

Year three of Trump's war on truth: Replacing enlightenment virtues with Dark Age fantasies

At the end of year three and on the verge of impeachment, Donald J. Trump is destroying Enlightenment principles that undergird American Democracy and the First Amendment – the faith that science, reason, facts and empiricism can triumph over ignorance, superstition, lies and darkness.

Our model democracy, our free press, our professional government, our world-class scientific establishment are based Enlightenment values that grew out of the Renaissance as civilization escaped the Middle Ages.

Democracy is based on the principle that ordinary men and women are able to understand the world and formulate beliefs about governance as well as kings and queens and nobles.

The First Amendment is based on the belief that truth triumphs over lies and defeats falsehood on the battlefield of ideas.

The modern press is based on the belief that professional reporters can sort fact from fiction and faithfully and fearlessly report the truth.

Government and the modern civil service are based on the Enlightenment belief that experts, such as those in the State Department, can sort through mountains of information and data compiled by diplomats and government experts to formulate intelligent policy.

Science is predicated on the Enlightenment belief in empiricism and the ability of disinterested scientists to

discover unpredictable, uncomfortable truths – that the sun doesn't orbit the earth, that splitting of tiny atomic building blocks of existence could end existence, that our scientific search for a comfortable life may heat the planet and make it uninhabitable.

The progress of civilization is based on belief that as people apply reason to learn more and throw off the superstitions and barbarities of the Dark Ages they recognize the common bonds of humanity. They understand the importance of international law and human rights to the welfare of the world's people and turn away from nationalism's gravitational pull toward destruction.

Yet Trump's know-nothingism threatens every petal of this great flowering of the Enlightenment that provided the fertile garden in which our nation was born.

Trump has created a fantasy world at odds with the real one. In his world, Ukraine and Democrats interfered with the 2016 presidential election, not Vladimir Putin and Russia. Nevermind Trump's loud entreaty, "Russia, if you're listening" or his son's "I love it" at Trump Tower, or convicted campaign manager Paul Manafort's sharing of internal polling data or dirty trickster Roger Stone's conviction for lying about his contacts with Julian Assange and the leak of a trove of Russian-hacked Clinton-campaign emails.

In Trump's fictional world, impeachment, like the Russia investigation, is a hoax. Trump extorted and bribed the leader of Ukraine in plain sight and declared it "perfect." He demanded a "favor" – investigating Biden and CrowdStrike – in return for a White House meeting and eventually \$400 million in military aid. Quid pro quo. Political dirt in return for \$400 million. It doesn't get much starker.

Dirt for aid.

In Trump's fictional world, the premiere news organizations

publish "fake news." The news media are enemies of the people. This even though the disclosures in the "failing" New York Times and "Amazon'" Washington Post have turned out to be true. Trump's first of many national security advisers, Michael Flynn, had lied about his dealings with the Russians. Trump tried to get FBI Director James Comey to spare Flynn and then fired Comey for disloyalty. Trump tried to fire Special Counsel Robert Mueller. Trump's lawyer tried to persuade personal lawyer Michael Cohen to lie to Congress about continuing negotiations to build a Trump Tower Moscow into the 2016 general election campaign.

Yet Trump loves and courts Sean Hannity and his debunked conspiracy theories. Not surprisingly, an InfoWars host, Owen Shoyer, disrupted the opening of House impeachment hearings on Dec. 9 yelling Trump was innocent and Democrats guilty of treason. This is the same "journalist" who claimed the Newtown massacre of first graders didn't happen and the parents lied about it.

The InfoWars view of treason is like Trump's. To the president, the traitors are the whistle-blower who tipped Congress to Trump's shakedown of the Ukrainian president, and Rep. Adam Schiff, who led the House Intelligence Committee's investigation that led to impeachment.

In Trump's fantasy, his lawyer Rudy Giuliani and the Three Amigos are the reliable experts on Ukraine. After all Rudy even believes the president's Ukrainian conspiracy theory. The Washington Post didn't have enough Pinocchios to describe how false "Crowdstrike" is, that debunked conspiracy that had Trump muttering about how "They [Ukraine] have this server, right? From the DNC, Democratic National Committee." It took the NSC Russia expert Fiona Hill to point out this was Putin propaganda that the president and his allies are spouting.



(Illustration by Steve Edwards)

In Trumpworld, the State Department and NSC professionals are tiresome as the “fake” news organizations. Take former Ukrainian Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch, whose parents fled the Soviet Union and Nazis. She was “bad news,” Trump said, after he removed her following a smear campaign by Giuliani. And when she testified to the House, Trump tweeted real-time witness intimidation: “Everywhere Marie Yovanovitch went turned bad. She started off in Somalia, how did that go?”

Anyone visualizing Black Hawk Down was in the wrong decade. Yovanovitch was a low level officer in the late 1980s without policy influence, and the helicopter was shot down in 1993.

What a contrast between the professionalism and courage of the diplomats on the one hand and Giuliani and his amigos and indicted Ukrainian companions caught on a plane out of the country.

The professionals in addition to Yovanovitch included Ambassador William B. Taylor, a West Point graduate and one-time member of the 82nd Airborne, Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, whose family fled the Soviet Union and who earned a Purple

Heart in Iraq, Dr. Hill, from Britain who has made a career of containing Putin and tried to set Trump and House Republicans straight as they parroted Putin talking points.

These are all professionals loyally serving American foreign policy and President Trump until the president's shakedown agenda turned into what former NSC Adviser John Bolton called a drug deal where Giuliani was a grenade "who's going to blow everybody up."

Meanwhile, beyond the facts directly relevant to impeachment, Trump continues to embrace dictators across the world from the Saudi Crown Prince implicated in murdering and dismembering a Washington Post journalist, to the leaders of Turkey, North Korea, Brazil and the Philippines.

Trump has happily surrendered America's role as a champion of human rights around the world. The president pardons those facing military justice for war crimes. He gives Turkey the go-ahead to invade Syria and attack Kurdish allies who did all the dying in the war against ISIS. Russia rushes into the American void.

And as the world began to take climate change seriously, Trump exited the Paris Climate Accord and continues to deny the overwhelming consensus of climate scientists that man-made global warming is an existential crisis. In pique at being denied Time's Person of the Year honor, he stoops so low as to bully Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old climate activist from Sweden.

Trump almost certainly will be impeached but not removed from office. He could even be reelected because a willfully blind minority that includes 42 percent of American voters live with Trump in this fantasy world of presidential tweets and misinformation. And Republicans in Congress follow like sheep.

It's a world in which the president's blunt repetition of crude slogans – fake news, hoax, witch hunt, coup, Deep State,

nasty woman, low IQ, FBI scam – masquerade as discourse. And when repeated over and over to a credulous audience of adoring supporters, these mindless slogans drown rational argument based on fact.

We face a stress test for our democracy, a stress test for modernity, a stress test for the three centuries of Enlightenment progress that has coincided with the life of a nation built on Enlightenment ideals of Franklin, Jefferson and Madison.

Whether Trump can drag the nation backward into selfishness and division will depend on an idea at the center of the Enlightenment – that ordinary men and women can discover truths that kings and potentates were blind to and that people can employ empiricism and rationality to banish the darkness of ignorance, superstition, lies and unjust power.

The survival of Enlightenment values in this country created upon Enlightenment ideals, is a matter of monumental importance to the world and it is in the hands of the American people.

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