

CORRESPONDENCE

Psychiatrists Diagnosing the President — Moral Imperative or Ethical Violation?

TO THE EDITOR: The premise of the Perspective article by Pouncey¹ is that moral and civic responsibilities justify the mental health professionals who, along with editor Bandy Lee, authored *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump*² and any others who might be impelled, in violation of psychiatry's Goldwater rule,³ to cite medical reasons that would compel the President's ouster.

Although moral and civic imperatives justify citizens' speaking out against injustices of government and its leaders, that does not mean that psychiatrists can use their medical credentials to brand elected officials with neuropsychiatric diagnoses without sufficient evidence and appropriate circumstances. To do so undermines the profession's integrity and credibility.

Psychiatry has made too many past missteps⁴ to engage in political partisanship disguised as patriotism — witness its collusion in Nazi eugenics policies, Soviet political repression, and involuntary confinement in mental hospitals of dissidents and religious groups in the People's Republic of China. More than any other medical specialty, psychiatry is vulnerable to being exploited for partisan political purposes and for bypassing due process for establishing guilt, fault, and fact.

Moreover, there is no reason for psychiatrists to take the risk of overstepping ethical boundaries for the purposes of political expression. Any of the neuropsychiatric conditions that the President is believed to have can be confirmed (or ruled out) by standard diagnostic tests, including mental status and neurologic exams, blood tests, imaging procedures, and neurocognitive testing.⁵

The 25th Amendment to the Constitution addresses presidential competence and when invoked by Congress and administration officials could require such an evaluation.⁵ If Congress fails to act, the public can force the government's hand, as during the Vietnam War, when widespread protests forced President Lyndon Johnson to decline renomination, President Richard Nixon to sign a peace treaty, and Congress to cut off funding.

I believe that Pouncey and Lee and her coauthors are acting in good faith and are convinced they are fulfilling a moral obligation. But I believe this is a misguided and dangerous morality.

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Disclosure forms provided by the author are available with the full text of this letter at NEJM.org.

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5. Lieberman JA. Trump's brain and the 25th amendment: eight experts gathered to discuss POTUS's mental situation. *Tonic*. September 8, 2017 (https://tonic.vice.com/en_us/article/wjiv3x/trumps-brain-and-the-25th-amendment).

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