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Trump Just Made the NJGOP's 2021 Tough Job Even Tougher

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Not since Richard Nixon directed the Central Intelligence Agency to block the FBI investigation of the break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate office complex 47 years ago has there been a more stunning act of self-incrimination than that committed by President Trump in his attempt to persuade the Georgia Secretary of State to alter the state's election outcome and declare him the winner.

It was an appalling case of political strong-arming of the sort that often leads eventually to a Federal judge intoning "Will the defendant please rise."

Whether Trump will face criminal charges will be considered and decided upon by others but his telephone call, taped without his knowledge, and his plea to find 11,780 votes in his favor and recalculating the official tabulation inflicted grave damage on the nation's electoral process and undermined public confidence that fair and honest voting is protected and assured.

Trump will leave office in two weeks, rendering moot any talk of impeachment. Nixon resigned after the House brought impeachment proceedings and was later pardoned by President Gerald Ford. Trump, however, still faces a criminal investigation by New York State authorities of his business dealings, a drama that will likely consume years.

The phone call incident may have also claimed the political future of Doug Steinhardt, the former New Jersey Republican chairman now seeking his party's nomination to oppose Gov. Phil Murphy.

Steinhardt has touted his long and continuing support for the president as his dedication to the Republican Party agenda, gambling that a substantial segment of the state's 1.4 million registered Republicans remains deeply committed to Trump and will turn out in the June primary election to support his candidacy.

The impact on those voters, though, of Trump's direct and personal attempt to convince a state official to arbitrarily alter already certified election results will be significant.

The taped conversation left no doubt about Trump's motives.

There is no out of context argument in his defense; no case to be made that his remarks were misunderstood or misconstrued.

There was nothing nuanced or subtle about the request that the Secretary of State suddenly and without explanation discover 11,780 votes, credit them to Trump and declare the president carried the state and is entitled to its 16 Electoral College votes.

Trump repeated his insistence that he won the election and, had it not been for massive fraud, would be looking forward to his second term.

Drawing on various conspiracy theories and unsubstantiated anecdotal evidence — none of which have held up in the dozens of lawsuits brought by his campaign — Trump declared that he received information that ballots had been shredded in some Georgia counties and that voting machines had been tampered with to deny him legitimate votes.

In what was as much a threat as a hint, Trump warned the Secretary of State that if he had knowledge of any such improper conduct and failed to act, he was complicit in election fraud and subject to prosecution. It was the very definition of strong-arming.

The Secretary refused all the president's entreaties, adamant in his assertion that the election was fraud-free, the count an honest one and the Biden victory legitimate.

Trump's confrontation with the Georgia official made fools and dupes of the handful of his supporters in Congress who intend to challenge the official Electoral College certification of the results on Wednesday.

The group disregarded warnings from its leadership that their challenge would fail, the party would be humiliated and its internal divisions laid bare for the nation to witness. They voluntarily signed on to the political kamikaze mission in any event.

Their arguments that certification be delayed until the allegations of fraud are investigated further collapses under the weight of the president's intimidation tactics, a tacit admission that the election results were legitimate and the only weapon left to change the outcome is presidential threats and demands.

By involving himself as directly as he did, Trump validated not only the criticisms of his Democratic opponents but those of the media as well which spent nearly every waking hour for the past four years belaboring him mercilessly, a fair amount of it unfairly. The president

gave a healthy dose of credence to the commentators, analysts, and talking head pundits who populate cable news accusing him of all manner of misbehavior, lying and a willingness to break the bonds of propriety in pursuit of personal and political advantage.

Steinhardt has joined a great many others in support of the Trump campaign's right to challenge the election outcome in court, but he'll surely face questions about the president's telephone call and whether he felt it reasonable and appropriate.

His principal primary opponent, former Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli of Somerset County, may confront the same questions, but his history as a Trump disciple isn't as lengthy or unwavering as Steinhardt's.

A few years ago, Ciattarelli described Trump as a charlatan who didn't deserve to hold office, a characterization that, in light of Trump's phone call, seems somewhat prescient. To be sure, Ciattarelli came around to support the president and he'll be called upon to explain in greater detail his current belief.

The Republican effort to defeat Murphy in November is a steep hill to scale. Trump just made it steeper.

For the national Republican Party concerned about Trump's post-presidency activities designed to assume control of the party and set the stage for his candidacy in 2024, the president just handed them an opportunity to distance themselves from him and shut down his takeover efforts.

In the interest of the party's survival and for the sake of their own self-respect, they'd be well advised to take it.

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