

President Trump was unmistakably talking about the number of people who were actually present on the Mall when he was sworn in, which seems to matter more to him than it does to anyone else.

Mr. Spicer expanded that number by an indeterminate amount to include anyone who had watched anywhere in the world on a cell phone, television, or other electronic device.

A day later, Mr. Spicer berated the press for being unfair by reporting on this. Perhaps he had forgotten that it was President Trump who initiated the whole thing by publicly promising something that did not happen and then falsely accusing the press of lying, as did Mr. Spicer, after being proven wrong.

Mr. Spicer also may have forgotten that, shortly after President Obama was inaugurated, the Senate majority leader announced that the Republicans' No. 1 priority was to prevent him from being elected to a second term. Failing that, they spent 8 years trying to obstruct, sabotage, and discredit everything President Obama tried to do.

During much of that time, Donald Trump carried on an utterly false campaign accusing President Obama of lying about his birthplace.

Two days later and without citing any evidence—because no evidence exists—President Trump resurrected his false claim that that he lost the popular vote because 3 to 5 million “illegal immigrants” voted. Mr. Spicer echoed this same claim, citing unnamed “studies.”

This, of course, is patently false and absurd, but one can assume that it will be repeated by Republicans to justify more onerous, discriminatory voter suppression voting requirements which have been a crusade of theirs, particularly in areas with large minority populations that traditionally vote Democratic.

To add insult to injury, Kellyanne Conway, the President's counselor, announced that President Trump will not be releasing his tax returns. This after candidate Trump repeatedly promised to do so once a routine audit is completed, and he even said he looked forward to doing that. Ms. Conway—who also came up with the phrase “alternative facts”—claimed that the fact that Mr. Trump won the election is proof that no one cared about his tax returns.

There are at least two problems with that. First, it is the only way the American people can know what President Trump's assets are, what conflicts of interest may exist, whether he has been telling the truth about what he owns, and whether he is working for the American people or to enrich himself and his family. The polls indicate that today between 60 and 74 percent of the American people want President Trump to release his tax returns, including 49 percent of his own supporters.

A few days later, Stephen Bannon, the White House strategist, said the

media should “keep its mouth shut and just listen for a while.” Ignoring that democracy is impossible without a free press, Bannon called the media the “opposition party . . . that [does not] understand this country.”

There is an even more disturbing aspect to this. Besides denigrating the press, candidate and now President Trump has attacked Muslims, the CIA, Mexico, Meryl Streep, the cast of “Hamilton,” Congressman JOHN LEWIS, politicians, undocumented migrants, or whoever else he thinks of at any particular moment, for meddling in the election or for any other reason, with one glaring exception: Vladimir Putin, one of the world's worst gangsters.

Despite credible evidence that the Russian Government, at Putin's direction, actively sought to sway the outcome of the U.S. election in favor of Donald Trump, candidate and now President Trump has repeatedly expressed admiration for Mr. Putin.

Think about what this means. The unanimous conclusion of U.S. intelligence agencies is that Vladimir Putin, a former KGB agent, ordered a cyber attack on our electoral system in favor of one candidate over another. Russia's goals “were to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency.”

Can you imagine what the response would be from the Republican leadership if the tables were turned? They would have threatened to shut down the government until a new election was held. And if that failed they would have demanded that an independent commission be established to investigate Russia's cyber attacks. Such a commission is, in fact, what Senator DURBIN, I and others have called for and what the Republican leaders, who should care no less about the integrity of our democracy, have summarily rejected.

What was candidate and President Trump's response to Russia's acts to undermine our democracy? He continued to praise Vladimir Putin.

This should concern every American because, for years, Vladimir Putin has engaged in a systematic campaign to weaken the alliances and norms that the United States and our democratic allies have painstakingly built over the course of more than seven decades, for our national security and for global stability.

Putin would like nothing more than to discredit our democracy, weaken NATO, fracture the European Union, and in doing so deflect criticism at home and abroad of the repression and rampant corruption that have become the hallmarks of his iron-fisted rule.

While Mr. Spicer blithely spoke of the United States and Russia teaming up against ISIS, Russia has used its military power in Syria for one overriding purpose: to ensure the survival of Bashar al Assad's government, one of Russia's staunchest and most brutal allies.

We have learned that President Trump is also an admirer of Egyptian President al-Sisi and Philippine President Duterte, two populist leaders who have abused their authority to silence their critics and trample on the rights of their citizens.

If allying ourselves with the likes of Presidents Putin, al Sisi, and Duterte, bringing back black CIA detention sites and so-called “enhanced interrogation”—commonly known as torture—and declaring entire nationalities of men, women, and children fleeing war and devastation as ineligible for resettlement in this country is what the future looks like, we should think long and hard about what it will mean for our reputation as the oldest democracy and leader of the free world.

I have made a career of working across the aisle and with Republican and Democratic Presidents on legislation to help solve the country's problems. I hope to be able to continue doing so, as I learned early on that bipartisanship is the only way the Congress can succeed. I have voted to confirm several of President Trump's Cabinet nominees. I expect to vote for others, and there are several I expect to vote against.

I have never believed that we should keep doing things a certain way just because it is the way we have always done them or that the government cannot be made more efficient and more accountable to the people. Of course it can be.

But in times like this, each of us should rededicate ourselves to defending the things that made this country great in the first place because ours is a great country and a good country. I believe that above all it was, and must continue to be, the integrity of our democratic system, our free, fair, and transparent elections and the checks and balances of our three equal branches of government bolstered by a free press, and our commitment to uphold the fundamental rights of all Americans.

Donald Trump was not elected President to weaken any of that, and we in Congress have a responsibility to do our best to prevent it from happening.

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#### CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. MORAN). Morning business is closed.

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#### EXECUTIVE SESSION

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#### EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to executive session to resume consideration of the Tillerson nomination, which the clerk will report.

The bill clerk read the nomination of Rex W. Tillerson, of Texas, to be Secretary of State.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, there will now be 30