

The Russia investigation's spectacular accumulation of lies



By **Michael Gerson** Opinion writer November 16

I spent part of my convalescence from a recent illness reading some of the comprehensive timelines of the Russia investigation (which indicates, I suppose, a sickness of another sort). One, compiled by Politico, runs to nearly 12,000 words — an almost book-length account of stupidity, cynicism, hubris and corruption at the highest levels of American politics.

The cumulative effect on the reader is a kind of nausea no pill can cure. Most recently, we learned about Donald Trump Jr.'s direct communications with WikiLeaks — which CIA Director Mike Pompeo has called “a non-state hostile intelligence service often abetted by state actors like Russia” — during its efforts to produce incriminating material on Hillary Clinton during the 2016 election. But this is one sentence in an epic of corruption. There is the narrative of a campaign in which high-level operatives believed that Russian espionage could help secure the American presidency, and acted on that belief. There is the narrative of deception to conceal the nature and extent of Russian ties. And there is the narrative of a president attempting to prevent or shut down the investigation of those ties and soliciting others for help in that task.

In all of this, there is a spectacular accumulation of lies. Lies on disclosure forms. Lies at confirmation hearings. Lies on Twitter. Lies in the White House briefing room. Lies to the FBI. Self-protective lies by the attorney general. Blocking and tackling lies by Vice President Pence. This is, with a few exceptions, a group of people for whom truth, political honor, ethics and integrity mean nothing.

What are the implications? President Trump and others in his administration are about to be hit by a legal tidal wave. We look at the Russia scandal and see lies. A skilled prosecutor sees leverage. People caught in criminal violations make more cooperative witnesses. Robert S. Mueller III and his A-team of investigators have plenty of stupidity and venality to work with. They are investigating an administration riven by internal hatreds — also the prosecutor's friend. And Trump has already alienated many potential allies in a public contest between himself and Mueller. A number of elected Republicans, particularly in the Senate, would watch this showdown with popcorn.

But the implications of all this are not only legal and political. We are witnessing what happens when right-wing politics becomes untethered from morality and religion.

What does public life look like without the constraining internal force of character — without the firm ethical commitments often (though not exclusively) rooted in faith? It looks like a presidential campaign unable to determine right from wrong and loyalty from disloyalty. It looks like an administration engaged in a daily assault on truth and convinced that might makes right. It looks like the residual scum left from retreating political principle — the worship of money, power and self-promoted fame. The Trumpian trinity.

But also: Power without character looks like the environment for women at Fox News during the reigns of Roger Ailes and Bill O'Reilly — what former network host [Andrea Tantaros](#) called “a sex-fueled, Playboy Mansion-like cult, steeped in intimidation, indecency and misogyny.” It looks like Breitbart News’s racial transgressiveness, providing permission and legitimacy to the alt-right. It looks like the cruelty and dehumanization practiced by [Dinesh D’Souza](#), dismissing the tears and trauma of one [Roy Moore](#) accuser as a “performance.” And it looks like the [Christian defense of Moore](#), which has ceased to be recognizably Christian.

This may be the greatest shame of a shameful time. What institution, of all institutions, should be providing the leaven of principle to political life? What institution is specifically called on to oppose the oppression of children, women and minorities, to engage the world with civility and kindness, to prepare its members for honorable service to the common good?

A hint: It is the institution that is currently — in some visible expressions — overlooking, for political reasons, credible accusations of child molestation. Some religious leaders are willing to call good evil, and evil good, in service to a different faith — a faith defined by their political identity. This is heresy at best; idolatry at worst.

Most Christians, of course, are not actively supporting Moore. But how many Americans would identify evangelical Christianity as a prophetic voice for human dignity and moral character on the political right? Very few. And they would be wrong.

Many of the people who should be supplying the moral values required by self-government have corrupted themselves. The Trump administration will be remembered for many things. The widespread, infectious corruption of institutions and individuals may be its most damning legacy.

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