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Does Trump want to be impeached?

Why the US President isn't stumbling backward toward impeachment, but might actually be eager for the fight

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When it comes to determining when it makes sense to impeach a president, congressional Democrats are working with 200 words in the Constitution, three significant historical precedents, the fervor of impeachment advocates, the anxieties of swing-state members of Congress and all the polling data that a modern political party can buy.

None of this, unfortunately, tells them what to do when the president in question actually wants them to impeach him.

That Donald Trump actually wants to be impeached is an argument that Ben Domenech, the publisher of The Federalist, has been making for some time — that the president isn't stumbling backward toward impeachment, but is actually eager for the fight.

In his email newsletter Monday morning, Domenech cited the last few days of Ukraine-related agitation as vindication, arguing that the circus atmosphere of congressional hearings, scenes of Joe Biden talking about corruption instead of health care or the economy, and wavering House Democrats getting forced into an impeachment vote by their angry colleagues and constituents are all exactly what Trump wants.

For my own part I think *wants* is probably an overstatement, since it implies a strategic purpose, a permanent intention and a stable mental state, none of which should be assumed when analysing the president of the United States. But let's go this far with Domenech: A president who escapes unscathed from an investigation into his campaign's collusion with a foreign government and then *the day after Robert Mueller's testimony* is on the phone jawboning a foreign government to help out his presidential campaign — does that president seem like a man who's particularly worried about being impeached? Who's terribly concerned with avoiding having articles filed, a Senate trial, the works? I would say ... not.

And why might Trump be so unconcerned? Maybe, as impeachment advocates insist, he just thinks Democrats are too gutless to defend the Constitution, too weak to oppose his lawlessness. But it's also possible (and yes, now I'm going to assume his rationality, having just warned against that, sorry) that he might see four upsides to impeachment, four gifts to his presidency and perhaps his post-presidency that an impeachment and a trial might bring.

Trump's abuses of power vs the Democrats' soft corruption

First, if the Democrats impeach him they will be doing something unpopular instead of something popular. Maybe the polls showing impeachment's unpopularity will alter as the Ukraine story develops. Maybe public hearings will deliver a series of blows that persuades the large anti-Trump, anti-impeachment constituency that his expedited removal from office is desirable or necessary. But the current shape of public opinion is the boring, basic reason that Trump seems to want to be impeached more than Nancy Pelosi wants to impeach him: The Democratic agenda is more popular than the Republican agenda (whatever that is), the likely Democratic nominees are all more popular than Trump, and so anything that puts the Democrats on the wrong side of public opinion may look better, through Trump's eyes, than the status quo.

Second, Trump is happy to pit his overt abuses of power against the soft corruption of his foes. This is an aspect of Trumpism that the president's critics find particularly infuriating — the way he attacks his rivals for being corrupt swamp creatures while being so much more nakedly compromised himself. But whether the subject is the Clinton Foundation's influence-peddling or now the Biden family's variation on that theme, Trump has always sold himself as the candidate of a more honest form of graft — presenting his open cynicism as preferable to carefully legal self-dealing, exquisitely laundered self-enrichment, the spirit of 'hey, it's totally normal for the vice president's son to get paid hundreds of thousands of dollars by the Ukrainians or the Chinese so long as every disclosure form gets filled out and his dad doesn't talk to him about the business.'

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In fact this sort of elite seaminess is bad, but what Trump offers isn't preferable: Hypocrisy is better than naked vice, soft corruption is better than the more open sort, and what the president appears to have done in leaning on the

were seen as the rough, effective alternative to a smug, hypocritical elite.

Ukrainian government is much worse than Hunter Biden's overseas arrangements. But no one should be surprised that some voters in our age of mistrust and fragmentation and despair prefer the honest graft — some in Trump's base, and also some in the ranks of the alienated and aggrieved middle, the peculiar Obama-Trump constituency.

Indeed, history is replete with 'boss'-style politicians who got away with corruption because they were seen as the rough, effective alternative to a smug, hypocritical elite. Trump's crucial political weakness is that unlike those bosses, he hasn't delivered that much to many of his voters. But that may make him all the more eager to return to the politics of comparative corruption, to have the argument again about whether he's more ethically challenged than the swamp. He may not win it, but at least he's playing a part that he knows well.

Trump's grip on the Republican Party

Third, an impeachment battle would give Trump a last chance to solidify his hold on the souls and reputations of his possible Republican successors. To understand what I mean, consider Jonathan V Last's explanation of why so few Republican elected officials are likely to break with Trump, no matter how Nixonian his straits become:

'One of the reasons Republicans were able to pressure Nixon to resign was that they knew Nixon cared about the institution of the Republican Party.

'Another reason is that they knew that Nixon would go away and keep quiet in a self-imposed exile after his presidency. He wasn't going to spend his winter years taking shots at (Charles) Wiggins and Goldwater and Ford on Twitter 15 times a day.

'Neither of those assumptions are operable with Trump.'

This doesn't just explain why Trump thinks he can survive an impeachment fight; it also explains why he might relish it. He knows that he could well lose the next election, but there's no reason a mere general-election defeat will prevent him from wielding power over the Republican Party, via Twitter and other means, for many years to come. And what better way to consolidate that power (or at least the feeling of that power) in the last year of his administration than seeing all his would-be successors, all the bright younger men of the Senate especially,

come down and kiss the ring one last time?

Come on down, Marco Rubio! Step right up, Ben Sasse! Tom Cotton, Josh Hawley, Ted Cruz, the history books are watching: Tell us one more time, just one more time, how completely Donald Trump the Great owns your vote, your principles, your honor!

Which brings us to the last reason Trump might kind of like to be impeached: *Because the circus is the part of politics that he fundamentally enjoys.* Throughout the Mueller investigation my Twitter feed was alight with liberal and NeverTrump fantasies about how Trump must be bed-wetting, flop-sweat terrified by the tough G-man's investigation. And maybe at times he was. But I'm pretty sure that when he ranted on Twitter about the 'Twelve Angry Democrats' and 'WITCH HUNT' and 'NO COLLUSION,' he was more engaged, more alive, more fully his full self than at any point during the legislative battles over tax reform or Obamacare repeal.

Much of the Trump era has consisted of politicians of both parties waiting for someone else to give Trump a knockout blow.

And Robert Mueller's was a legal investigation, with the power to actually put people in Trump's inner circle in prison. A merely political trial, where the worst-case scenario is a political martyrdom that Sean Hannity will sing of ever after, seems to offer Trump a much lower-stress variation on that experience. Why, the nicknames for the impeachment managers alone will be a Trumpian banquet, a veritable feast!

Should Democrats impeach?

None of this, I should stress, adds up to an airtight argument that the Democrats should not impeach. Nine months ago I made a case against impeachment, and many of the arguments in that essay might apply to this case — depending on how far it turns out Trump went in pressuring Ukraine. But politics is a contact sport, a field for combat as well as for manoeuvre, and just because someone wants a fight doesn't mean that you should never, ever give him one. The dictum about wrestling a pig (you get dirty, and besides, the pig likes it) doesn't hold up if the pig keeps punching you; the dictum that it's better to beat Trump at the polls than lose a Senate vote probably doesn't hold up if you talk yourself into looking permanently supine in the face of indubitable corruption.

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something to be said, at the level of spiritedness if not necessarily strategy, for House Democrats to take a swing themselves.

But my ultimate guess is that none of this matters quite as much as some impeachment arguers suppose. An impeachment effort could be both foredoomed *and* unlikely to influence the 2020 outcome all that much, so Nancy Pelosi might be wise to forestall one but also find herself with few regrets if one gets forced on her.

The nature of the Trump era is that *yuge* events recede far more rapidly than anyone expects. So it might be with impeachment: Have the vote or don't have it, we'll be arguing about something completely different by the time Americans are going to the polls.

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