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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Hi, Jim — I trimmed a bit to compress some redundancies. Please feel free to arm wrestle. —Jeff



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Good government: more than a feeling

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 No president, regardless of confidence or conviction,
3 can safely substitute personal feeling for the disciplined processes
4 that democratic governance requires

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 WHEN President Donald Trump was asked recently what
7 ultimately constrains his power in decisions about foreign policy
8 and the use of American force, here is what he said.

9 “My own morality. My own mind. It’s the only thing that
10 can stop me.”

11 It is an extraordinary statement for any president to
12 make, let alone this one. This remark may be the clearest
13 description yet of how this president approaches power through
14 instinct and gut feeling.

15 Of course presidents have always relied on judgment.
16 Leadership cannot be reduced to data tables or legal memoranda
17 alone.

18 Harry Truman’s decision to recognize Israel in 1948,
19 John F. Kennedy’s management of the Cuban missile crisis, and
20 Ronald Reagan’s diplomacy with the Soviet Union all involved
21 moments where personal judgment mattered. But in those cases,
22 instinct operated alongside — not instead of — evidence, debate,
23 and constitutional responsibility.

24 That distinction matters.

25 * * *

26 The American system was deliberately designed to
27 prevent government from resting on one person’s impulses. The
28 Constitution disperses power among institutions precisely
29 because the founders distrusted concentrated authority guided
30 solely by personal certainty.

31 Congress declares war. Courts review legality. Advisors,
32 intelligence agencies, and diplomatic institutions exist to provide
33 the information and scrutiny needed to discipline presidential
34 judgment. History has shown that the presidency works best
35 when instinct is informed by these structures rather than
36 replacing them.

37 Yet many of this administration’s most consequential
38 decisions appear to emerge from something different: a governing
39 style that treats intuition and emotional reaction as substitutes for
40 careful and rigorous analysis.

41 When announcing military strikes in Syria in 2017, the
42 president described acting after seeing disturbing images on
43 television and concluding his response was simply the “right
44 thing to do.”

45 In 2020, Trump authorized the drone strike that killed
46 Iranian general Qasem Soleimani — and the president reportedly
47 selected the most extreme option presented during a briefing,
48 surprising even his own advisors.

49 More recently, he has justified the timing of military
50 action against Iran by saying he “just felt it was the right time.” In
51 each case instinct and personal conviction appeared to stand in
52 for a more publicly articulated strategic rationale.

53 His approach carries obvious risks.

54 Complex global crises — from nuclear proliferation to
55 economic stability to regional conflict — rarely yield to gut
56 feeling. They require careful evaluation of intelligence,
57 consultation with allies, and sober consideration of unintended
58 consequences.

59 When those disciplines weaken, decisions become
60 reactive rather than strategic.

61 * * *

62 OBSERVERS HAVE BEGUN to ask a deeper question: whether
63 Trump’s heavy reliance on instinct reflects more than a simple
64 leadership preference.

65 Governing in a complex modern world requires the
66 ability to absorb competing information, weigh uncertainty, and
67 navigate difficult trade-offs. When a leader repeatedly bypasses
68 these processes, it raises concerns about his willingness — or
69 ability — to engage the full complexity of the choices before him.

70 Instinct can be valuable when it rests on deep knowledge
71 and experience. Instinct without evidence becomes something
72 closer to impulse of the moment.

73 James Madison warned in Federalist No. 51 that
74 concentrated power must be restrained by institutional checks
75 because human judgment is inherently fallible. “Ambition must
76 be made to counteract ambition,” he wrote.

77 The Constitution’s architecture — separation of powers,
78 shared authority, and legal accountability — exists not because
79 Americans distrust leadership, but because they understand its

80 limits. No president, regardless of confidence or conviction, can
81 safely substitute personal feeling for the disciplined processes that
82 democratic governance requires.

83 At its best, the presidency blends judgment with humility.
84 Leaders listen to advisors, examine evidence, respect legal
85 constraints, and accept that no single perspective is sufficient. The
86 office demands intellectual rigor and emotional restraint precisely
87 because the stakes are so high.

88 That is why statements suggesting that personal morality
89 alone limits presidential power should outrage Americans across
90 the political spectrum. A constitutional republic must not depend
91 on the inner compass of one individual. It depends on
92 institutions, law, and shared democratic rules.

93 The presidency was never meant to be governed by
94 instinct alone. It was meant to be governed by the Constitution.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

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96 leadership consultant working in the global health-care sector.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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