Opinion

News



President Donald Trump speaks to reporters in January. (CNS/Reuters/Jim Young)



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I suppose none of us should be surprised by the various reactions to the Mueller report or, more accurately, Attorney General William Barr's letter sharing the principal conclusions of the report. But it is still depressing.

The president, whose political instincts never elevate the country or himself, was reptilian. Having been challenging Robert Mueller's integrity for months, now he decides the special counsel acted honorably. And, instead of taking the high road and reaching out to Democrats with a view toward enacting some policies that might help the nation, he attacked them and the media, calling them liars even while he put forward a new lie of his own, claiming the report exonerated him when it explicitly stated it did not.

Donald Trump's allies called for the resignation of Rep. Adam Schiff from the chairmanship of the House Intelligence Committee, even though Schiff has been exceedingly careful in his interviews to not confuse his concerns with a verdict, something the White House still has trouble with. Trump's re-election campaign sent a memo to TV news producers urging them to no longer host certain guests who had criticized the president. Should someone tell them how the Alien and Sedition Acts backfired on our nation's second president, John Adams?

Trump will benefit hugely from the report's apparent conclusion that it did not find evidence of collusion with the Russians. But he might squander that good will by overreaching. The Democrats should hand him as much rope as he needs.

Some Democrats sound almost exactly like Fox News contributors did before the report's results came out. They challenged Mueller's findings, even though they have not really seen them. They questioned Barr's integrity — not his judgment, but his integrity.

The Democrats should be careful. They were given a majority in the House of Representatives after they campaigned mostly on health care issues. Most Americans think it is a good thing that the president or his children or his employees were not actively colluding with a foreign power to affect the election. The Democrats are right to insist that the full report be released to Congress. But they should not overreach either. Besides, as a purely tactical matter, if Trump was

insufferable *before* he felt vindicated, imagine what he will be like now?

Republicans should be careful too. The president's claim that the report is a complete exoneration is contradicted by one of the few quotes from the report in Barr's letter. The details of why Mueller could not reach a conclusion about whether or not the president obstructed justice may not look so pretty when examined closely. The president's disdain for the truth is not among his finest attributes.

Obstruction of justice is no laughing matter, especially in a president who took an oath to uphold the Constitution and faithfully execute the laws. Perversely, and largely because the country is so polarized, Republicans have largely succeeded in convincing a significant percentage of the American people that obstruction, like lying to Congress or to FBI investigators, is not such a serious offense, that it is a "process crime." If there is no proof of an underlying offense, they have argued, then no charge of obstruction can be sustained. Democrats, who defended Bill Clinton when he perjured himself, do not have much of a leg to stand on.

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Which leads me to what I think is the most important lesson this week: If most Americans do not grow up, take off the partisan lenses that cause them to see everything in Manichaean terms, to question the integrity of someone like Mueller, to ignore the gravity of obstruction of justice, then where will we find the intellectual and moral resources to renew our democracy?

I am especially disappointed by Democrats because they have not been compromised as Republicans have by Trump's electoral power and only they will be in a position to help restore trust in our political life once this horrible man leaves the White House. I understand their frustration, but that does not amount to an excuse for acting like little children who did not get their way.

Trump threatens many evils in our land. His demonization of migrants and refugees is despicable. His deregulation of industry and his indifference to climate change is costing our civilization precious years, years we might not have, in the fight to save the planet. His tax cut achieved little beyond large stock buybacks at large corporations. His hostility to our allies and fraternal affection for despots is morally bankrupt. But his greatest threat to our country has been his repeated attacks on

democratic norms.

I am rereading *Marlborough: His Life and Times*. After several books I needed to read for work, I wanted something relaxing and fun. In describing the politics that attended the change of government from James II to his daughter Mary and her husband, William, Winston Churchill writes:

> Longer than any other race in the world the English have exercised the right or power of dismissing a government of which they have tired, and in the main our civilization has gained by this process. But in the days when party leaders were rival kings, when dislike of bad government was disloyalty, when resistance to a misguided king was treason, the ordinary transactions of modern political life wore a dire and sinister aspect.

It is the rule of law and the commitment of all parties to democratic norms that have kept our country from all the political and social ills that accompany politics rooted in personalities and not laws. Trump's hostile threats directed at political enemies, his disregard for the balance of powers, his ugly smears against the media, all invite us to return to an earlier and more brutish time.

It will fall to the Democrats to rescue the country from further descent into the Trump quagmire, to bolster democracy and the rule of law. They cannot achieve that if they mimic the president and his allies. They can achieve it only if they elevate themselves and the country with them to a higher ethical plane.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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