



The President Is Not the Commander in Chief of the United States, Nor Its CEO

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The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki R. Haley, told George Stephanopoulos on ABC's "This Week" yesterday that "the president is the CEO of the country," and thus "he can hire and fire whoever he wants. That's his right." Leaving aside the question of whether the president can fire everyone in the federal government, she is wrong on her main point. The president is not the CEO of the country. He can reasonably be described as the CEO of the federal government. The Constitution provides that in the new government it establishes, "The executive Power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America."

Meanwhile, too many people keep calling the president—this president and previous presidents—"my commander in chief" or something similar. Again it's important for our understanding of a constitutional republic to be clear on these points. The president is the chief executive of the federal government. He is the commander in chief of the armed forces, not of the entire government and definitely not of 320 million U.S. citizens. Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution provides:

The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States.

Too many people who should know better keep getting this wrong. The highly experienced former first lady, senator, secretary of state, and presidential nominee Hillary Clinton for instance, who declared last year on the campaign trail, "Donald Trump simply doesn't have the temperament to be president and commander in chief of the United States." (She had also used the term a year earlier, and in her previous campaign she expressed a determination to be the "commander in chief of our economy," so this wasn't just a slip of the tongue.)

And also third-generation Navy man, senator, and presidential nominee John McCain who declared his support for President George W. Bush in 2007, saying, the Washington Post reported: "There's only one commander in chief of the United States, and that's George W. Bush."

Now Donald Trump is getting the same treatment. Perhaps it's no surprise that the Daily Mail, a popular newspaper in a country still headed by a monarch, would write

President Donald Trump sent a message to ex-FBI director James Comey and his detractors as he told Liberty University graduates that ‘nothing is more pathetic than being a critic’ during his first commencement address as the commander-in-chief of the United States.

But how about Democratic strategist Maria Cardona, writing in a Capitol Hill newspaper to mock President Trump’s historical ignorance:

How apropos that this famous and very fitting quote was likely used by the Abraham Lincoln, the president who actually was the commander-in-chief of the United States when the Civil War happened.

Oops.

And here also Tim Weiner, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter and author of “Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA”: “Our commander-in-chief has made a serious miscalculation.”

The Military Times should know better than to write, “Business mogul Donald Trump was sworn as the nation’s 45th commander in chief on Friday, promising to return government to the people and return American might to the international stage.”

Even Joy-Ann Reid, who hates Trump, gives him a title he doesn’t possess, declaring that Trump’s “greed and neediness and vaingloriousness have made our commander in chief a national security threat.”

In this time when we worry about threats to the Constitution and our liberal republican order, we need to remember the basics.

This is a constitutional republic, and we don’t have a commander in chief.

That’s an important distinction, and it’s disturbing that even candidates for the presidency miss it. Hillary Clinton may well have wanted to be commander in chief of the whole country, of you and me, and to direct us and our economic activities the way the president directs the officers and soldiers of the armed forces. But if so, she would have needed to propose an amendment to the Constitution—an amendment that would effectively make the rest of the Constitution irrelevant, since it was designed as a Constitution for a limited government of a free people.

Donald Trump is not my commander in chief. Neither was Barack Obama. Each was elected president, charged with leading the executive branch of the federal government.

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