, abolished slavery as late as 1888.)

We are witnessing events in our White House that can best be described as "Palace Intrigues." President Trump, who is considered "refreshing" by his admirers, is seen by others as a master of chaos. He campaigned and appears to be running his presidency as he ran his businesses: a sort of dictatorship that rejects "norms," not having to consider rules that have long governed the institution of the presidency.

He has staffed his White House and some of his cabinet with people of like values, people willing to demonstrate total loyalty to their chief. But this loyalty is a one-way street. The president is showing how little he cares for his colleagues when they appear to have other ideas: dress badly (Press Chief Spicer), recuse themselves to avoid conflict of interest (Attorney-General Sessions), or appear weak (Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, and whose power was sabotaged by the President himself). Sycophants turn into victims at the whim of the boss.

Tense emotions in the White House are stirred by an inner circle of immediate family members in conflict with some powerful players, such as political guru Steve Bannon and newly-appointed (and immediately fired) foul-mouthed old buddy, Anthony Scaramucci. The President, according to observers, appears to enjoy the conflict. It is exciting to have everyone battling to get a little praise from the chief.

Since there is nothing new under the sun, we might take a look at a famous palace intrigue in literature: Shakespeare's King Lear. The foolish king, wanting to retire, divided his country between his two evil daughters, exiling the third daughter, who really loved him but refused to flatter him. Before the play comes to a crashing end, the two evil daughters and their equally evil spouses fall out in one of the most fascinating, and gratifying, bad ends.

In history, a not surprising falling out of thieves can be read in descriptions of Hitler's early inner circle. Erik Larson's In the Garden of Beasts tells the story of a smart American Ambassador sent to the new Nazi state in the 1930s. He was President Roosevelt's eyes and ears, and it is a good thing that he was. Too many in the US at that time thought that Hitler was "refreshing," and this erroneous evaluation almost blinded the country to this enormous danger.

The fact is that evil governments invariably fall apart from internal conflict. Even if Hitler had won his war, his realm would not have lasted for 1,000 years, as he boasted. It was falling apart from the moment it was created.

The Soviet Union is another example of disintegration from within, despite the fierce punishments for "disloyalty." The Islamic Republic of Iran is facing the same fate, as its repressive leadership faces its own Palace Intrigues. (See Misagh Parsa's Democracy in Iran: Why it Failed and How It Might Succeed." I will discuss this book in my next column.

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