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Donald Trump is no Tom Kean

By Carl Golden

In the nonstop, mind-numbing crush of news since President Donald Trump fired FBI Director James Comey, one of the president's comments escaped largely unnoticed, even though its ramifications could change forever the interaction between the administration, the news media and ultimately the American people.

"It is not possible," Trump said, "for my surrogates to stand at the podium with perfect accuracy."

The implications are staggering.

The president said, in essence: Don't believe everything the press secretary or other spokespeople tell you. In less polite circles, this is known as lying.

In 14 words, Trump cut off his communications team at the knees and blamed it for limping.

From this point forward, whenever press secretary Sean Spicer or his deputies stand in the White House briefing room, the assembled reporters will have a lingering suspicion they're being lied to.

Spicer is forever crippled. His credibility is shot. Skepticism rules the day. His ability to meet his responsibilities has been undercut by the very person who hired him and entrusted those responsibilities to him.

The job is a demanding one, serving as a go-between between a relentless press corps doggedly pursuing information and an administration that often finds it crucial to maintain secrecy on sensitive issues.

In his book "The Politics of Inclusion," former Gov. Thomas H. Kean offers his description of a press secretary:

"Only a member of a politician's immediate family should be closer to him than a press secretary. The job may well be the most sensitive in an administration. Every time a crisis occurs, the press secretary gets the call and becomes your voice. His response is your response. I have seen politicians spend days cleaning up after an unfortunate remark by a press secretary. Similarly, I have seen a good press secretary defuse an issue before it became embarrassing."

Kean goes on to recount an interview he conducted to fill the position of press secretary for the Republican delegation in the New Jersey Assembly, where he served as majority leader.

"He asked only two things of me," Kean wrote. "First, that he have complete access to me. Access is to a press secretary what a good ear is to a musician. Second, he asked me never to put him in a position to lie to the press corps. Once a press secretary has been dishonest with the press, he is finished."

The individual being interviewed by Kean?

Me.

I relate this story not because of any self-aggrandizing motive or because my conversation with him was particularly unique. A great many potential press secretaries would have laid down the same conditions and, if not agreed to, would have declined any job offer.

I spent nearly nine years as the spokesman for Assembly Republicans, served as Kean's campaign press secretary in 1981, and in the same capacity during his two terms as governor.

As I watch Spicer struggle through his daily briefings, a certain sympathy works its way into my mind and I muse about whether he laid down conditions similar to those I did in my interview with Kean.

Does Spicer have the kind of access to Trump that Kean describes (“Access is to a press secretary what a good ear is to a musician”) or he is left slowly twisting in the wind after being blindsided, as he was in the Comey firing?

Did Spicer ever tell Trump to never ask that he lie to the press corps? Did he, as Kean writes, warn that “once a press secretary is dishonest with the press, he is finished.”

The administration's history — short as it is, at less than five months — suggests strongly that any conditions or warnings that Spicer may have voiced have been ignored.

From the embarrassing, petty and pointless argument over the size of the crowd at the Trump inaugural, to the conflicting explanations about why Comey was fired, to whether Trump attempted to halt an FBI investigation of his national security adviser, Spicer has come across as uninformed about what is transpiring in the administration.

He has become the embodiment of Trump's warning that “it is not possible for my surrogates to stand at the podium with perfect accuracy.”

The more hardhearted among us can argue that Spicer can always simply resign and walk away with some shred of dignity from a job that has become intolerable.

True enough, certainly. It's sad, though, that Donald Trump is no Tom Kean.

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