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President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin shake hands during the Group of 20 meeting in Hamburg, Germany, July, 7, 2017. (CNS/Handout via Reuters)



by Sr. Christine Schenk

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In the midst of the histrionics playing out at the Trump White House, I was oddly comforted by Robert Redford's Emmy-nominated 2013 Watergate documentary "All the President's Men Revisited," which I viewed recently after MSNBC aired it again last June.

I am intrigued by President Nixon's attorney, John Dean, whose testimony would eventually topple Nixon's presidency. While acknowledging his own early complicity in the cover-up, Dean says he reached a point where he could no longer live with himself:

"We could have dragged wagons around a giant lie that would protect everybody who was willing to lie. Who was going to lie? [H.R.] Haldeman and [John] Ehrlichman," said Dean. But for himself, "I couldn't play that game. Further lying, even if I could get away with it, isn't something I'm comfortable with."

In high stakes political struggles, truth is often the first casualty.

In what is either the saddest or most cynical statement in the Gospels, Pontius Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?" after Jesus reveals he came to witness to it (John 18:38).

In 1973 H.R. Haldeman had his own Pontius Pilate moment when he testified: "The President, Mr. Ehrlichman, and I made no attempt to take over the Watergate case. It was the view of all three of us was that the truth must be told and quickly although we did not know what the truth was."

Of course, all three knew very well what the truth was.

Whom to believe? Dean, who testified the president had known all along about the break-in and sought to cover it up? Or the office of the presidency? It was after all, Dean's word against the word of the president and his two top aides.

Most of the American public didn't know what to believe until subsequent evidence from the infamous White House tapes proved that Dean was telling the truth, and the president and his henchmen were not.

High stakes political games are again playing out on our national stage. And it is scary.

Over a year ago, congressional Republicans pledged to investigate Russian interference with U.S. elections. But recently, the chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Sen. Charles Grassley (R-Iowa), sought to incriminate not those who were complicit with the Russians, but some of the very people who exposed the scandal in the first place.

On Jan. 5 without giving notice to Democratic colleagues, Grassley formally filed a criminal referral to the Justice Department against Christopher Steele, a former British intelligence agent, who authored a damning dossier about Trump's Russia connections.

This is odd because Steele had already turned the dossier over to the FBI after uncovering credible evidence that the Kremlin made efforts to elect Trump president. Steele feared the Russians planned to blackmail him. If the Justice Department had found anything unlawful in Steele's dossier, it could have begun legal action on its own.

Grassley's decision seems of a piece with a conservative campaign to deflect attention from special prosecutor Robert Mueller's exhaustive investigation into Trump-Russia connections.

Mueller's probe has already charged four high-level individuals from the Trump campaign. Retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, former national security adviser, was charged with lying to the FBI about meetings with Sergey Kislyak, then-Russian ambassador. Paul Manafort, former campaign chairman, and Rick Gates, Manafort's campaign deputy, were indicted on 12 counts, including conspiracy against the United States, money laundering, and among other things, failure to file reports about foreign bank and financial accounts. George Papadopoulos, the campaign's former foreign policy advisor, pled guilty last October to lying to the FBI about his interactions with Russians related to alleged "dirt" in Hillary Clinton's emails.

Grassley and some of his colleagues seem to be creating a smokescreen to disguise serious wrongdoing on the part of influential staffers in the Trump campaign.

The ranking Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), then unilaterally released the full transcript of the committee's interview with

Glenn Simpson, Steele's employer and cofounder of Fusion GPS. Grassley had previously refused to make the interview public. Feinstein told the press:

> The American people deserve the opportunity to see what he said and judge for themselves. The innuendo and misinformation circulating about the transcript are part of a deeply troubling effort to undermine the investigation into potential collusion and obstruction of justice. The only way to set the record straight is to make the transcript public.

And here we are once again.

Our nation is in the throes of seeking truth about critical issues affecting our democracy.

What is a Jesus-follower to do?

During the Watergate hearings, a legislator asked John Dean: "How do you expect us to resolve the truth in this matter when you state one story here — and the president states another story and he does not appear before this committee? Can you give us any info as to how we might resolve this?"

Dean's reply seems made for this moment: "I strongly believe that the truth always emerges. I don't know if it will be during these hearings. … I don't know if it will be through the processes of history. But the truth will out someday."

Although some suggest Dean only testified because he knew Nixon and his aides were setting him up to take the fall for Watergate, I believe he chose to turn away from politically expedient lies and toward the truth.

In these present perilous times, we American Christians are also called to seek the truth, regardless of how miserable a job it might be.

Our faith empowers us to seek and recognize truth, regardless of smokescreens and falsehoods.

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As believers we know, "The Spirit is the one who testifies, and the Spirit is truth." (1 John 5:6). Just as Jesus came to witness to the truth, so too must we witness to it in

the concrete details of our lives, including the details of our political lives.

While it may be a royal pain to keep track of the house-of-cards machinations emanating from Washington, it is our obligation to do so. As the riff on John 8:32 goes: "The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable."

So, suck it up Christians, and trust the Spirit to lead you to the truth.

A place to start might be to read the Senate Fusion GPS transcript and see for yourself what you think.

[St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years. She holds master's degrees in nursing and theology.]

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