



OPINION
William Felice

After the Capitol riot, is it too late to save one's honor? | Column

Are these resignations attempts at political self-preservation or true ethical actions to awaken us to the dangers of Trump? An Eckerd professor wonders.



President Donald Trump tours a section of the U.S.-Mexico border wall under construction on Tuesday in Alamo, Texas. [ALEX BRANDON | AP]

How are we to understand the current rush of resignations from the Trump administration? Suddenly many individuals who for four years dutifully stood by President Donald Trump are resigning from their positions in government. The violent Trump riot and insurrection in the halls of Congress persuaded Elaine Chao, Betsy DeVos, Mick Mulvaney, Matthew Pottinger, John Costello, Tyler Goodspeed, Stephanie Grisham and many others to abandon ship.

Yet, are these resignations simply attempts at political self-preservation or true ethical actions to awaken the country to the dangers of Donald Trump? Are these individuals simply “rats fleeing a sinking ship” or patriots ringing alarm bells about unethical and illegal actions of the Trump administration?

Government officials who resign to call attention to unethical behavior and policy can set off alarm bells. Such actions can expose unconscionable government action, draw the public’s attention to an insufficiently debated issue, supply the public with “inside” information necessary to an informed debate, and potentially even reverse the objectionable policy through the democratic political process.

Yet, those resigning from the Trump administration today rationalized continuing in their positions of power for years despite the dubious ethical practices of the administration. Such moral compromises can lead to complicity and the tacit support of undemocratic and immoral policies.

Examine, for example, the reflections of former Gen. Harold Johnson during the Vietnam War, and Erica Newland, former lawyer with the U.S. Office of Legal Counsel during the Trump administration.

◆ In July 1965, Gen. Harold Johnson — the U.S. army chief of staff — was appalled by the lies President Lyndon Johnson was telling the American people. In his press conference, President Johnson led Americans to believe that only an additional 50,000 U.S. troops were needed to win the war in Vietnam. The general knew the truth. Military leaders had earlier told the president that he should plan on sending hundreds of thousands of troops over the next few years to Vietnam.

Gen. Johnson felt it was unconstitutional and profoundly wrong to mislead the American people about such monumental decisions of war and death. Following the president’s press conference, the general put on his best dress uniform and ordered his driver to take him from the Pentagon to the White House. On his way there he unspined the stars from his shoulders. He was going to resign in protest. Yet, when he arrived at the White House, he had a sudden change of heart and pinned them back on. Years later, reflecting on this moment, he stated: “I should have gone to see the president. I should have resigned. It was the worst, the most immoral decision I’ve ever made.”

◆ Erica Newland worked in the Office of Legal Counsel at the Justice Department during the Trump administration from 2016-2019. She is now haunted by what she did. In late 2020 Newland wrote: “In giving voice to those trying to destroy the rule of law and dignifying their efforts with our talents and even our basic competence, we enabled that destruction. ... No matter our intentions, we were complicit. We collectively perpetuated an antidemocratic leader by conforming to his assault on reality...we enabled an assault on democracy — an assault that nearly ended it.”

We will never know if principled resignations by top officials in the Trump administration could have prevented the “assault on democracy” we are now experiencing. We do know that resignation to protest unethical action can be effective in slowing and preventing illegal policies.

Resignation in silence is probably the least ethically defensible course, as it gives to the public a false reassurance that nothing is fundamentally wrong. Moral responsibility does not end with resignation. These former officials have a responsibility to make some effort to at least bring President Trump’s illegal and immoral actions to the light of day.

By forcefully speaking out and regretting not resigning, former Gen. Harold Johnson and former Legal Counsel Erica Newland are outstanding role models for these individuals to emulate. It is never too late to speak the truth.

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