

# Opinions



**Eugene Robinson**  
Columnist

## Beating Trump at his own game

President Trump has many limitations, to put it mildly, but he is brilliant at the dark art of branding. Those seeking to hold him accountable had better study his technique — and learn to fight fire with fire.

Witness how Trump is trying to use the word “spy” as a weapon against the FBI, the Justice Department and special counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation of Russian meddling in the election. The president’s performance this week has been totally dishonest — and, let’s be honest, quite effective.

Here is what actually happened, as far as we know: In 2016, the FBI saw what it believed were Russian attempts to interfere with the U.S. election, including contacts with three Trump campaign advisers. Alarmed and needing to know more agents asked a retired college professor named Stefan Halper to touch base with those advisers to see what he could find out. Halper did so. Two of the advisers, Carter Page and Sam Clovis, have spoken publicly about the encounters and described them as innocuous.

Here is what happened, according to Trump: “Spygate!” Trump has consistently and cleverly referred to Halper as a “spy,” rather than an “informant,” which is what he really was. And he has suggested, falsely, that the “spy” was “placed very early into my campaign.” Trump alleged in a tweet Wednesday that the “Criminal Deep State,” which for some reason is apparently persecuting him, has been “caught in a major SPY scandal the likes of which this country may never have seen before!”

Right-wing media and Trump’s political allies have joined the chorus, which is meant to sow doubt on the Mueller probe’s legitimacy. And I believe the campaign is having at least some success — all because of the word “spy.”

According to The Associated Press, “Trump told one ally this week that he wanted ‘to brand’ the informant a ‘spy,’ believing the more nefarious term would resonate more in the media and with the public.” He was right. His supporters have gleefully adopted the term. Media outlets have called Trump on his distortion, but in order to refute the word “spy” it is necessary to use the term — which has the counterproductive effect of reinforcing the word, through repetition.

Trump’s success in making some people believe his campaign was “spied on” does not deter Mueller from his appointed rounds. But it can incrementally shake confidence in Mueller’s findings — unless he completely exonerates Trump, in which case the president will paint him as the noblest and finest public servant in the history of the republic.

None of this should surprise anyone. Trump had early success as a real estate developer, then made a series of foolish investments, especially in Atlantic City, that almost ruined him. He survived by transforming the Trump Organization into what is essentially a branding company that makes deals to put the Trump name on projects whose costs, and risks, are borne by others. He has long understood how perception can overwhelm reality — and how the right turn of phrase can change everything.

As The Washington Post’s Karen Tumulty wrote in January of last year, Trump came up with the phrase “Make America Great Again” on Nov. 7, 2012, the day after Mitt Romney’s loss to Barack Obama. Five days later, Trump applied for a trademark. *This was back in 2012.* He’s good at this.

Of course you will recall how he branded his opponents for the Republican nomination with mocking nicknames — “Little” Marco Rubio, “Low Energy” Jeb Bush and the rest. It was juvenile and undignified, but it served to lump the other contenders together and diminish them all, while letting Trump set himself apart and above.

Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif., the ranking minority member on the House Intelligence Committee, is trying to give Trump a dose of his own medicine. What Trump calls “Spygate” should really be known as “Lie-gate,” Schiff says, because it is built on falsehoods. Schiff should get points for making the effort, but he’s already a bit late.

Trump understands, and seizes, the first-mover advantage that comes from coining definitional terms. “Lie-gate” is a decent counterpunch. “Spy-gate,” by contrast, was a roundhouse sucker punch — not nice, not polite, but effective.

Beating Trump at his own game requires actually playing that game. This means acting instead of always reacting — it means defining the linguistic terrain before he can. And it means understanding, as the president does, that words don’t just describe reality. They shape it. *Eugene Robinson’s email address is eugenerobinson@washpost.com.*

### The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.



### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Clarifying Paulus’ remarks

Following publication on May 20 of an opinion column I wrote, Dr. Ron Paulus of Mission Health contacted me to dispute that he said, as the Macon County News reported, that “HCA doesn’t care” about the rural hospitals in Mission’s system. He referred me to a rebuttal penned by the president of Angel Medical Center in Franklin. According to it, what he said was: “HCA is not doing this transaction because of Angel and Highlands. They like having Angel and Highlands as part of it.”

Having been unable to independently verify the quote as reported by the Macon County News, and out of fairness, I wanted to share Mission’s rebuttal. If the paper was in error, I regret repeating the error. I believe, however, that in either case, Dr. Paulus’ words support my central argument: that the 70 percent of Mission’s potential patients who live outside Buncombe County can expect to be treated as second-class citizens unless the deal specifically protects their interests.

*Victoria Loe Hicks, Asheville*

#### Think about food safety, too

What ever happened to the good old days when the worst things we had to fear on Memorial Day were traffic jams and indigestion?

Folks setting to break out their outdoor grill this Memorial Day face a nasty choice. If they undercook their hamburgers, hot dogs, and chicken nuggets, their family and friends may face food poisoning by E. coli and Salmonella bacteria. The U.S. Meat and Poultry Hotline advises raising the temperature.

But our own National Cancer Institute warns that high-temperature grilling of pro-cessed meats produces cancer-causing compounds.

Do we really need to choose between food poisoning and cancer?

Luckily, a bunch of enterprising food processors have met this challenge head-on by developing a great variety of healthful, delicious plant-based veggie burgers, veggie dogs, and soy nuggets. These products don’t harbor nasty bugs or cancer-causing compounds. They don’t even offer cholesterol, saturated fats, drugs, or pesticides like their animal-based alternatives. And, they are waiting for us in the frozen food section of our neighborhood supermarket, along with nut-based milks, ice creams, and other dairy-free desserts.

This Memorial Day, let’s stay safe on the roads, but let’s extend the safety net to our family barbecue grill.

*Arnold Mitzer, Asheville*

#### Venom, God and hypocrisy

Letters from conservatives have reached the point where I must respond. Where is your venom coming from? Progressives are Americans just like you. We love our country, serve in the military, and cherish the constitution just like you. We differ on some social and spending issues, but since when does having a

difference of opinion constitute grounds for the hatred in your letters?

Here are a few questions for my conservative friends. Do you enjoy Social Security? Do you support Medicare? Do you support equal rights for all Americans? If yes, thank a progressive! Why do you label fellow Americans as traitors simply because you disagree with them? Diversity is one of America’s great strengths and values.

It’s great fun to write letters about people who think differently and call them names like snowflake, but can you please just stop? Childish name-calling is dividing us at a time that we desperately need to be united.

Finally, I have a question for the author of the opinion letter titled “Resisting Trump is Resisting God.” You contend God selected President Trump and cite scripture (God appoints all governing authorities) as proof. Where was your letter when president Obama was in office?

*Curt Tucker, Asheville*

#### Of God and politics

I’m dismayed when Christians, or any religion, claim resisting

Their leader is resisting God as expressed in a recent letter to the ACT: “Resisting Trump is resisting God.” It’s comments like this that make me hesitate to identify myself as Christian. The same kind of statements are made by ISIS and other terrorists groups; the use of “God” to fulfill our finite desires. I say this as a Christian who rejects such absolutist statements.

Here’s a quote from one of the 20th century great theologians:

“If you are talking about God or talking about anything to do about God...and you are sure you know what you are talking about, you are a heretic.”

- Carl Rahner  
*Ed Sacco, Asheville*

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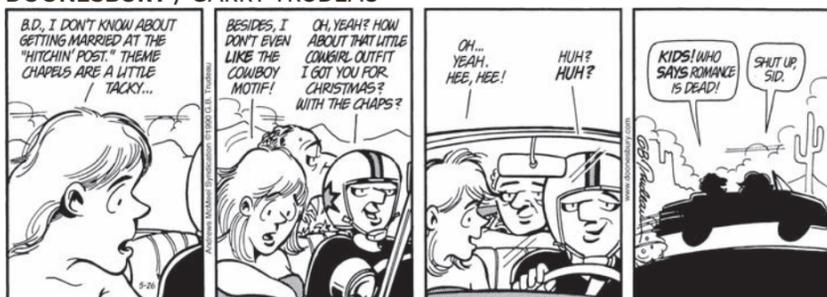
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