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Protecting America: More Than Just a Wall

Sarah Huckabee Sanders, on the 14th of February, 2019, opened up her iPhone. She clicked into the Notes app and typed away. After screenshotting the 50-something word memo, she pasted the image into a tweet along with the caption “Statement on Government Funding Bill.” This tweet came shortly after a thirty-five day long government shutdown over said funding bill. In order to get around the House’s opposition to allocating funds towards the around five billion dollar project along the border with Mexico, Trump has declared a national state of emergency, which, according to the National Emergencies Act of 1976, automatically gives him access to money that could aid in securing the country in a time of crisis (Paul). This crisis is not nuclear war nor foreign attacks but immigration. Trump, throughout his short political career, has capitalized on growing xenophobic ideas and the promise of a border wall between southern states and Mexico, seen through his 2017 Executive Order 13767 and championed by his slogan: “Build the Wall.” Many of Trump’s campaign promises in the last three years have fallen flat, and these failures have contributed to his falling approval rating. With a 2020 campaign already beginning, Trump appears to be using this declaration of emergency as a means of getting reelected, which has resulted in criticism about abuse of the presidential power from both Republicans and Democrats. With growing concerns about foreign threats of Russian and Chinese hackers, Iranian “nukes,” and growing hostility from North Korea, many politicians have questioned the Trump Administration’s evaluation of America’s true sources of danger. Despite mounting threats from the East, the Trump administration has used its own agenda to modify Americans’ perceptions of the safety of their country; the national security of America and threats to it have been misevaluated, falsely projected, and ignored in the years under Donald Trump, simultaneously creating mass hysteria and ignorance.

In 1796, George Washington, after rejecting John Jay's infamously terrible treaty with Great Britain in 1794, began the precedent of executive privilege and thus the 300-something year long presidential obsession with the abstract concept of "national security" (Foner). Though the concept of national security was never truly defined, Washington alluded to it being the absence of foreign entanglements for America, in his Farewell Address (Foner). While this still applies, the term has gained more significance than in the 1790's. Politicians, especially in the late 20th and early 21st century, have begun to expand what qualifies as national security and its threats, whether the issues in question are the African AIDS epidemic or foreign hackers ("World"). The idea of national security has been contorted to fit the agenda of each politician, meaning that the public has been largely desensitized to the headlines outlining the daily "national security threat." Nowadays the "threats" at the center of national conversations are immigration, climate change, hacking, food insecurity, and various other issues that could lead to the deterioration of the nation's economy, global status, or the lives of its citizens. As Trump has become the poster child for ultra-conservative legislation, certain issues have been shoved to the forefront of the national agenda while others have been pushed into the background. Homeland Security Secretary, Kirstjen Nielsen, has declared issues with cybersecurity as the number one threat to national security (Youngs). This prioritization greatly contradicts Trump's emphasis on border security and, at times, affable relationships with Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un. The closest thing to legislation that Trump has passed concerning cyber security was the dissolution of the "cyber security coordinator" role ("Role"). Ranked second most threatening, according to a 2018 report by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, was nuclear weapons, and the third was terrorist attacks by Jihad organizations . Though Nielsen and the aforementioned ODNI report did mention growing immigration as a threat, it was mentioned almost as an afterthought (Schmitt). The discoordination between the legislation and the agenda of the president and public reports by his administration have confused the public and created chaos and, in turn, done little to combat the true threats. The inflammatory language of "national security"

and “national emergencies” have been overused and abused by Trump, and it’s time that he tackles the *true* national security threats and works to preserve the safety of our nation and its democracy.

Since the 2016 presidential election, the American public has become more aware of cyber attacks, specifically from Russia. As the Mueller Report has been publicized, more and more people have begun to understand the threat that Russia poses to everyday Americans’ way of life. The likelihood of small-scale hacks to occur by Russian hackers has opened up the possibility of large-scale security breaches and hacks into major components of infrastructure like power grids (Gallagher). This threat, however, pales in comparison to the possible peril to our democracy. The public, especially Democrats, have moved their attention to Mueller’s investigation as it looks into Trump’s supposed collusion with Russia concerning election results. Since the investigation began, four of Trump’s cronies have been convicted, only adding to the suspicious aura surrounding the election and Trump himself. This, along with the “Trump Tower Meeting” between Jared Kushner, Donald Trump Jr., and others with a Russian ambassador have produced public uncertainty about Trump and his ties to Russia. Though Trump passionately denies any collusion with Russia or friendship with Putin and has dismissed his convicted aides as liars, there is a clear history of Trump’s admiration of Putin and Russian policy (as seen through his July 2016 tweet “The new joke in town is that Russia leaked the disastrous DNC e-mails, which should never have been written (stupid), because Putin likes me” which he later recanted in January 2017 (Kaczynski). This contradictory dialogue has happened as Russian hackers have slowly infiltrated private businesses’ power grids and databases. Since then, knowledge has only expanded into Russian capabilities as several studies have even alluded to interference in the 2018 midterm elections. The pillar of American freedom is the right to vote, and the Russians have compromised it. Through hacking and funding, the Russians have successfully infiltrated what should be impenetrable. America is not the only victim, however; Russia has apparently used its technology and funds to meddle in 2018 Ukrainian elections. This meddling isn’t a new occurrence, with data pointing to interference in Reagan and

Goldwater's respective campaigns in the 1970s and 80s (Vanden Brook). For much of its history, America has had an obsession with maintaining and creating democratic regimes around the world. Though this obsession has often been destructive, it's positioned America as a sort of global police figure that tries to maintain world order. For many, it's frightening that this beacon of freedom and democracy could have its own foundations attacked and threatened through direct assaults and things like the spread of disinformation and false news reports. Regardless of warnings from Nielsen, Trump has focused on other issues, and many see this as almost an unspoken air of culpability for Trump. Despite vehement denials of interference and his so called "complete exoneration" from Russian collusion with the release of the Mueller Report, many of Trump's allies have been jailed and are still being investigated (Vanden Brook). The investigation, starting at the beginning of his presidency, has weakened support of Trump and brought about rumors of impeachment. Many see that Trump's constant critiques of his political opponents serve as a means of poisoning the well and thus disqualifying their criticisms of him and his policies. Throughout his presidency, Trump has attacked politicians, particularly women, on the basis of their appearances or ethnicities; this has created a spectacle that distracts from true issues. Trump's problem is that he wants above all to be popular, and he hopes to become so by befriending or reprimanding people that will result in public support; this has led to the practical friendship with totalitarian leaders of countries like North Korea and Russia while alienating important European allies that his supporters often label as "socialists." Trump must apply the same iron fist that he did towards China during the trade war to leaders committing human rights and security violations, and the step towards eliminating the position of the cybersecurity coordinator was a step backwards.

Like Russia, Muslim Jihad organizations have long been a threat. Since 9/11 in 2001, the American public has feared another terrorist attack or further expansion of organizations like Al Qaeda or ISIS. However, in recent years, thanks in part to American involvement in places like Syria, these terrorist groups have lost the necessary funds and territory to commit the same large scale violence and attacks

carried out in earlier years. Donald Trump has even gone as far to proclaim that “[America has] won against ISIS” in a December 2018 tweet which was later flanked by a statement by the Pentagon saying that American efforts to defeat ISIS were continuing and that ISIS was still “well-positioned to rebuild and work on enabling its physical caliphate to re-emerge”. Despite this statement, Trump announced that the 2,000 American troops in Syria would be removed in the coming months because the threat of ISIS was gone. Despite this decree, 400 troops, at least, would need to remain (Mitchell). Only four months after Trump declared ISIS as being “99% defeated”(Mitchell), an attack in Sri Lanka that killed over 300 people was claimed by the terrorist group. The idea that terrorism in the Middle East is eradicated and no longer a threat is false. Trump has used the “ending” of the caliphate as a means of bolstering public opinion about himself and his administration, a technique also utilized by presidents like George H.W. Bush after the Gulf War. This propaganda is not only incorrect but dangerous; the projection of a lack of a radical presence in the Middle East could lessen domestic support for military intervention and in turn lead to troops leaving quickly (so that Trump can keep up his already falling ratings) and leading to an even further destabilization of the region, a perfect climate for breeding radicalism.

More pressing than Jihad terrorists, however, is the growing threat of weapons of mass destruction. In 1945, the U.S., being the only country with nuclear capabilities, felt on top of the global totem pole. However, by 1949 the U.S.S.R. had developed similar capabilities. As the strongest countries post-WWII, the two nuclear powers tried to battle for unipolarity to show the triumph of its country and its ideologies. The nuclear capability was what kept the war “cold;” the phenomenon of Mutually Assured Destruction kept both countries from using their nuclear weapons for fear of its own end in the process. Nowadays, with eight countries officially declaring their ownership of nuclear weapons, politics have become more complicated. Most recently, Kim Jong Un has repeatedly threatened South Korea and the United States with nuclear attack. After several summits between Kim and Trump, tensions have appeared to de-escalate, but many critics question what happened behind closed doors. Trump has very publicly

shown his hostilities towards Kim and North Korea; in November 2017 Trump even went on a public Twitter tirade against Kim. These criticisms, however, were less of a condemnation of the regime but of public comments about Trump in which Kim called Trump “old.” Rather than taking issue with North Korea’s human rights violations like his predecessors, Trump attacks Kim on a personal level, almost as a means of settling a personal rivalry rather than trying to ease tensions or aid a struggling population. In America, there are mixed opinions on Trump’s dealing with the nuclear threat. Republicans have applauded Trump’s multiple summits with North Korea and the short-lived, though impressive, move towards N. Korean denuclearization (Berlinger). Democrats, however, have criticized the unprofessional attacks on Kim and unauthorized threats from Trump’s personal Twitter account. Another nuclear weapon issue leading to diplomatic blunders is the 2018 U.S. withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal. The deal aimed to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons with its large uranium stores in return for better trade deals and an Iranian entrance into the global economy . The U.S., specifically Republicans, disliked the deal and saw it as too lenient or not effective enough. Therefore, it became a focus for Trump’s foreign policy. America’s exit could mean an end to the deal overall, which would allow Iran to continue developing nuclear capabilities and pose serious threats to the West. Without the U.S., the deal loses some of its legitimacy and could alter trade between participating countries (DiChristopher). N. Korea and Iran are just two examples of rising threats of nuclear power and how Trump has mismanaged them. Though he has attempted some diplomacy and formal policy changes, he continues to lack the eloquence and temperament necessary to make real and effective change.

Trump’s biggest concern with regard to national security is immigration. He fails to account for, or even goes as far to deny, pressing threats and advice from his top aides. After forcing Nielsen to resign in April, various reports detailed his attempts to silence her warnings about Russia in the wake of the Mueller Report (Karni). He exploits issues and uses them to his advantage to increase support without realizing the negative implications. Trump’s presidency has ushered in a new xenophobic rhetoric that has

translated to three consecutive years of increased of hate crimes, 59.6% of which were motivated by race and 20.6% which were based on the victim's religion (McCarthy). The scapegoating of immigrants and the labeling of them as rapists, thieves, and criminals has been instrumental in the increasing polarization of politics. Without a cohesive "homefront," tackling international issues will be impossible. It's Trump's responsibility to unite the nation through other means. The whole aim of Russian trolls and hackers is to split the United States, make the population fearful, and impair alliances; it's embarrassing that the president is doing their work for them. Trump must confront past allegations and issues and try to resolve them rather than trying to harp on them. While doing so, he must use diplomacy and eloquence to improve deals to benefit both the world and the American people. Together we must band together to counter foreign threats to our democracy and national survival by holding Trump accountable and demanding change.

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