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The Trumps and the Truth

The best defense against future revelations is radical transparency.

By the Editorial Board

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Even Donald Trump might agree that a major reason he won the 2016 election is because voters couldn't abide Hillary Clinton's legacy of scandal, deception and stonewalling. Yet on the story of Russia's meddling in the 2016 election, Mr. Trump and his family are repeating the mistakes that doomed Mrs. Clinton.

That's the lesson the Trumps should draw from the fiasco over Don Jr.'s June 2016 meeting with Russians peddling dirt on Mrs. Clinton. First Don Jr. let news of the meeting leak without getting ahead of it. Then the White House tried to explain it away as a "nothingburger" that focused on adoptions from Russia.

When that was exposed as incomplete, Don Jr. released his emails that showed the Russian lure about Mrs. Clinton and Don Jr. all excited—"I love it." Oh, and son-in-law Jared Kushner and Beltway bagman Paul Manafort were also at the meeting. Don Jr. told Sean Hannity this was the full story. But then news leaked that a Russian-American lobbyist was also at the meeting.

Even if the ultimate truth of this tale is merely that Don Jr. is a political dunce who took a meeting that went nowhere—the best case—the Trumps made it appear as if they have something to hide. They have created the appearance of a conspiracy that on the evidence Don Jr. lacks the wit to concoct. And they handed their opponents another of the swords that by now could arm a Roman legion.

Don't you get it, guys? Special counsel Robert Mueller and the House and Senate intelligence committees are investigating the Russia story. Everything that is potentially damaging to the Trumps will come out, one way or another. Everything. Denouncing leaks as "fake news" won't wash as a counter-strategy beyond the President's base, as Mr. Trump's latest 36% approval rating shows.

Mr. Trump seems to realize he has a problem because the White House has announced the hiring of white-collar Washington lawyer Ty Cobb to manage its Russia defense. He'll presumably supersede the White House counsel, whom Mr. Trump ignores, and New York outside counsel Marc Kasowitz, who is out of his political depth.

Mr. Cobb has an opening to change the Trump strategy to one with the best chance of saving his Presidency: radical transparency. Release everything to the public ahead of the inevitable leaks. Mr. Cobb and his team should tell every Trump family member, campaign operative and White House aide to disclose every detail that might be relevant to the Russian investigations.

That means every meeting with any Russian or any American with Russian business ties. Every phone call or email. And every Trump business relationship with Russians going back years.

This should include every relevant part of Mr. Trump's tax returns, which the President will resist but Mr. Mueller is sure to seek anyway.

Then release it all to the public. Whatever short-term political damage this might cause couldn't be worse than the death by a thousand cuts of selective leaks, often out of context, from political opponents in Congress or the special counsel's office. If there really is nothing to the Russia collusion allegations, transparency will prove it. Americans will give Mr. Trump credit for trusting their ability to make a fair judgment. Pre-emptive disclosure is the only chance to contain the political harm from future revelations.

This is the opposite of the Clinton stonewall strategy, which should be instructive. That strategy saved Bill Clinton's Presidency in the 1990s at a fearsome price and only because the media and Democrats in Congress rallied behind him. Mr. Trump can't count on the same from Republicans and most of the media want him run out of office.

If Mr. Trump's approval rating stays under 40% into next year, Republicans will begin to separate themselves from an unpopular President in a (probably forlorn) attempt to save their majorities in Congress. If Democrats win the House, the investigations into every aspect of the Trump business empire, the 2016 campaign and the Administration will multiply. Impeachment will be a constant undercurrent if not an active threat. His supporters will become demoralized.

Mr. Trump will probably ignore this advice, as he has most of what these columns have suggested. Had he replaced James Comey at the FBI shortly after taking office in January, for example, he might not now have a special counsel threatening him and his family.

Mr. Trump somehow seems to believe that his outsize personality and social-media following make him larger than the Presidency. He's wrong. He and his family seem oblivious to the brutal realities of Washington politics. Those realities will destroy Mr. Trump, his family and their business reputation unless they change their strategy toward the Russia probe. They don't have much more time to do it.

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