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Donald Trump's 'Lynching'

The President keeps asking friends to defend the indefensible.

By The Editorial Board

Oct. 22, 2019 7:12 pm ET



President Donald Trump PHOTO: EVAN VUCCI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Donald Trump made himself a political celebrity in 2016 by persuading news media to talk about—Donald Trump. He did it mainly by the expedient of saying outrageous things—by trolling, in the parlance of social media—and it worked. It's still working, though these days as often to his detriment as advantage.

On Tuesday the President guaranteed he'd be topic number one for at least 24 hours by

tweeting that the effort to impeach him is a "lynching." Instantly, and perhaps as he intended, his critics in the media, on Capitol Hill and elsewhere expressed rage and disbelief that Mr. Trump could compare the conduct of his political opponents to the mobs that murdered African-Americans in an earlier, shameful era.

The verb *to lynch* means to execute without a trial or due process. It doesn't refer only to extrajudicial killings in the post-Reconstruction and Jim Crow South. Accordingly, it's occasionally used in a figurative sense in other English-speaking countries. But in the United States the word is electric for its historical context, and you don't have to indulge in racial hypersensitivities to appreciate why. Clarence Thomas famously used it during his confirmation hearing in 1991 when, as he saw it, a cabal of white liberals sought to destroy his nomination to the Supreme Court by a "high-tech lynching." Justice Thomas had what we would call political and historical standing.



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But no President should use the word in the off-hand and self-indulgent way that Mr. Trump did in his tweet. What's so galling about this and similar pointless provocations is that, in his quest to remain always and forever in the headlines, Mr. Trump puts his more judicious allies on the political spot. Every Republican in Congress is immediately asked either to ignore him and risk association with his reckless pronouncements, or criticize him and risk his wrath.

Democrats are bent on impeaching Mr. Trump, and if he wants to survive he is going to need allies—especially in Congress. The more he forces Republicans to defend words or actions that don't deserve defending, the more their resentment will build and the more political trouble he will be in.

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