
Opinion

Diplomats taking a stand

Nov 11, 2019



Kathleen Stephens

The author was U.S. ambassador to Korea from 2008 to 2011. She is the president of the Korea Economic Institute of America located in Washington.

In mid-October, American President Donald Trump marked 1,000 days in office. He has maintained an overall approval level of around 40 percent, reflecting support from citizens pleased by a strong economy, conservative court nominees and Trump's America First, get-tough line on immigration, trade and China, as well as from those inspired by his racially-tinged brand of populist nationalism.

But even Trump's supporters acknowledge he is presiding over a chaotic administration, with half his original cabinet now gone, and more acting officials in senior positions, including the White House chief of staff, than ever. He has cycled through six communications directors and is on his fourth national security adviser. His volume of tweets has doubled between 2017 and 2019 and grown increasingly detached from any visible policy process or factual basis. The Washington Post has documented more than 13,000 false or misleading claims by Trump since the beginning of his tenure. For his part, Trump terms any press he doesn't like "fake news" and those who report it "enemies of the people."

Wherever one falls on the political spectrum, it's all more than a little exhausting and disturbing. Taboos drop away; language and behavior long unimaginable in public life becomes normalized.

But events have unspooled in recent weeks that are transforming the political context in Washington and perhaps in the country at large. Trump's sudden withdrawal of U.S. troops from northern Syria, coupled with the accumulating evidence that Trump sought for his own political gain to pressure the new Ukrainian president to investigate Trump's Democratic Party rivals, has ushered in a new period of peril for the Trump administration and a new test for

American institutions.

The immediate impact of Trump's precipitous decision to remove American troops from northern Syria, where they had been allied with Kurdish forces fighting the Islamic State while deterring Turkish forces from attacking the Kurds, was so clearly disastrous on so many levels that previously acquiescent Republican members of Congress, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, risked Trump's wrath to criticize the policy. This, after all, was the issue over which Trump's respected first Secretary of Defense James Mattis had resigned earlier in the year. The House passed a nonbinding resolution condemning the withdrawal by a 354-60 vote with bipartisan support. Aside from the humanitarian and security consequences on the ground in the region, the whole affair has eroded global confidence in American commitment. Allies are concerned. Moscow is pleased.

But it is that other foreign policy issue — Ukraine — that prompted House Democrats to launch an impeachment inquiry. It was a whistle-blower, a civil servant not leaking to the press but scrupulously following required procedures for reporting issues up the bureaucratic chain, who precipitated what followed, including the White House's release of a rough transcript of the August telephone conversation in which Trump asked the new Ukrainian president to do a favor of investigating Trump's political opponents. This was the tipping point for some Democratic members of Congress who had previously worked in national security positions in government; they felt compelled to join in launching an impeachment inquiry, which seems increasingly likely to result in the majority-Democratic House voting for impeachment, though the votes that would be needed for conviction and removal from office would come from the Senate, where the Republicans hold the majority.

Unlike in the impeachments of Nixon and Clinton, the issue this time centers on foreign policy and diplomacy. The Congress must decide what constitutes as high crimes and misdemeanors meriting impeachment, but it is the career diplomats and civil servants who have been called on to provide the facts and background for Congress to make its judgment. It is an unfamiliar and uncomfortable place for career diplomats to be.

I know; I was a career diplomat for more than 30 years, serving Republican and Democratic administrations. A core value of our service, like the military, was the principle of nonpartisanship. Even when I worked under a political appointee ambassador, as I did in the 1980s in Seoul under Ambassador Richard Walker, it was Walker himself who stressed to all of us that, "American domestic politics stop at water's edge," an adage first coined in the post-World War II era by the Republican senator chairing the Foreign Relations Committee while working with the democratic administration of former U.S. President Harry Truman. All of us privileged to represent the United States abroad took seriously our oath as nonpartisan public servants "to support and defend the constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic."

It is this oath with which former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch began her Oct. 11 statement to the House committee. Ten days later, Ambassador William Taylor, called out of retirement by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to go to Ukraine after the sudden recall of Yovanovitch, continued the narrative in a 15-page statement detailing his concerns about efforts to leverage U.S. support for Ukraine for domestic political gain.

I admire the professionalism and patriotism of Ambassadors Taylor and Yovanovitch and the other career civilian and military officials who have stepped up to speak with honesty and integrity. I am inspired by their determination to remain nonpartisan and strengthen America's core values and institutions.

A century ago George Orwell described in books like "1984" and "Animal Farm" a world so dystopian that his name became an adjective, "Orwellian." The millennial generation reading him today doesn't find him fantastical but rather merely observant in asserting that, "In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act."

I've never met a revolutionary among the diplomats and bureaucrats I've known, but I have a fresh appreciation for the importance of public servants to our democracies.