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‘It’s a dumb thing to say’: Critics blast Trump for calling his impeachment inquiry a ‘COUP’

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President Trump claimed he was a victim of a coup d’etat on Tuesday night, continuing his dramatic rhetoric that has drawn fierce pushback from legal scholars and Democrats since the House impeachment inquiry began last week.

“As I learn more and more each day,” he wrote on Twitter, “I am coming to the conclusion that what is taking place is not an impeachment, it is a COUP, intended to take away the Power of the People, their VOTE, their Freedoms, their Second Amendment, Religion, Military, Border Wall, and their God-given rights as a Citizen of the United States of America!”

Critics disputed the president’s tweet by pointing to basic definitions of a coup d’etat, a violent illegal overthrow of the government by an opposing group, and impeachment, a legal process laid out in the Constitution. Sen. Kamala D. Harris (D-Calif.), a presidential hopeful, even suggested Trump should not be allowed to make such a remark on Twitter, sharing his “COUP” tweet with CEO Jack Dorsey.

“Time to do something about this,” she tweeted to Dorsey.

Gene Healy, a vice president at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, called Trump’s comparison “dumb and galling.” He pointed out how Vice President Pence, a close ideological ally, would take office if the president were to be impeached, unlike in the illegal overthrow Trump’s tweet evokes.

“What kind of coup would replace Donald Trump with his handpicked, duly elected, loyal-to-a-fault running mate? That’s not a coup,” Healy, also the author of “Indispensable Remedy: The Broad Scope of the Constitution’s Impeachment Power,” told The Washington Post. “So it’s a dumb thing to say, but it’s something that is par for the course in terms of moronic political rhetoric.”

How Trump's attempt to force a Biden-Ukraine investigation backfired to an impeachment inquiry

The Fact Checker unravels what happened when Trump tried to force an investigation into the false rumor about then-vice president Joe Biden and Ukraine. (Meg Kelly, Sarah Cahlan/The Washington Post)

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The “COUP” tweet follows explosive, and at times threatening, comments Trump has made in attempt to discredit the impeachment inquiry. He has questioned whether House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam B. Schiff (D-Calif.) should be arrested for treason, an offense that can be punishable by death. He has ominously alluded to the same punishment while attacking the anonymous whistleblower, whom Trump called “almost a spy.” And he has suggested on Twitter that his impeachment could lead to civil war while quoting Southern Baptist megachurch pastor Robert Jeffress — who had just made a similar argument on “Fox & Friends Weekend.”

Likewise, Trump’s “COUP” tweet came hours after his allies made the same case on Fox News.

“This is not an impeachment. This is a coup d’etat,” Newt Gingrich, the former House speaker who led impeachment proceedings against President Bill Clinton in 1998, said Tuesday on Fox News’s “America’s Newsroom.”

Peter Navarro, Trump’s trade adviser, later told Fox Business Network: “This is nothing less than an attempted coup d’etat and end run around the ballot box.”

But Healy said the “coup” argument is old news, a recycled political talking point spewed by both President Richard M. Nixon’s surrogates in the aftermath of Watergate and by Democrats defending Clinton in the ’90s.

“Let’s not pretend Trump is the first to use this stupid comparison,” he said.

During Clinton’s impeachment, Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.), now chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, which is tasked with investigating Trump, called it a “partisan coup d’etat.” It was a “Republican coup d’etat,” said former congressman John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.), and it was “raw, unmasked, unbridled hatred and meanness that drives this impeachment coup d’etat, this unapologetic disregard for the voice of the people,” said Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) at the time.

Hillary Clinton, in fact, also said her husband experienced an “attempted Congressional coup d’etat” in her 2003 memoir, “Living History.”

It was already stale by then. For decades after Nixon’s resignation, his closest allies continued to spin the same “coup d’etat” alternative history.

“Having been beaten at the polls in the crushing defeat of the McGovern-Shriver ticket, the left-wingers determined to reverse the election results by forcing Nixon out of the presidency by a process which amounted to a coup d’etat,” Spiro Agnew, Nixon’s vice president who resigned in 1973, wrote in 1980.

Some of Nixon’s most ardent supporters, notably his speechwriter Patrick J. Buchanan, are still making that case today. In June, Buchanan said that if impeachment ever happens to Trump, that would also be an “attempted coup to overthrow a president by the losers of 2016.”

“This COUP business from Trump is the same nonsense that the revisionist Nixon gang pushed for years,” Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia Center for Politics, said on

Twitter, “that Nixon wasn’t really guilty of anything, he was removed from office via a ‘silent coup’ of plotters determined to destroy Nixon’s legacy and policies.”

Healy said Trump notably diverges from past presidents threatened with impeachment by making the “COUP” claim himself rather than leaving it to his surrogates. “He crossed a new rhetorical Rubicon,” Healy said, while noting he finds the president’s “civil war” and “treason” rhetoric considerably more troubling.

It’s also not the first time Trump has claimed to be the victim of a coup. During then-special counsel Robert S. Mueller III’s probe into Russian interference in the 2016 election, Trump frequently retweeted or quoted Fox News pundits and Tom Fitton of the conservative legal watchdog group Judicial Watch, who said that the president was targeted in a “Deep State coup effort.”

There has been only one successful coup d’etat in U.S. history, when white neo-Confederates overthrew the multiracial local government in Wilmington, N.C., in 1898, killing at least dozens of black residents and politicians in the process.

Making light of a coup for political purposes, critics charged, failed to appreciate the gravity of actual coups such as this one or others around the world.

“A Coup is what took the lives of my two brothers during the first Liberian civil war,” Wilmot Collins, mayor of Helena, Mont., who is a Liberian refugee and Democratic candidate for Senate, wrote on Twitter. “What the President is facing is not even close to a Coup. It’s called accountability. And it’s long overdue.”