

WASHINGTON Examiner

Who to believe on Saudi Arabia: Trump or the intelligence community?

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October 17, 2018

As credible evidence continues to mount that the Saudi government killed the journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi embassy in Istanbul, President Trump steadfastly refuses to engage in an honest discussion about what happened. His behavior during this crisis is just the latest example of his dismissiveness toward the American intelligence system and his lack of interest in the truth when it might be uncomfortable for him.

Faced with reporters' questions over the disappearance of Khashoggi, Trump could have acknowledged the likely role of Saudi Arabia while asking for time to get the details right. Instead, the president passed along farcical denials from the Saudi king and crown prince.

Trump summed up his thinking this way: "It sounded to me like maybe these could have been rogue killers, who knows?"

Even though we cannot know if there is firm evidence of exactly what happened, it is clear that the American intelligence services do know some things. But for the past week it has been media outlets, not Trump, telling the public about the intelligence. Meanwhile, Trump keeps amplifying the hollow claims of the likely culprits and now compares the situation to the confirmation battle over Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh.

Trump's attempt to downplay the possibility of foul play gets less persuasive by the day. Journalists noted that U.S. agencies had intercepted communications that the Saudi crown prince ordered Khashoggi's detention. Other journalists broke the news that clandestine audio tapes recorded Khashoggi being tortured and murdered inside the Saudi Arabian embassy in Turkey. Another recent story established that several of the suspects identified by Turkey worked on the crown prince's security detail.

Trump has access to the world's best intelligence. If the intelligence supports his doubts about the Saudi government's role, Trump could declassify it or at least make mention of it to assure the public that he has a clear picture of what happened. So far, he has not done that, which

strongly suggests that Trump does not want to talk about the truth because it would be inconvenient for him.

Nor has Trump been shy about why he doesn't want to talk about the Saudi's bad behavior. Almost immediately after the news of Khashoggi's death broke, Trump said he saw no reason to halt lucrative American arms sales to the Saudis, despite rising calls to do so.

Sadly, Trump's strategy of muddying the waters, ignoring intelligence, and obscuring the truth is not new. Two years ago, Trump said the potential source of meddling in the U.S. elections might be "somebody sitting on their bed that weighs 400 pounds." After taking office and having access to all of the classified material, he offered this:

"[Director of National Intelligence] Dan Coats came to me and some others. They said they think it's Russia. I have President Putin — he just said it's not Russia. I will say this, I don't see any reason why it would be."

Putin on one side and the entire U.S. intelligence community on the other, and the president isn't sure who is right? All of the U.S. intelligence agencies agreed: The Russians meddled in the 2016 election.

The president's lack of regard for the truth should concern every American. In a time when cries of "fake news" and Russian Twitter trolls have everyone worried about the information they consume, it can be difficult to distinguish truth from fiction. As president, with all the tools of the bully pulpit at his command, Trump plays an outsized role in determining not only what information the public will see but also how they feel about it. But instead of providing a beacon of integrity and honesty during difficult times and crises, Trump keeps pouring gas on the fire.

What happens if, in the next crisis, America finds itself threatened by Russian or Chinese aggression, or rogue actors again target the homeland? Will the commander-in-chief issue orders based on the best available intelligence, or will his preferred reality drive him to embrace dangerous narratives peddled by any number of voices in his head?

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