Twitter Thread by Joanne Freeman



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1/ A brief thread (and there will be something more long-form -- on the contagion of rage -- to come).

A few words on the cultural power of presidents.

2/ When the new U.S. government was launched under the Constitution, the Founding folk assumed -- worried -- that the President's behavior would have an enormous influence on the American people, the tone of governance, the temper of the nation, and national character.

3/ They worried that if the President adopted aristocratic manners or lived a lavish lifestyle, that the American people would grow to admire those standards and endorse them, and the nation would suffer for it.

4/ For that reason, they closely watched the president's habits and manners. How did he dress? What kinds of dishes did he use on his table? How did he interact with the American people? Did he interact with them?

5/ As trivial as these things seem, people assumed that the national executive--a person of power w/the endorsement of being voted into office--would shape the nation w/his example. They assumed that everyday actions mattered. Words mattered. The visuals of leadership mattered.

6/ Washington understood that. And although he set an example that some considered too "high-toned" (i.e. aristocratic) for a republic, he carefully considered the implications of his actions, words, & appearance. He tried to embody his interpretation of a republican president.

7/ The underlying assumption was a good one. Leaders shape constituencies w/their attitude & actions as well as w/their policies, & that's particularly true of the President, who shapes the nation's character by acting the role of American leader before a national audience.

8/ When a President praises and jokes about violence and attacks the idea of a free press, it matters.
The cheering, laughing crowds who endorse those sentiments at his rallies -- and are visible standing behind him -- show the impact of those ideas in real time.

9/ When his party stays silent in the face of those threats, it matters.
Their silence is a tacit endorsement.
And a reign of violence with a strategically stifled press is not democratic governance.

10/ If you agree w/this President, you may not see a threat.
But here's the thing.
If he can stifle & silence some Americans, he can stifle & silence you, when the time is right.
To endorse this style of leadership is to surrender your power as an American citizen.

11/ Throughout its history, the United States has struggled to reach some key ideals.
The government is accountable to the American people.
A free press allows for that accountability.
Voting rights enforce it.

These ideals are being denigrated before our eyes on a daily basis.

12/ We haven't always lived up to these ideals.
Not by a long shot.
But they have persisted as something worth striving for.
They are part of the core cluster of values that have helped to define what America can be.

13/ If you care about those ideals...
Put people in office who share them.
Vote for those who don't define themselves by violating them.

14/ This election will have enormous implications pragmatically, politically, & ideologically.
It will make a statement.
Add your voice to that statement & vote.

END.
(For now...)