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February 25, 2017

## Who's the Check on Authoritarianism in the Whitehouse?

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# Who's the check on authoritarianism in the White House?



ALAN GARFIELD

President Trump's policies are bad enough. His EPA administrator is a climate change denier. His Secretary of Education denigrates public schools. His Secretary of Energy wanted to abolish the Department of Energy.

Trump won the election by passing himself off as the champion of the working class. Once in office, he filled his cabinet with billionaires.

That's all pretty bad, but it's not even the scariest aspect of the Trump administration. What really sends chills down people's spines is the administration's penchant for authoritarian tactics.

It begins with whipping up fear that some "other" is threatening our very existence. Rapists and murderers are pouring in over the border. Terrorists are masquerading as software engineers and seven-year-old Syrian refugees.

Then there's the proclamation that "I alone" can save you. Put your faith in me, grant me unbridled power, and all will be well. Forget about checks and balances.

Finally, there's the delegitimizing of anyone who questions the leader. Reputable news sources are branded as "fake." Purveyors of fabricated stories are treated as serious journalists.

This is scary stuff. But what did we expect? Trump didn't hide his authoritarian tendencies. He openly admires Vladimir Putin whom he calls a "strong leader." But Putin exhibits "strength" by poisoning opponents and threatening independent journalists. If that type of strength counts, why not admire Stalin, Hitler, and Chairman Mao?

Perhaps the scariest aspect of the Trump administration is the prominent role of chief strategist Steve Bannon. This Rasputin-like character, who pulls the strings while narcissist Trump tweets about Alec Baldwin and Meryl Streep, ran a website that catered to white supremacists and expressed admiration for an obscure Italian philosopher who inspired Mussolini.

Most likely the situation is not as dire as I've portrayed. But even if it is, why worry? Our Constitution has built-in checks and balances to keep any authoritarian regime at bay. Right?

Not entirely.

Sure, there are checks and balances



President Donald Trump, center, sits with Army Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, left, and retired Army Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, right, at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Fla. AP PHOTO/SUSAN WALSH

built into our system of government. These start with the two other branches of the federal government: the judicial branch and the legislative branch.

We've already witnessed the judicial branch standing up to Trump by enjoining his poorly executed immigration ban. But don't overestimate the judiciary's power. Judges have neither the power of the purse nor the power of the sword. Their authority exists only when we respect their rulings. If that respect evaporates, judges' power crumbles.

And Trump seems bent on undermining judicial authority. When rulings don't go his way, he demeans judges and brands them as "political." The district court judge who enjoined Trump's immigration ban was only a "so-called judge." The judge who ruled against Trump University had "an absolute conflict" because of his "Mexican heritage." No wonder Trump's own Supreme Court nominee characterized his patron's remarks as "demoralizing" and "disheartening."

No worries. We've got the legislative branch. Surely it can rein in a rogue executive.

There are indeed lots of things Congress can do to rein in the president. It could refuse to appropriate money for the president's programs, hold investigations of executive actions, censure the president, and even remove the

president through impeachment.

Congress can do these things. The question is if it will. Can we count on Republican members of Congress to stand up to a rogue Republican President, or will they choose partisanship over patriotism?

We'll know the answer soon enough. There is mounting evidence that members of the Trump campaign may have colluded with Russian intelligence to manipulate the presidential election. That's not jaywalking. That's a threat to our democracy.

Democrats have cried out for an independent investigation. Some Republicans, to their credit, have expressed support. But other Republican leaders are desperate to bury the matter.

Still, don't worry. If Congress and the courts can't restrain a wayward regime, surely the press will expose the regime's malfeasance. Isn't that why the press is called the "fourth branch of government"?

Woodward and Bernstein's Watergate reporting epitomizes this power. But Trump is also bent on discrediting the press. He has called the news media the "enemy of the American people" and, like a schoolyard bully, calls the "New York Times" the "failing New York Times."

If the press can't help us, is there no

one who can protect us from a regime gone bad?

There is. Just look in the mirror. "We the People" are and have always been, the ultimate check on tyranny in this country. If we let members of Congress know their jobs are on the line if they don't thoroughly investigate Trump's Russia ties, they'll investigate.

We can also bolster the judiciary by making it clear – through our letter writing, rallies, and lobbying – that attacks on the judiciary's independence are unacceptable.

And we have always had the power to ensure a vibrant press. If we insist on reading and watching quality journalism, it will thrive while fake journalism withers and dies.

Federal Judge Learned Hand got it right in 1944 when he said that "liberty lies in the hearts of men and women." "When it dies there," he said, "no constitution, no law, no court" can save it.

If "We the People" commit to being guardians of liberty – by monitoring elected officials, speaking out, writing letters, and voting in every single local, state and national election – our liberty is as secure as the torch in Lady Liberty's hand.

No president, no cabinet, no chief strategist can stop us.

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