

A clarion call for democracy

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The conservative columnist Peggy Noonan wrote last week: “The president needs to be told: Democracy is not your plaything.” She is so right. Donald Trump has warmly welcomed despots to the White House, suggested that reporters who publish classified information should be jailed, and may have obstructed justice by firing the man leading the investigation into possible collusion between Trump and the government of Russia. The first four months of this presidency underscore the necessity of the checks and balances the Founders wrote into our Constitution and the importance of the institutions of democracy that have evolved over time.

Those checks have shifted into overdrive. Trump’s Muslim ban has been stopped while the courts consider its legality. The media are investigating and reporting matters of urgent public interest, in spite of Trump’s almost daily diatribes against the press. And the most important check—the will of the public—is evident in the activism Americans are displaying in protests, town halls and other forums from coast to coast.

But one check on the executive branch has been notably lacking: the Republican leadership in Congress. Their response to everything from controversial tweets to a potential constitutional crisis? It ranges from sticking their heads in the sand to this anemic statement from Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell: “We could use a little less drama from the White House.”

That’s not to say congressional Republicans haven’t been busy. While Trump’s pyrotechnics dominate news cycles, GOP lawmakers are pushing hard for legislation that hurts working families, such as their proposals to repeal the Affordable Care Act.

After the House of Representatives narrowly passed the American Health Care Act, or Trumpcare, House Republicans headed to the White House, where the Rose Garden provided a picturesque backdrop for a perverse celebration. The president, vice president and a phalanx of GOP lawmakers beamed as they congratulated each other on passing a bill that will take health security away from millions of people in the United States. No wonder the public’s trust in

political leaders is at a new low. Only 21 percent of Americans approve of the Republicans’ healthcare plan, and voters are much less likely to support representatives who voted for it.

It’s hard to know which is worse—what Trumpcare contains, or the way it was passed.

Under Trumpcare, 24 million people would lose health insurance in the coming decade. People like the patients Toria Harris sees as an oncology nurse in Ohio—patients whose advanced cancer could be cured with access to healthcare. Millions of people with pre-existing conditions may be one recurrence away from bankruptcy or death. Reduced funding for Medicaid would be devastating

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for students like Evan, a 6-year-old from Souderton, Pa., with Down syndrome. Medicaid enables Evan to receive occupational, physical and speech therapy and other services that are vital to his growth and independence. Trumpcare would also strip \$117 billion from Medicare for seniors. All of this to pay for a tax cut for the top 2 percent of earners.

And the way the House Republicans rammed the AHCA through steamrolled the government

mechanisms intended to create trust and transparency. No time for the Congressional Budget Office to score the bill’s impact and cost, no time for House members to read it, no amendments, and less than three hours of debate. Enormous changes to the healthcare Americans rely on and a law affecting one-fifth of the economy require a scintilla of transparency so Americans know what their representatives are doing.

The president is displaying increasingly unbalanced, dangerous and authoritarian behaviors. Every member of Congress takes an oath of office—not to party or president, but to uphold the Constitution. That sworn oath is mere words unless exercised.

In *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, Yale historian Timothy Snyder takes readers through three times when Europeans confronted authoritarian regimes: the end of World War I, the end of World War II and the fall of communism. Until recently, most Americans had only been spectators to assaults on democracy. “We might be tempted to think that our democratic heritage automatically protects us from such threats,” Snyder writes. “This is a misguided reflex.”

This is no time to lower our defenses or sit on the sidelines. With an increasingly erratic president and members of his party who refuse to act as a check on his power, it is we, the people, who must serve that function to protect democracy—at town halls, rallies and, ultimately, at the ballot box.



Weingarten speaks at the Women’s March on Washington on Jan. 21, 2017.

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