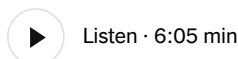


GUEST ESSAY

Trump's Election Denial Has Never Been More Dangerous

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**By Jim Himes**

Mr. Himes is the ranking Democrat on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

On Thursday evening, President Trump plans to give a rare prime-time address to the nation. He reportedly intends to revive the debunked claim that he, not Joe Biden, won the presidential election of 2020, the same claim that led to the lethal but unsuccessful attack on my workplace, the U.S. Capitol, on Jan. 6, 2021. But this time there will be a difference.

Mr. Trump now has at his disposal the full backing of his cabinet and much of the Republican Party, including key leaders of the American intelligence community. And he reportedly intends to use newly declassified American intelligence in an attempt to lend credence to these lies.

In advance of what the president may say on Thursday, it is critical that the American people understand what foreign intelligence tells us about the security of our elections, past and future.

After Russia interfered in the 2016 election, our intelligence agencies made detecting foreign interference in our democratic process a priority. In past elections, members of Congress have regularly received briefings on how nations such as Russia and China monitor our elections, and what, if anything, they're doing to interfere in or influence them.

Those updates are generally classified, but after elections, a declassified summary is typically released to the public. You can read these assessments yourself, and you will find them broadly reassuring. They show that foreign nations do indeed attempt to influence our elections and democratic processes, but we have no credible evidence that they attempt to change the actual vote count or disrupt the casting of ballots, let alone that they have succeeded. We have been and remain very good at spotting and countering their activities.

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After the 2020 election, our intelligence community found “no indications that any foreign actor

attempted to interfere in the 2020 U.S. elections by altering any technical aspect of the voting process.” That assessment reflected a rigorous look at all available information and expert judgments by nonpartisan professionals. In fact, there’s been no evidence of successful interference in the tabulation of votes in any federal election since I have been on the intelligence committee, and I have seen no credible intelligence that the upcoming midterms will be different.

Those are the facts.

But ahead of this year’s midterms, Mr. Trump is setting the stage to undermine the confidence of the American people in our elections. He has packed his administration with election deniers and hired an acting director of national intelligence with zero national security experience and a history of abusing his position to target political opponents. The F.B.I. director, Kash Patel, has made his career chasing the president’s conspiracy theories, most recently with the devotion of massive resources to a sham investigation in Georgia.

Both leaders will reportedly join Thursday night’s address. But under this administration, their agencies have gutted elements intended to identify, assess and counter foreign threats to U.S. elections, including the Foreign Malign Influence Center at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the Foreign Influence Task Force at the F.B.I. Last week, Mr. Trump fired the remaining members of the bipartisan Election Assistance Commission, which was created to help states fairly administer elections. Without these institutions, and without principled leadership to fight for the integrity of their agencies and for the truth, our intelligence community stands precariously exposed to the president’s whims.

As a result, there are a number of ways he can muddy the waters by abusing the powers of the presidency. He’s done it before.

First, he may misrepresent what classified intelligence actually says. Last year, his administration invoked the Alien Enemies Act to defend deporting undocumented Venezuelan immigrants without due process. To justify the use of this centuries-old authority, the president claimed that classified intelligence showed that the Venezuelan government was directing the actions of the Tren de Aragua gang. A now declassified assessment has revealed that most of America’s intelligence agencies believed such classified intelligence was “not credible.”

Another tactic Mr. Trump might use would be to present a scrap of raw, unverified reporting as if it were proven truth. He or his acting director of national intelligence, Bill Pulte, could, say, declassify an unsubstantiated report that includes an explosive allegation from a human source about rigged elections. The reality is that raw intelligence collection is full of things that aren’t true. Sources are sometimes unreliable — we learned that in spades after the disastrous invasion of Iraq in 2003. Reliable intelligence analysis fuses hundreds of different sources of information with expertise to produce something we can validate and trust.

Finally, if Mr. Trump declassifies intelligence about the 2020 election, it is nearly certain he will be cherry-picking bits and pieces that make his falsehoods look true. The findings of the 2020 assessment by the U.S. intelligence community have been declassified, but the basis for its findings has not.

I have read the most detailed version of that assessment, and the declassified findings are fully

consistent with the classified material, which was based on exceptionally sensitive, high-value, high-confidence intelligence. The government has a legal obligation to share critical information with the House intelligence committee, and in nearly six years it has provided nothing that would call these findings into question.

Mr. Trump may attempt other tricks to mislead the public about their democracy on Thursday. The American people should know that our elections are strong and secure because of the quiet and dignified work of thousands of patriotic Americans in the intelligence community, in state and local election offices and in polling places themselves. We all can be confident that they will continue to speak truth to power and perform their duties without fear or favor.

Jim Himes has represented the Fourth Congressional District of Connecticut since 2009 and has served on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence since 2013.

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