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President Donald J. Trump turns to speak to workers at his addresses Tuesday, June 11, 2019, on his visit to the Southwest Iowa Renewable Energy facility in Council Bluffs, Iowa. (Wikimedia Commons/Official White House Photo/Shealah Craighead)



by Michael Sean Winters

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June 17, 2019
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In 1993, when Sen. Patrick Moynihan coined the phrase "defining deviancy down," he was thinking in terms of cultural changes like the rise in out-of-wedlock births. Moynihan, who was brilliant, could understand that there were limits to what government could accomplish in combating unhealthy societal trends. He could never have imagined that one day the nation would have a president who routinely, and almost daily, defines deviancy down, making normal or even acceptable what once did and still should provoke horror.

The most recent and most egregious example of President Trump breaking through a boundary that should not be crossed came in his interview with George Stephanopoulos. I am not sure why Trump's team allowed him anywhere near Stephanopoulos who has become the foremost interviewer in the press, combining as he does raw intellectual heft and acute emotional intelligence. He set the trap and Trump walked into it, saying that he would likely take opposition research on a domestic political opponent from a foreign government. When prompted to say if he would call the FBI, Trump said, "Life doesn't work that way."

That is not how *his* life works. In Trump's world, all that matters is what he perceives will be helpful or harmful to him. Often enough, his perception is wrong and the Mueller Report is evidence of that, as well as evidence of other malfeasance. Certainly, the president's comments to Stephanopoulos make the suspicions raised in the Mueller Report about conspiracy with the Russians more plausible. But, in that moment, thinking he wants to keep his options open and, after all, appears so far to have gotten away with whatever collusion did occur in 2016, he said to Stephanopoulos, "I think I'd take it."

It doesn't matter that accepting help from a foreign power is against the law. It doesn't matter that, if successful, he would be beholden to a foreign power. The concerns about foreign interference raised by the Founding Fathers, those don't matter. The fact that his Republican colleagues have been trying mightily for weeks

to shift the focus from Russian meddling to the still strong economy, from the past to the future, and that his comments set them back on their heels, none of that matters. It doesn't matter that, according to Politico, the president's comment undid months of work by the FBI to prevent foreign tampering in 2020.

Michelle Goldberg at the New York Times captured the essence of the strange combination of juvenile delinquency and dangerous geopolitics that our president evidences in the question "Who is going to stop me?" It is what a schoolyard bully asks when he knows the teacher is not around.

The president's inability to identify, let alone pursue, any interest beyond his own extends beyond his pussyfooting with the Russians. Our friends at the Hope Border Institute have been tracking the evil consequences of the administration's "Remain in Mexico" policy. The callousness is shocking. Desperate people are reduced to pawns in the president's effort to look tough.

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To repeat: This is about a posture, not about policy. The president is not interested in pursuing comprehensive immigration reform, still less with examining ways we might help the distressed countries in the northern triangle — Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras — escape the violence and poverty that drive the migration. I cannot imagine how desperate a parent must be to send a child on the dangerous journey north, but they do it. Even if you shared the president's racist opposition to immigration, self-interest would dictate helping these countries. Unless you want a campaign theme.

The evidence of the president's narcissism is as substantial as the evidence of his vast ignorance. He may not intend to endanger our democracy by inviting foreign interference because he may not grasp the threat. The threat is not directly to him, only to the Constitution he swore to uphold, and he understands the Constitution as little as he understands how his statements threaten it. The proper adjective for his reflexes is reptilian. But, we are not reptiles and we live in world more complex than one of simple threats and simple benefits. The country is paying a price for this man's personal failings and the price gets higher every day. Will no Republicans stand with their own Rep. Justin Amash and say "Enough is enough"?

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

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