

# The Trump era puts patriotism on trial

By **Roxanne Jones**

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**Editor's Note:** Roxanne Jones, a founding editor of *ESPN Magazine* and former vice president at ESPN, has been a producer, reporter and editor at the *New York Daily News* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Jones is co-author of "[Say it Loud: An Illustrated History of the Black Athlete](#)." She talks politics, sports and culture weekly on Philadelphia's 900AM WURD. The views expressed here are solely hers. Read more [opinion](#) on CNN.

**(CNN)** — Democracy always sounds so beautiful -- on paper.

Adam Schiff offered America a civics lesson during the House Intelligence hearing with Robert Mueller on Wednesday; the California congressman called loyalty to country our "oath of citizenship."



His words about patriotism sounded so honorable. I was inspired. Schiff's comments left us to consider whether we truly expect our president -- or even ourselves -- to exemplify these idealistic notions above all else, even our own personal gain.

But, for me, the hearings were ultimately a reminder that our historical moment demands that no matter what our politics

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report detailing Russian interference) "welcomed it, built Russian meddling into their strategy and used it to their benefit."

Democrats have presented the Trump administration and Republican leadership's approach to Russian interference -- not to mention stolen so-called "dirt" from WikiLeaks -- as un-American. But what counts as un-American -- how we define patriotism itself -- seems these days to depend more on their political affiliations. than



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I fall more on the Schiff side of the argument, for the most part. But I also get why Americans are divided. We have allowed our politics, not our principles, to define what we feel is right and wrong for the country. And that's a mistake we'll regret in hindsight.

President Trump is quick to call out what he considers un-patriotic behavior. And he, like Schiff, has strong opinions about what it means to be a loyal American.

For example, it's un-American to behave like former NFL quarterback [Colin Kaepernick](#), or more recently, US women's soccer star [Megan Rapinoe](#), who both have refused to stand for the national anthem at sporting events in protest of injustice and racism in America. It's not that Trump doesn't understand the First Amendment right to protest. We know he does, because he quickly defended that right for the white

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supremacists and nationalists who marched through Charlottesville, Virginia, saying there were "very fine people" on "all sides" -- and he has [continued to voice](#) that perspective over and over again.

In Trump's America, disloyalty to country looks like four freshmen congresswomen who got elected on the promise that they would stand against many of Trump's policies and against whom the president [has launched](#) racist and xenophobic attacks.



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In Trump's world, Vladimir Putin and [Kim Jong Un](#) are not enemies of the state. He reserves that notorious label for members of the media, especially those working for media companies he feels have covered him unfairly.

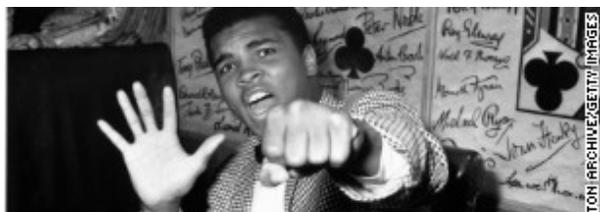
No one believes media members are always right — least of all me. And we should expect fairness and accuracy in reporting and call it out when journalists fail to measure up. But demanding that the media bend to a myopic political agenda does us all a disservice in the search for patriotism.

There's no exaggerating the threat to democracy when the public loses confidence in media and is left unable to make informed decisions — from how we vote to how we spend our money -- based on objective information. When that happens, we leave ourselves open to exactly the kind of election interference that foreign adversaries like Russia pulled off in

2016 and according to Mueller are still attempting today. And yet, hours after Mueller reiterated a warning that foreign powers constituted an ongoing threat to US elections, Republicans in the Senate [blocked the advancement](#)

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Talk about politics over principles. Regardless of political party, we all have a right to expect our government to keep elections fair and free of foreign interference.


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In 2015, nearly half of all political contributions during the early parts of the presidential race were made by only 158 families, [according to](#) the New York Times. Lobbying cash donations rose from \$1.57 billion in 2000 to \$3.15 billion in 2016.



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black, brown and Hispanic citizens [are more than 60%](#) of the nearly 2.2 million people in US prisons - the [most in the world](#), according to Bureau of Prisons statistics.

And justice fails the poor, of every race, who often can't afford prohibitive bail, or competent legal representation. But the wealthy seem able to dodge the laws of the land.

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Some argue that Democrats like Schiff and others are protesting too much. The President does pick on everyone, though I would argue [not equally](#). And not every bombastic Trump tweet spells the end of our democracy.

Still, even if you don't buy all the Trump bashing, it would be foolish not worry about recent developments in our nation. It

[According to](#) global economist Dambisa Moyo, several warning signs can signal when democracy is in danger: a decline in voter participation, a rise in the role of big money in elections, an increase in executive orders, and when citizens stop believing "no one is above the law" — a phrase we heard during the Mueller hearings.

The good news: Voter participation, which had been falling in recent decades, is now on the rise, [according to](#) the Pacific Research Institute, citing [CIRCLE](#). The 2018 midterm elections saw historic highs: Nearly half, 50.4% of eligible voters went to the polls. And if that trend continues, especially among young voters, only 30% of whom voted in the midterms, that's a win for democracy and a strong sign of loyalty to country, in my view.

Sadly, the midterms were also marred by charges of voter suppression, which continues to be a concern, [along with](#) partisan gerrymandering.

Voting rights coming under attack, coupled with the repeated police killings of unarmed citizens, often makes equal justice feels like a farce. The criminal justice system has failed too many Americans. There's no other way to explain why today

Still, it gives me hope that issues such as police brutality, law enforcement reforms and mass incarceration are taking top billing [for many of the 2020 presidential candidates](#).

Pushing through our problems won't be easy. Liberty, justice, equality, loyalty to country -- the notions that uphold this democracy can feel like an impossible dream. Yet the only way to make the dream real is to constantly challenge, question and redefine what those ideas mean to us all.

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