

Kuwait Times
 THE LEADING INDEPENDENT DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF
 ESTABLISHED 1961

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Focus

TRUMP CONTINUES HIS SCORE-SETTLING, TRASH-TALKING WAYS

As a candidate one of the ways Donald Trump shocked America was by locking horns nastily with anybody who got in his way. He once mocked a journalist with a disability. He argued for a couple of days with the Pakistani-born parents of an Army captain who was killed in Iraq. Now, Trump is days away from being sworn in as president and little has changed: He dwells on minutiae far removed from things presidential and spends a lot of time settling scores.

Before breakfast on Friday, Trump took aim at Arnold Schwarzenegger, the new host of "Celebrity Apprentice", because the reality TV show's ratings are lower than when Trump was its star until 2015. "Wow, the ratings are in and Arnold Schwarzenegger got 'swamped' (or destroyed) by comparison to the ratings machine, DJT," Trump wrote on Twitter, his main conduit for communicating. "But who cares, he supported Kasich & Hillary," he added in a second tweet, referring to a former rival in the Republican primaries and to Hillary Clinton, whom he defeated in the November election.

The ratings plunge - 21 percent compared to the first episode of the 14th season of the show, Trump's last - was not news until Trump decided it should be. And in blasting Schwarzenegger along the way, Trump effectively attacked a show in which he himself is still executive producer, at the risk of sapping revenue of which he is a beneficiary.

The Republican billionaire has attacked the New York Times and Vanity Fair magazine, arguing wrongly that their circulations were down. He has also fired away, among others, at the comedy show "Saturday Night Live", in which actor Alec Baldwin lampoons him, and CNN. The list goes on. Trump seems tireless. "People said that after he got elected he would act more presidential, that he would change as he assumes the role of the office," said Daniel Kreiss, associate professor at the University of North Carolina School of Media and Journalism. "And yet here we are months into the transition and Trump hasn't changed one bit," Kreiss added. "I have no reason to suspect that it will change."

His sawed-off-shotgun approach to expressing his opinion may have a downside in what Americans think of Trump, said David Lewis, a professor of political science at Vanderbilt University. "The fact that the president-elect gives opinions about subjects that have very little to do with politics, that can affect their opinions of him," Lewis argued. "I think there's a real danger here of him sort of being overexposed in ways that get fatiguing and make people less receptive to his approach domestically," he added. Politicians generally are very careful about how and how often they say things publicly so as to protect the impact of their message, Lewis said.

Personal

Before Trump, Barack Obama was without a doubt the first president of the social media area. Since 2007 he has tweeted more than 15,000 times - an average of more than four a day. But Obama has a team of professionals do this, and it is rare for him to tweet himself, said Kreiss. What is more, Trump's tone in his tweets could not be more different from Obama's. It is often aggressive, angry and personal.

Exclamation points and capital letters abound. His acidic wording regularly goes far, far beyond what is traditional for US politicians. Trump regularly dismisses the US media as being "dishonest". Just this week he derided the Senate's top Democrat, Chuck Schumer, as a "clown". This came just weeks after he praised Schumer as being "much smarter" than his predecessor, Harry Reid. Trump complained of fraud before and after the election, when there was no evidence of this.

"It just doesn't seem in his nature to really think harder what it is he's putting out there and why," said Kreiss. He said you can see this also in Trump's seemingly cavalier approach toward possible conflicts of interest between his business empire and his job as president. "In nearly every single measure, Trump is undermining democratic norms and democratic institutions here in the United States," said Kreiss.

For this reason, he said, some of Trump's tweets are more worrisome than the ones that have zero to do with being president. Trump's filter-free way of speaking, especially on social media, was popular with voters but there is a lot more at stake when the whole world is listening, as will be the case from now on. "The risks of loose talk are particularly high in foreign policy and the president-elect doesn't seem to mind taking those risks," said Lewis. — AFP

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NAVY, TRUMP EYE BIGGEST FLEET EXPANSION

With President-elect Donald Trump demanding more ships, the Navy is proposing the biggest shipbuilding boom since the end of the Cold War to meet threats from a resurgent Russia and saber-rattling China. The Navy's 355-ship proposal released last month is even larger than what the Republican Trump had promoted on the campaign trail, providing a potential boost to shipyards that have struggled because budget caps that have limited money funding for ships.

At Maine's Bath Iron Works, workers worried about the future want to build more ships but wonder where the billions of dollars will come from. "Whether Congress and the government can actually fund it, is a whole other ball game," said Rich Nolan, president of the shipyard's largest union. Boosting shipbuilding to meet the Navy's 355-ship goal could require an additional \$5 billion to \$5.5 billion in annual spending in the Navy's 30-year projection, according to an estimate by naval analyst Ronald O'Rourke at the Congressional Research Service.

The Navy's revised Force Structure Assessment calls for adding another 47 ships including an aircraft carrier built in Virginia, 16 large surface warships built in Maine and Mississippi, and 18 attack submarines built in Connecticut, Rhode Island and Virginia. It also calls for more amphibious assault ships, expeditionary transfer docks and support ships.

In addition to being good for national security, a larger fleet would be better for both the sailors, who'd enjoy shorter deployments, and for the ships, which would have more down time for maintenance, said Matthew Paxton, president of the Shipbuilders Council of America, which represents most of the major Navy shipbuilders. "Russia and China are going to continue to build up their navies," he said. "The complexities aren't going to get any easier. The Navy, more than any of the services, is our forward presence. We're going to need this Navy."

Many defense analysts agree that military capabilities have been degraded in recent years, especially when it comes to warships, aircraft and tanks. The key is finding a way to increase Navy shipbuilding to achieve defense and economic gains "in a fiscally responsible way that does not pass the bill along to our children," said independent Sen Angus King of Maine, a member of the Armed Services Committee. Even when Trump takes office, no one envisions a return to the heady days during the Cold War when

workers were wiring, welding, grinding, pounding and plumbing ships at a furious pace to meet President Ronald Reagan's audacious goal of a 600-ship Navy. The Navy currently has 274 deployable battle force ships, far short of its old goal of 308 ships. Lawrence J Korb, a retired naval officer and former assistant defense secretary under Reagan, said the Navy's request isn't realistic unless the Trump administration is willing to take the budget "to levels we've never seen." "You never have enough money to buy a perfect defense. You have to make trade-offs," said Korb, senior fellow at the Center for American Progress.

But investors apparently are betting on more ships.

General Dynamics, which owns Bath Iron Works, Connecticut-based Electric Boat and California-based NASSCO, and Huntington Ingalls, which owns major shipyards in Virginia and in Mississippi, have both seen stock prices creep upward since the election. "To the generic military shipbuilder, it's a bull market right now," said Ronald Epstein, an analyst at Bank of America's Merrill Lynch division.

In Bath, the 6,000 shipbuilders aren't going to count their eggs before they hatch. "A lot of people are hopeful that it'll happen," Nolan said. "But they're taking a wait-and-see approach. They've heard it before and then seen it not come to fruition." — AP



In this Jan 3, 2017 photo, a shipyard worker walks to his car at the end of the workday at Bath Iron Works in Bath, Maine. — AP

ASSANGE: BOLD PUBLISHER OR RUSSIAN DUPE?

Accusations that Russia interfered with the US presidential election by leaking hacked documents via WikiLeaks have put a fresh spotlight on the crusading website's founder Julian Assange. A report from the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) released Friday accuses Russian President Vladimir Putin of ordering the operation in which computer hackers stole Democratic Party files and fed them to WikiLeaks. The website published the internal documents and emails over the weeks ahead of the Nov 8 election, embarrassing Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton's campaign and arguably contributing to her defeat - which US intelligence said was Putin's goal.

Assange, who has made a trade out of publishing purloined secrets of governments and powerful organizations and individuals, has repeatedly insisted that WikiLeaks did not receive the Democratic files from the Russian government, adding that the group publishes anything significant that it receives. "Nothing in today's declassified ODNI report alters our conclusion that WikiLeaks's US election related source are not state parties," the group said in a Twitter statement late Friday.

Earlier in the week, Assange told Fox News the focus on WikiLeaks's source for the information was a smokescreen for what it contained, and its impact on Clinton's campaign. "WikiLeaks published true information... The American public read that information, true information, and said, 'we don't like these people.' And then voted accordingly."

But Assange did not rule out that people acting on behalf of Moscow had handed over the documents. The US intelligence report says Russian military intelligence relayed the material to WikiLeaks via unnamed intermediaries. "Moscow most likely chose WikiLeaks because of its self-proclaimed reputation for authenticity," it said.

Journalist, 'publisher'

Assange calls himself a journalist and publisher who is doing nothing illegal. Since he took refuge in Ecuador's London embassy four years ago to avoid possible extradition to the United States for espionage - by Sweden,

where he faces sexual assault charges, or by Britain - he has also called himself a "political prisoner". But since the organization stunned the world in 2010 by publishing hundreds of thousands of internal diplomatic communications from the US State Department leaked to it by a former US military intelligence analyst, Washington has regarded him as a dangerous menace and maintained the threat of prosecuting him, though no charges have been filed.

In 2010, US Vice President Joe Biden likened Assange to a "high-tech terrorist". And US politicians this week roundly blasted him as irresponsible and an enemy of the country. In its first decade, WikiLeaks has clearly welcomed secret documents on nearly any matter. The first document it published in December 2006 involved Somalia, and the next year it helped expose corruption by Kenyan leader Daniel Arap Moi.

Since then releases have targeted Peru's oil industry, the Scientology group, the Syrian government, and Swiss and Icelandic banks. But they pale in volume and impact to its disclosures of US-related documents on Guantanamo, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the Obama administration's trade treaty talks, and the Democratic Party files. While he did not reply to AFP questions, in recent interviews Assange insisted the group does not have an anti-US bias.

"WikiLeaks is a predominantly English-speaking organization with a website predominantly in English," he told Italian newspaper La Repubblica last month. "We have published more than 800,000 documents about or referencing Russia and President Putin, so we do have quite a bit of coverage, but the

majority of our publications come from Western sources, though not always."

Clinton obsession

But Assange has shown an extraordinary fixation on US power and Clinton. "The US is in the business of managing an extended empire," he told Der Spiegel in a 2015 interview. "An American mindset is being fostered and spread to the rest of the world," he said, pointing to US power in business, trade and the Internet. In February 2016 he authored a strong attack on Clinton on WikiLeaks' website. "I have had years of experience in dealing with Hillary Clinton and have read thousands of her cables. Hillary lacks judgment and will push the United States into endless, stupid wars which spread terrorism."

And in an interview with Russia's RT television on the eve of the election - which he still expected Clinton would win - he described her as "someone who is eaten alive by their ambitions, tormented literally to the point where they become sick as a result of going on with their ambitions". Nevertheless, Assange has accurately pointed out that mainstream journalistic outlets would themselves have published the Democratic Party documents, had they received them. "In the end, I think that we have an obligation to report what we can about important people and important events. There's just no question that the email exchanges inside the Democratic Party were newsworthy," Dean Baquet, executive editor of The New York Times, told the paper last month. — AFP

