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## Once a President: Trump must be denounced and stripped of even the appearance of presidential legitimacy after he leaves office

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## The Activist History Review



DECEMBER 2020

Once a President



BY EDITORIAL BOARD

JANUARY 10, 2021

*by Jason Schlude*

Dear Citizens and Readers,

It is true. Once a president of the United States, always a president. No matter what happens in the course of one's presidency, one's election and service cannot be erased. The title of president offers one authority even after one's term.

It gives its former holder the potential to do great good. It has been used to that effect many times. Jimmy Carter remains the modern example *par excellence*. His wide-reaching work with [the Carter Center](#), including supporting free and fair elections the world over, has immeasurably improved the lives of millions of people.

The title, however, also has the potential to do great harm.

As public officials decide what to do after [the assault on the Capitol](#), inspired and encouraged by the very president of these United States, they should bear this possibility in mind.



VALDOSTA, GEORGIA – DECEMBER 05: President Donald Trump attends a rally in support of Sen. David Perdue (R-GA) and Sen. Kelly Loeffler (R-GA) on December 05, 2020 in Valdosta, Georgia. The rally with the senators comes ahead of a crucial runoff election for Perdue and Loeffler on January 5th which will decide who controls the United States senate. (Photo by Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

The historian's perspective is valuable here. It stretches into the past—but we look to the past to understand the present and anticipate the future, where possible. We must avoid the mistake of focusing only on the immediate moment. The coming days are not the only concern.

While we could not have predicted the full horror of the end of Trump's presidency, that it could be so ignoble should not surprise. Even as [one article in this journal of ideas](#) hoped something at least of the president's foreign policy might produce broad benefits (whatever Trump's precise personal motivations for it), it argued that his early self-consumed behavior mirrored figures of the past and that his public career—if unaltered—likely would end in failure and disgrace.

The reality though is that it will not be over when a new president takes office. Trump will retain the attention commanded by a living former president. If past behavior is a guide to the future, he will use it first and

foremost to promote himself, to the detriment of our union.

Public officials, including his cabinet, the senior leadership in the House of Representatives and Senate, and all those elected by the people of the United States to protect and perfect our democracy, must bear this in mind. The danger of Trump goes beyond the final days of his presidency. These officials cannot change that he has been the president he has, but even at this late moment they retain the power to lessen his future potential to harm our common interests. They need to pursue every legal measure given to them by the constitution to remove Trump from the presidency, to protect our country at this critical time of transition, but also with an eye to our future. As far as possible, the government should make the effort to inoculate the United States against this corrosive force.

One who turns a mob against the one of the most precious symbols of democracy to overturn the American public's will does not deserve the legitimacy enjoyed by past presidents.

What if no efforts succeed? What if cabinet members fail in an attempt to use the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment to remove Trump from office? What if an impeachment effort again fails in the Senate? Will it all be worth it? The historian has an answer for this as well.

There are times when public officials must indicate clearly where they stand. This is one of them. In the future, when we write the history of the now, Americans deserve to know what actions their elected officials attempted—or blocked—to address this dishonorable episode in the story of our country, knowing these decisions would continue to shape it.

To ensure a peaceful democracy, now and in the future, we first need to mitigate the dangerous threat to it posed by Trump. And then we must somehow find a path forward—together. That likely will require imagination transcending present political horizons. But there is reason for hope. Americans are dreamers. If only we can dream together.

*Jason Schlude is an Associate Professor of Classics and Chair of the Department of Languages and Cultures at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University. A former Getty scholar, he is an ancient historian and archaeologist who published Rome, Parthia, and the Politics of Peace: The Origins of War in the Ancient Middle East*



*(Routledge, 2020). A member of the Avon Hills Salon (<https://avonhillssalon.com>), he engages in public scholarship exploring the significance of the liberal arts and classics in the modern world. His articles have appeared in Foreign Policy Journal, Minneapolis Star Tribune, The Activist History Review, and Bible History Daily, his poetry in Pericles at Play.*

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