

OPINION

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The Trump Circus ■ Guest Editorial by Emily Weathers Kennedy



Since the election of our new president, the weekly news cycle has felt like a three ring circus. Last week in particular, keeping up with events felt something like whiplash.

In one ring, Trump addressed Congress and started to sound downright presidential, according to pundits. He left to celebrate, but before he and his supporters could ride the momentum and push their new agenda forward, the center ring lit up.

Here, new Attorney General Jeff Sessions was caught lying under oath to a senator about his meetings with Russians, and the fireworks on every news station exploded like Roman candles. Then the far ring started its show with one side's senators and congressmen hitting news programs parsing words like "misleading," while the other side demanded Jeff Session's recusal and even resignation.

Then, frustrated by the loss of center ring attention, the president's ring lit up again in a Twitter tirade. Trump found something interesting on Breitbart news to take the heat off his administration's Russian ties and used it to attack none other than his favorite former whipping post, Barack Obama.

I wish the above narrative were as trite as my commentary, but the underlying issues behind the hullabaloo reveal cracks in our republic that are discouraging and dangerous.

Folks wonder why Russian meetings are of such interest. After all, they argue, don't we need better relationships with Russia? The answer is yes, of course we wish for rapport with all foreign nations. But, Russia is no friend of ours, and cozying up to Vladimir Putin, a dictator who murders his

challengers and takes what he wants for power, must be carefully considered and carried out through proper channels. Rubbing shoulders with his emissaries, too, must be taken very seriously.

Attorney General Sessions' involvement with Russian could be no more than casual diplomatic discourse. After all, he was a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee and said, after being caught "misleading" Senator Al Franken during his confirmation hearing, that his meetings with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak were in that capacity. The trouble is that he is but one more in Trump's inner circle, including Trump's son-in-law, who met with the same ambassador before, during, and after the Russians were confirmed to be hacking the DNC to disrupt elections and then denied those meetings. And, other members of the Armed Services Committee did not have contact with Kislyak during this time period.

As the circus played out last week, I listened to Andrea Mitchell interview a former Russian ambassador

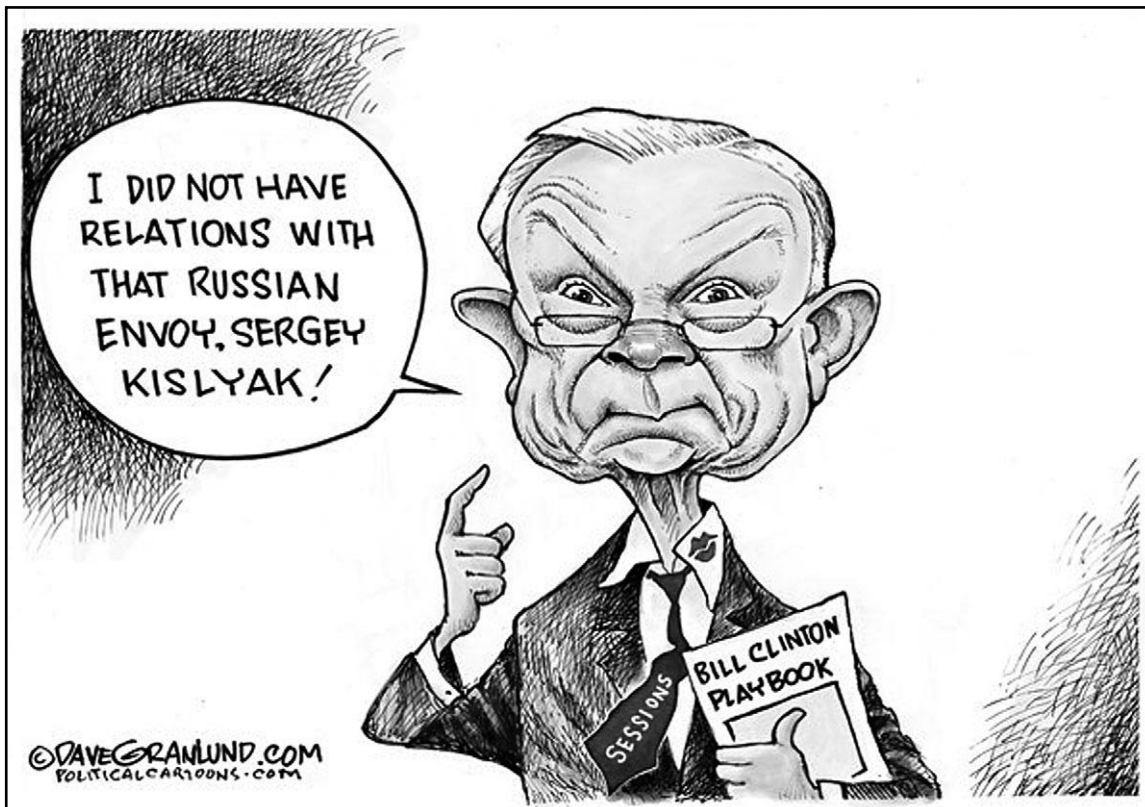
to the U.S. and Sergey Kislyak's former boss who left the Putin administration because he could not stomach Putin's behavior. He said the job of the ambassador is to gather any piece of information from each and every encounter with Americans in political circles. And, the first thing diplomats do after a conversation is to report to Vladimir Putin.

He then said that what Americans should be worried about is not that Kislyak met with American politicians. What they should be concerned about is that none of the Americans Kislyak met with, including Sessions, Mike Flynn, and Jared Kushner, said anything about the Russians' hacking the DNC and Wikileaks. He said that saying nothing was tacit approval to Putin. He said they could have told the Ambassador, "Stop the hacking!" or "Quick meddling in our elections!" thereby sending Putin a message that this business would not be tolerated.

But, since they claim they said nothing of the sort, Putin would have believed, by their silence on the matter, that his activities were condoned. Such behavior is foolhardy if not treasonous, especially in light of the fact that conversations about lifting sanctions also occurred with Kislyak while our sitting president, Barack Obama, was issuing them as punishment for the hacking.

It is in the Trump administration's and our nation's best interest to disclose all ties to Russia, including any conflicts that might be apparent on Trump's tax returns. In fact, 65 percent of Americans believe an independent special prosecutor is needed to handle the investigation, while only 32 percent believe congress is capable of handling it, according to a CNN/ORC poll released Monday.

In order to have any hope of governing, Trump must stop the circus. Otherwise, it's going to be a long four years with Putin over America's shoulders.



Congress writes the laws; Administration only helps states/U.S. implement them



By Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN)

This week, I led a group of 10 senators in introducing a resolution to rescind an Obama administration education regulation that violates the 2015 law I helped write to fix No Child Left Behind.

On Nov. 29, 2016, the United States Department of Education released its final regulation for implementing the accountability provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act – and the rule specifically does things or requires states to do things that Congress said in our law fixing No Child Left Behind that the Department can't do. In other words, the Department's regulation specifically violates the law. It's not a matter of just being within the au-

thority granted by the law. We said to the Department, 'You can't tell states exactly what to do about fixing low-performing schools. That's their decision.' This rule does that. And we said to the Department, 'You can't tell states exactly how to rate the public schools in your state,' but this rule does that.

The resolution to rescind the regulation is co-sponsored by Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) and Sens. John Cornyn (R-Texas), Tom Cotton (R-Ark.), Bill Cassidy (R-La.), David Perdue (R-Ga.), Roger Wicker (R-Miss.), John McCain (R-Ariz.), Michael Enzi (R-Wyo.) and Pat Roberts (R-Kan.).

This is really a question of whether you believe that the United States Congress writes the law or whether you believe the U.S. Department of Education writes the law. I believe under Article I of our Constitution

the United States Congress writes the law, and when it's signed by the president, then that's the law and that the regulations have to stay within it — and that is especially true when Congress has prohibited the Department from doing these things that the rule does.

And this isn't a trivial matter. The whole issue around the bill fixing No Child Left Behind was to reverse the trend to a national school board and restore to states, classroom teachers, and parents decisions about what to do about their children in public schools. Teachers, governors, school boards all were fed up with Washington telling them so much about what to do about their children in 100,000 public schools. So this rule, which contravenes the law specifically, goes to the heart of the bill fixing No Child Left Behind, which received 85 votes in the United States Senate.

Haslam, other govs, meet with Trump on Obamacare

February 28 | By Tom Humphrey

Tennessee's Bill Haslam was among a group of governors meeting with President Trump Monday for a discussion of Obamacare, reports the Associated Press.

"It's an unbelievably complex subject. Nobody knew that health care could be so complicated," Trump told the governors.

Haslam unsuccessfully pushed a plan to expand

health insurance access to hundreds of thousands of low-income Tennesseans. Haslam's Insure Tennessee plan would have used funds made available through the Affordable Care Act.

"There was discussion around a couple of topics, including infrastructure, but the discussion was predominantly around health care, and Gov. Haslam was very encouraged by the amount of collaboration between the White House, Congress and governors on this issue," Haslam spokeswoman Laura Herzog said by email Monday. "He has never seen the White House and Congress listen to governors as much as they are doing now."

Trump met later Monday morning with health insurance executives, some of whom are worried that the uncertainty over the health care law's future is spilling into the marketplace.

...A report by the consulting firms Avalere Health and McKinsey & Company presented to the governors during a weekend of meetings with the National Governors Association concluded that the changes under consideration by the GOP-led House would reduce significantly federal funding for Medicaid and subsidize private insurance, creating funding gaps for states and threatening a loss of coverage for many participants.

Preserve Medicaid, protect rural Tennessee

From the Tennessee Justice Center

As Congress undertakes the most sweeping changes in federal health programs in a generation, rural communities find themselves in the crosshairs. That is because health care in rural America is very dependent on those federal programs, especially Medicaid.

Medicaid, known in Tennessee as TennCare, has changed dramatically from its beginning fifty years ago. It has evolved into a principal source of funding for health care systems that benefit the entire community.

Medicaid covers over half of pregnant mothers and babies, funding the neonatal centers that are essential parts of Tennessee's health care system. Medicaid covers over half of all Tennessee kids and is the single most important payer for services for children with severe health care needs. It covers a quarter million Tennesseans with disabling illnesses. Medicaid pays for 61% of nursing home care. It is the largest single payer for mental health and addiction services, a crucial role in Tennessee, where the opioid and meth addiction epidemics are among the worst in the nation. In all its varied roles, Medicaid is especially

important in rural Tennessee, where enrollment in the program is generally twice as high as in urban counties.

Congress proposes to cut \$1 trillion from Medicaid over the next several years. Our elected officials must understand what that would mean for Tennessee, and must ensure that congressional actions do not harm rural Tennesseans' health.

Editor's note: The Trump Administration has identified the repeal of the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) as a top priority for Congress in 2017. While few argue that health care policy past or present is entirely satisfactory, much has been said about how it might be replaced or improved. The Tennessee Justice Center (TJC), a non-profit Nashville-based law firm that serves vulnerable families to hold government accountable and improve health and financial security for hundreds of families in every part of our state, has offered a series of editorials outlining suggestions for how the repeal and replacement of current healthcare laws might be accomplished while protecting what is good about the current law and improving policy with new legislation.

Senior Discounts: Boon Or Menace?



Tyrades! by Danny Tyree

My mother's favorite supermarket is undergoing a mysterious "repeal and replace" operation with its senior discount program. Of course nerves are on edge.

Senior discounts used to be a kindly gesture to help out struggling "fixed income" elders and reward loyalty; but in recent decades they have stirred up jealousy and made businessmen fear they've created an immortal monster.

Of course that lobbying juggernaut AARP is responsible for a lot of the discounts. Heck, gas stations that already offered "free air" were strong-armed into promising, "We'll have Cletus install a free windmill for you."

Statistics are a favorite weapon of senior discount critics. Many of the articles I've read argue that "on average" or "as a whole," people eligible for senior discounts have higher income and more accumulated wealth than the younger folks paying full price. On the other hand, one of my gray-haired friends pointed out, "On average,

as a whole, my cousins are amazing drivers. But if you depend on dead cousin Ernie to drive you to your doctor's appointments, you're up the creek."

I cannot deny that younger consumers have legitimate complaints about their own bleak prospects. If some prosperous seniors want to be magnanimous and forego their discounts, more power to them. Other seniors are a little less sympathetic. ("Sorry about your debt load, but I've got a PROSTATE bigger than your student loan. Guess I would've studied up on touchy-feely stuff more if we'd had free Wi-Fi when I was in the Vietnamese P.O.W. camp!!")

Granted, some seniors do a better job of defending their entitlements than others. One guy went full "Charlie Brown's little sister" when the topic of tampering with senior discounts came up. ("All I want is what I have coming to me. All I want is my fair share. I've paid my dues – unless you count being a deadbeat dad and getting paid under the table and filing for bankruptcy to avoid my medical bills. I didn't say I was a FANATIC about paying dues.")

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