When thinking about the special prosecutor’s investigation, start by recalling his job description

ACCORDING to NATO’s handbook, the preferred tactics in Russian information warfare can be summarised as “dismiss, distort, distract, dis- may”. That is a fair description of the response in America when Robert Mueller, the special counsel, unsealed charges against Donald Trump’s former campaign manager, Paul Manafort, and two others. The presi- dent’s most enthusiastic supporters denounced Mr Mueller, saying he should be fired or, failing that, redirected to investigate Hillary Clinton instead. Meanwhile, some of the president’s opponents took Mr Mueller’s move as the prelude to impeachment. Both views are wrong and unhelpful.

To think clearly about what Mr Mueller is up to, it helps to recall the terms of his appointment. The special counsel has been told by the Justice Department to investigate links or co- ordination between the Russian government and individuals associated with Mr Trump’s presidential campaign, and any other matters that arise directly from that endeavour. Unlike the three separate congressional inquiries into Russian gov- ernment meddling in last year’s election, Mr Mueller is authorised to prosecute anyone who committed a federal crime (see page 34). The purpose of Mr Mueller’s investigation is not to take down Mr Trump. It is to make it harder for foreign governments to interfere in future elections.

That is an aim all Americans should be able to unite behind. Instead, Mr Mueller’s probe has become the latest territory for an uncomprehending shouting match between partisans. The keyboard warriors at the Internet Research Agency in St Petersburg, Russia’s best-known troll farm, might like to imagine that this is all their doing. In reality, though, the Rus- sian meddling in America which, in the judgment of the intelligence services, took place last year is now being followed by open season for Americans to turn on each other.

To gauge the degree of partisan intoxication, recall that, as recently as 2012, the Republican presidential candidate identified Russia as America’s number one foreign-policy threat. Mr Trump’s election has turned this on its head. Republicans are now half as likely to say that Russia poses a big threat to nation- al security as Democrats are. Around 35% of Republicans express “confidence” in Vladimir Putin. No, that is not a misprint. The power of partisan thinking has created a favourable audience for the idea of firing Mr Mueller.

The Mueller meter

However, getting rid of Mr Mueller would be an act of presidential self-harm (unless, of course, Mr Trump would suffer even more from the truth coming out). Had Mr Trump not fired James Comey, Mr Mueller’s predecessor as head of the FBI, earlier this year, there would be no special counsel’s investigation. If the president were to sack Mr Mueller, too, there is a chance that he would once again set off a chain of events he cannot predict or control. If Mr Trump acts against Mr Mueller, Congress must reinstate him.

Step back, and the special counsel’s investigation looks like a test case for the country’s political system. In a staged democracy like Russia’s, someone who chaired the president’s victorious election campaign would never be arrested for money- laundering by an independent prosecutor just a year later, as Mr Manafort has been. Even in America the separation of powers, the principle that no citizen is above the rule of law, and the integrity of future elections are all now being put under strain. Roll over on any of them and the information warriors working for the Kremlin, who want the world to believe that America’s democratic institutions are no different from Russia’s, really would have something to celebrate.