

The Clear and Present Danger of Donald Trump

By

William A. Galston , February 21, 2018

In business, it is said, the customer is always right. Politics is more complicated, because citizens are called upon to be more than consumers.

“The people commonly intend the public good,” Alexander Hamilton wrote in Federalist 71, “but their good sense would despise the adulator who should pretend that they always reason right about the means of promoting it.”

In November 2016, 46% of the American people made a mistake, elevating to the highest office in the land a man incapable of discharging its duties. Now our country and our friends around the world are wrestling with the consequences.

President Trump’s out-of-control weekend [Twitter](#) storm has raised these concerns to new heights. Our European allies no longer know what to believe. “Is it deeds? Is it words? Is it tweets?” asked Germany’s foreign minister at the annual Munich Security Conference. While senior administration officials offered reaffirmations of traditional American positions, our allies did not know whether they were speaking for the president and if so, for how long.

We know what is required of every American citizen. It is enshrined in the oath that every naturalized citizen must take—to “defend the Constitution and laws of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.”

Surely no less is required of the president. But when his own national security adviser stated that “the evidence is now incontrovertible” that Russia worked to undermine our most basic constitutional processes during the past election, Mr. Trump [slapped him down](#) with a tendentious tweet. He has repeatedly chosen to take the word of Vladimir Putin, the autocratic ruler of Russia and a former KGB agent, over the judgment of the entire U.S. intelligence community.

Mr. Putin's Russia, which is waging war in Eastern Europe and propping up Bashar Assad in Syria, has become an enemy of the U.S. Can any fair-minded person say that the president is doing what he should to defend our Constitution and laws against this threat?

He isn't, and the reason why should be clear to all: President Trump regards any affirmation of Russian electoral influence as an attack on the legitimacy of his 2016 victory. He cannot distinguish between the national interest and his own insecurities, making it impossible for him to acknowledge the nature of the Russian threat.

That Mr. Trump thinks this way poses a clear and present danger. The question is what to do about it.

Article II of the Constitution gives the president broad powers in foreign affairs. Law, custom and congressional dereliction of duty have expanded these powers further. But no president can act alone, which is why those who serve him have power as well.

It is time for the secretary of defense, the secretary of state, and the national security adviser to confront Mr. Trump, collectively and directly, to inform him that unless he publicly affirms the reality of the Russian threat and authorizes the strongest possible response to it, they will have no honorable alternative to resignation. They swore an oath of loyalty to the Constitution, not to Mr. Trump.

There is a starker alternative, which no one should contemplate lightly. Section 4 of the 25th Amendment gives the Vice President, supported by a majority of the cabinet, the authority to declare that the president is "unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office." If the president contests this determination, as Mr. Trump surely would, Congress is empowered to settle the matter.

Taking this step would create a political crisis. But if the alternative is leaving our country undefended against an attack on the foundation of political legitimacy—free and fair elections—invoking the 25th Amendment would be the lesser evil.

The drafters of the amendment contemplated the president's physical incapacitation, as when a stroke felled Woodrow Wilson. With Mr. Trump, we face the incapacitation of

character—an inability to master his passions sufficiently to distinguish between the country’s well-being and his fathomless self-regard.

Our Founders did their best to devise institutions that would defend us against the frailties of our nature. But they understood that these institutions formed an imperfect bulwark. When the people go badly astray, ordinary checks and balances may not suffice to protect them against themselves.

The Americans who supported Mr. Trump in 2016 had genuine grievances that both parties had neglected for far too long.

But he is a deeply, dangerously flawed instrument of their purposes. In choosing him, they made a mistake that threatens America and the world.

It is no violation of democracy to say that the people are not always right. To claim that they are is to cross the line from democracy to flattery, and to surrender the liberty of independent judgment on which democracy ultimately depends.