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In Trump Era, GOP Leaders Lack Courage and Integrity

A Column by Evan Barrett

July 22, 2019

“These are the times that try men’s souls,” as true today as in Thomas Paine’s time. Each day our president trashes something important to the continuation of the longest functioning Democracy in the world.

An independent judiciary, designed by our Founders, is an essential element of checks and balances. For Trump it is simply an irritant, to be overcome by appointing as many extremist judges into lifetime positions as he can, regardless of their qualifications. He only praises a court if it affirms his position. He condemns any and all courts and judges that rule against him. The real Donald Trump believes a respected Indiana-born judge cannot render a proper decision because he is “Mexican.” In Trump, notwithstanding the racism, there is no respect for the rule of law.

Trump treats the executive branch as a fiefdom, not a public responsibility. His appointees don’t work for the American people, they work only for Trump. He has filled key spots with sycophants and made “acting” appointments that don’t require Senate confirmation, avoiding constitutional checks and balances.

Our First Amendment rights of free speech and free press are institutional pillars of American democracy. Thomas Jefferson’s marketplace of free ideas is under constant Trumpian assault. Reasonable and measured debate have been replaced by 5:00 AM stream-of-consciousness tweets from the bathrobe-clad narcissist.

Our Article One branch, the Congress, was created in 1787 as the primary bulwark against the emergence of a tyrant. Trump has lawlessly refused to recognize Congress’ Constitutional oversight role, directing his people to refuse to honor Congressional subpoenas. The Founding Father’s greatest fear is becoming a reality - a president who would like to be a tyrant, above the law.

Trump just established a new low by tweeting out a racist rant against four women of color, all elected members of Congress. It wasn’t a whim. He doubled, tripled and quadrupled down on the affront to our national values. But most Republican leaders either justified it or slinked silently, without comment, to their sideline holes.

However, Montana’s two GOP members of Congress - Senator Steve Daines and Congressman Greg Gianforte - were not silent, they were complicit

Gianforte amplified Trump’s rationale by citing “extreme liberal Democrats” in Congress and “standing against socialism,” as if philosophical or political differences could justify Trump’s “send her back” attack.

Daines' immediate tweet in support of Trump dived deeply into Trump's hatred swamp, concluding with a penultimate "I stand with" Trump. Daines asserted that the four members of Congress were "anti-American," an approach amplified by Daines' chief of staff posting an American flag with the words "America Love It Or Leave It," the same challenge hurled fifty years ago at those who, as Americans, opposed the Vietnam War..

Daines' "anti-American" claim against anyone with whom he and Trump disagree echoes another tragic chapter in our history - a chapter that Trump, Daines and Gianforte seem to yearn for. In the early 1950's Senator Joe McCarthy abused and harmed thousands of Americans for what they said, what they thought and who they hung out with. In that shameful historically discredited search for communists and anti-Americanism, just like today, Republican leaders either supported McCarthy or cowered in silence.

But unlike today, in 1950 Maine Republican Senator Margaret Chase Smith stood tall on the floor of the Senate. While unhappy with the Democratic Truman administration, she said it would be disastrous to replace it with "... a Republican regime embracing a philosophy that lacks political integrity or intellectual honesty." She said she didn't "want to see the Republican Party ride to political victory on the Four Horsemen of Calumny: Fear, Ignorance, Bigotry and Smear."

In her "Declaration of Conscience," Senator Smith outlined the true basic principles of Americanism: 1) the right to criticize, 2) the right to hold unpopular beliefs, 3) the right to protest, and 4) the right of independent thought. These are the very things that Trump-Daines-Gianforte assault today. Is the price of courage and integrity too high a price to pay for today's GOP?

History recognizes Margaret Chase Smith for her courage and integrity. Where are the voices of conscience among GOP leadership today? Surely and sadly not found in Montana's two GOP members of Congress.

Evan Barrett lives in historic Uptown Butte after retiring following 47 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is an award-winning producer of Montana history videos who continues to write columns and commentaries and occasionally teaches Montana history.

(700 words in the body)