

A president who thinks he can do whatever he wants

Trump's position is not that the facts will vindicate him. It's that they don't matter.

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Donald Trump, 2016. Licensed under Creative Commons by Walt Disney Television.

In the final days of Richard Nixon's presidency, Republican leaders met with the president to say he had lost support among members of his own party and was certain to be impeached by the House and convicted in the Senate. He could either resign or wait to be removed from office.

Just days before, the momentum for impeachment had surged because Americans had learned decisive new facts about Nixon's behavior based on a tape recording from the Oval Office. On the recording, Nixon could be heard directing the CIA to stop the FBI from investigating crimes committed by his subordinates. This was unmistakable evidence that Nixon had been—despite his vehement denials—personally engaged in obstructing justice. Even his staunchest defenders now had to admit it: the facts showed Nixon had undermined the rule of law and abused his office for personal gain. And so Nixon resigned.

Will such a moment come for Donald Trump or his allies in the current impeachment inquiry? If Nixon's case is taken as the benchmark, Trump deserves to be put on trial in the Senate for his actions related to Ukraine. A transcript of a July phone call with Ukraine president Volodymyr Zelensky shows Trump using the power of the presidency to press a foreign government to dig up dirt on a political opponent, thereby seeking to manipulate the outcome of the next US election. Moreover, Trump used the threat of withholding aid to Ukraine as leverage with Zelensky, thereby hijacking US foreign policy to directly serve his personal interests. That's an abuse of power Nixon never attempted.

Will the revelation of the facts sway people's minds, as happened in the Watergate era? The more sobering question in the age of Trump is: Do facts even matter? Unlike Nixon, who denied wrongdoing until the facts finally surfaced, Trump has admitted that he asked Zelensky to go after Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden. He has publicly encouraged China to do the same. Trump's response to critics is not that facts will prove him innocent; it's that facts really don't matter, because as president he can do what he wants. How else do we understand his blanket refusal to cooperate with Congress, his nonsensical declaration that the House impeachment inquiry, explicitly outlined in the Constitution, is unconstitutional, and his charge that the whistleblower who called attention to the Zelensky phone call is a "traitor"?

Democracy always involves a heated battle between competing narratives in which the facts themselves are often contested. That was true in the Watergate era, as well as now. But then as now, democracy depends on a rough agreement on some facts and a recognition that the rule of law and the constitutional order have some definite meaning. Without a horizon of shared truth, politics becomes simply the exercise of brute force, a world in which the only relevant question is who has the muscle to impose their will. This is the world Trump wants us all to inhabit. It is not a world in which democracy can survive.

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