

Trump's Rhetoric of Tyranny Undermines Our Democracy

I used to see a bumper sticker on cars that read, "If You're Not Outraged, You're Not Paying Attention." That is my message to all of my fellow Americans today.

In recent days, America's head of state and head of government and commander in chief of the armed forces has been more than implying that he believes critics and whistleblowers undermining his presidency are traitors.

According to one recording (according to news reports), he said of them that (paraphrasing), "We used to know what to do with them."

Can a democracy, a free country, slide down into dictatorship and tyranny? Of course it can. It has happened many times before.

"It can't happen here" is a head-in-the-sand attitude of obscurantism. All the evidence of history is that it can happen anywhere.

For those of you readers "not in the know," a U.S. government employee has claimed recordings exist of President Trump talking with the president of a foreign government urging him, possibly even threatening him, to investigate the business dealings of the son of a political rival.

This accusation is so serious that even some in Trump's own party are backing away from him and urging its investigation by the U.S. House of Representatives to go forward. Most of his party, however, rally around him no matter what he is accused of.

My concern here is not about whether the whistleblower's accusation is true; that will eventually come out (if it is true) and I withhold judgment until then. "Innocent until proven guilty" applies to presidents also.

My concern is Trump's "tweeted" and spoken responses to the accusations. The word "traitor" especially alarms me.

When has whistleblowing, which does not involve giving aid and comfort to an enemy nation, ever been legally traitorous?

The U.S. Constitution clearly defines "traitor" as someone who aids the enemy in a time of conflict.

It does not include accusing the head of state and head of government (they are one and the same in U.S. government) of abuse of power.

It does not even include talking about "secrets" of the head of state and head of government insofar as the secrets are not classified for national security reasons.

According to news reports, one of Trump's most influential evangelical supporters

has publicly stated he believes the whistleblower's actions amount to treason and that impeachment of the president could lead to civil war.

Yes, yes, I know. What he actually said was that it could lead to a civil-war-like division within the U.S. I see little difference.

This rhetoric of "treason" and "traitor" only about an act of whistleblowing, which does not in any way relate to national security, is the rhetoric of tyranny. The national press needs to call it that.

At the very least, such language will inevitably cast a "chill" over other potential whistleblowers within the government. And that is probably its purpose.

Again, "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention."

Or, possibly, the prospect of a rogue president silencing critics with fear does not concern you because you agree with some of his policies.

As a student of modern dictatorships, I know it is possible for a democratic society with freedom and liberty of speech to slide down into tyranny. And if it happens, I will not hesitate to tell you "I warned you" and "I told you so."

But chances are you will not care - so long as the tyrant is on your side and you do not feel any danger - even if dissidents begin to disappear as happened in Chile and Argentina in the 1970s through the 1990s.

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