

## **GringoView: Democracies, Dictatorships and Corruption**

**Peter Rosenwald, BrasilPost**

This gringo will never forget the Saturday evening of October 20, 1973 when, having dinner with some lawyer friends, the news reached us that President Nixon had summarily fired Archibald Cox, the special prosecutor investigating the infamous Watergate break in. Nixon must have believed that as the mounting evidence was getting closer and closer to him, he could end the investigation by firing the investigator. Instead, this dictatorial act created a constitutional crisis and hastened the day of his resignation.

This past Tuesday, Donald Trump, having learned nothing from history, followed Nixon's imperious example and summarily fired the FBI Director James Comey. Director Comey had recently requested additional resources for the ongoing FBI investigation of Russian influence on the 2016 American election and possible collusion between Trump's aides and the Soviets, to steal the US election.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century British politician, Lord Acton, wrote that "power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely". Since assuming the US presidency, Trump has wallowed in his pool of power, splashing about without reservation or restraint. His level of absolute corruption violates every known ethical standard. The act of crudely dismissing his FBI director who only heard he had been fired on the TV news, creates another constitutional crisis. Can the president get away with it? Or will it be a milestone on the road to Trump's demise?

My Brazilian friends and colleagues, many of whom are frequent visitors and big fans of the US, ask how this could happen, how a democratic country with all its faults of arrogance and insensitivity, a country that treasured its reputation for 'exceptionalism', could decline so rapidly? Acknowledging that Brazil has recently had more than its share of corruption, they point with pride to *Lava-Jato* and courageous Judge Sergio Moro's independence. They ask how the American president can simply dismiss the head of a potentially embarrassing investigation without creating the kinds of demonstrations that have erupted throughout Brazil? What kind of a democracy is that?

These are good questions and much as I would like to have positive and optimistic answers, they are becoming harder and harder to find.

In fact, how this drama will play out in the weeks to come will be a test of whether it is an aberration to be quickly overcome by a popular backlash which will wrest the presidency from Trump or whether it is a cancer that will grow until it eats away at the core of the US 'democratic' system.

That the establishment 'New York Times' would headline the lead opinion piece in Wednesday's paper: "Donald Trump Is Lying Again, Now About James Comey" speaks to the total lack of credibility of this president. Writes David Leonhardt, "... it's important to remember just how often Trump lies. Virtually whenever he finds it more convenient to tell a falsehood than to tell a truth, he chooses the falsehood." This is Orwellian '1984' behavior. Lies are truth to him and the worst part is that he probably believes that he has the absolute power that permits him to do whatever he pleases.

Sadly, the lust for power and its abuse is nothing new. Watching the historical series 'The Tudors' on Netflix, it is impossible not to imagine how much Trump and Henry VIII had in common and not just in respect to women. As their power grew, their appetite for absolute power became insatiable.

The constitutional crisis arises from the question of whether the president and the executive branch of government have the constitutional power to stop an investigation which has been sanctioned by the legislative branch of the government. The crime would be the obstruction of justice, using the presidential power to stop a lawful investigation of the president's team. When Nixon fired Cox on that cold night way back in October 1973, as a matter of principle, having refused the president's order to fire Cox, the Attorney General Elliot Richardson and Deputy Atty. Gen. William French Smith both resigned rather than fire Cox for doing his job as the president had ordered.

On July 4<sup>th</sup> 1776, the American Declaration of Independence was adopted by the congress. That same year, the American patriot Thomas Paine, wrote that "He who dares not offend cannot be honest." It is a sad reflection that in the current political climate no one has yet resigned in protest as they did then.

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