

The scum rises to the top: Reflecting Pool fiasco epitomizes Trump's Washington

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President Donald Trump told reporters Monday afternoon that the fiasco of his projected makeover of the Reflecting Pool on the National Mall in Washington D.C. was caused by “vandals,” who slit the fabric lining at the bottom of the pool and dumped fertilizer in the water to create algae, a green scum that now covers much of the pool. In response to questions, he provided no evidence, only claiming that “somebody said” that five people arrested on the Mall in recent days were responsible.

The Reflecting Pool extends from the Lincoln Memorial nearly half a mile eastward toward the Washington Monument. It has been the backdrop for some of the major political events of the last century, most notably the 1963 March on Washington where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech.

After Trump ordered the draining of the pool and the repainting of its bottom with a color he personally selected, “American flag blue,” the water in the refilled pool has turned green with algae and the paint peeled off in great strips within weeks of being applied. Last week Trump ordered the pool drained and repainted again, blaming “vandalism” for the debacle.

The entire episode could serve as a metaphor for the broader significance of the Trump administration: It represents the scum rising to the top of American society.

But it is more than that. The Reflecting Pool project is a case study of Trump's governing style: a gaudy makeover of a national symbol, driven by vanity and the aesthetics of an ignorant real estate swindler, routed through secretive and anti-democratic means, providing a financial bonanza for Trump cronies, and collapsing in an incompetent mess while Trump scapegoats supposed enemies rather than take responsibility.

Trump ordered the renovation of the Reflection Pool as part of his effort to put a personal stamp on every aspect of the celebrations marking the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution. He described the pool as “filthy” and “disgusting” and proceeded to make it so. He short-circuited the normal processes of review, bypassing groups like the Commission of Fine Arts, National Capital Planning Commission and Advisory Council on Historic Preservation even though he had fired their previous members and replaced them with his own nominees.

The contracts for the renovation were steered without competitive bidding to companies linked to Trump personally, including Atlantic Industrial Coatings, which had no previous federal contracting work, but Trump asserted it had done pools for his resorts. Watchdog groups said that its contract had a built-in profit margin far higher than usual for federal projects. The water purification system went to a company owned by John Cafaro, a Trump donor who has pleaded guilty to two felonies.

Costs ballooned from \$1.8 million, the initial estimate, to more than \$14 million, and the final total, after the pool is again drained and resurfaced, is likely to be far higher.

These are, of course, small potatoes compared to the multi-billion-dollar ripoffs carried out by Trump's own family, including the cryptocurrency scams of Eric and Donald Jr. and the real estate dealings of Jared Kushner. There are published estimates that the Trump family fortune has grown by \$3 billion to \$5 billion since Trump began his second term in office.

At every point, decisions on the celebration of the 250th anniversary of American Revolution were driven by Trump's desire to transform it into an epic of self-glorification. Hence the disgusting spectacle of an

Ultimate Fighting Championship cage match on the White House grounds, marking Trump's 80th birthday, and the announcement that the official July 4 ceremonies will culminate in a "Trump Rally" on the National Mall.

There are many other monstrosities of an architectural character, perpetrated by a president with the aesthetic sensibilities of a failed casino developer and real estate self-promoter and swindler. There is, of course, the Trump ballroom being built after demolition of the East Wing of the White House (with the bulk of the costs to be paid for by the government, not Trump's wealthy backers).

Other projects include the planned construction of Trump's Garden of Heroes, which will commemorate right-wing figures like Antonin Scalia, Barry Goldwater and Milton Friedman, a 13-foot-high fence around Lafayette Park—to make it easier to control protests outside the White House—and the proposed 250-foot-high Arch of Triumph (dubbed the "Arc de Trump") that will overshadow the Lincoln Memorial and block the view of Arlington National Cemetery.

As in many other more significant areas of public policy, Trump's ventures into architecture and landscaping are characterized by a visceral hostility to scientific knowledge. It apparently did not occur to the self-proclaimed "very stable genius" in the White House, or to any of his aides, that spring warmth would foster the growth of algae in the Reflecting Pool. Perhaps they should have proposed injecting bleach into the water, as Trump suggested as a cure for COVID-19.

Rather than acknowledge design or implementation failures—rushed work, questionable materials, the wisdom of painting a shallow outdoor basin dark blue—Trump publicly blamed "vandalism" by political enemies. There have been arrests, although these seem to have been generated more by White House pressure to find someone to blame than by actual malfeasance. Among those seized was David Hearn, a former Olympic canoeist, who paused during a bike ride, reached into the water to feel a detached piece of the lining, and was charged with destroying government property, and the National Guard was deployed to the site.

For their part, the Democrats have treated the affair as a matter of "waste, fraud and abuse," reducing a case

study in oligarchic looting, fabricated sabotage and the deployment of troops against the public to a complaint about value for money.

The debacle on the National Mall is the work not of the "radical left" but of the vandal-in-chief in the White House and the social layer he represents. The Reflecting Pool was meant to mirror the Washington Monument. It has instead returned a faithful image of the American ruling class and its political system. This is the financial oligarchy that has enriched itself beyond measure while the society around it rots, and that now, on the eve of the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, drapes itself in a heritage it has betrayed in every particular.

There is a fitting irony in the setting. The ground running from the Lincoln Memorial to the Washington Monument is where, again and again working people and youth have assembled to fight for democratic and social rights. The genuine heirs of the revolutionary traditions being invoked this July 4 are not the swindlers who have fouled this place, but the millions who are entering into struggle against them.



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