Opinion

News



Women's March on Washington, Jan. 20, 2018 (Wikimedia Commons/Ted Eytan)



by Pat Perriello

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Jan. 3 marked the start of a new Congress. It happens every two years. It is not that big a deal, and yet it seemed like a big deal this time. It turns out we still live in a democracy. In November, the American people voted to give Democrats 40 additional seats in the House of Representatives. Power in government shifted.

There were no riots in the street. Tanks did not drive down Pennsylvania Avenue to prevent the change in power from occurring in Washington. Law enforcement did not rush into the Capitol building to arrest new congressional members before they could be sworn in.

Autocratic governments are on the upswing in Democracies such as the Philippines, Brazil and Turkey. Even solid European allies are experiencing a dangerous populism that threatens their age-old democratic institutions. Yet it seems the United States remains strong in its Democratic traditions. We can be grateful for that as this new year dawns.

Yes, the current president continues to seek ways to extend his power, and especially to protect himself and his family from investigation. Yes, President Donald Trump clearly believes that as president he should be able to speak and make things happen. He expects all the levers of power to be engaged to do his bidding.

Yet, that is not working out so well for him. The Mueller investigation continues. Congressional investigations in the House will be getting underway. Other legal challenges to the activities of this president and his administration continue.

Perhaps our Founding Fathers really did know what they were doing when they wrote the Constitution. There is reason to hope that "our long national nightmare" may soon be over.

So, one has to ask the question about impeachment. It seems everyone is now asking whether this president should be impeached. Some Democrats are chomping at the bit to move forward immediately. House leadership says no. Wait for the Mueller report.

I have a somewhat different tack. I believe it is fair to say that the impeachment process has already begun. I would call it a potential impeachment. First, one needs to remember that it is a process. The House of Representatives cannot simply vote

tomorrow to impeach the president of the United States. Those clamoring for immediate action should relax a bit and let the process move forward.

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Hearings will soon begin to hold members of this administration accountable for what they have said and done. They will be questioned in public hearings and the American people will begin to make up their minds about what is going on and how they feel about it. To me, this is the beginning of the impeachment process. It could lead to articles of impeachment and impeachment, or not.

That is the caveat. The careful and deliberate process begins with these hearings. It awaits the Mueller report. It can then continue with articles of impeachment, actual impeachment, and conviction in the Senate and removal from office.

What is clear, however, is that the process can also be aborted at any point along the way. If the hearings don't move the public in the direction of impeachment, it becomes less likely. If the Mueller investigation doesn't produce damning evidence that stirs up the public, it would be difficult to go forward. If congressional Republicans and rank-and-file Republicans remain solidly behind this president, then impeachment may not be feasible.

On the other hand, it is also possible that the facts will move the public to demand action. In short, the impeachment process has begun.

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