

On Friday, in an interview with CNN anchor Kaitlan Collins, Trump's former attorney general William Barr brushed off the recent news that Trump, furious that the story he had taken refuge in a bunker during the Black Lives Matter protests in summer 2020 had leaked, called for the White House leaker to be executed.

"I remember him being very mad about that. I actually don't remember him saying 'executing,' but I wouldn't dispute it, you know," Barr said to Collins when she asked him about it. "The president would lose his temper and say things like that. I doubt he would've actually carried it out."

Collins followed up, asking if Trump would call for executions on other occasions. "He would say things similar to that on occasions to blow off steam. But I wouldn't take them literally every time he did it," Barr answered.

Why not? Collins asked.

"Because at the end of the day, it wouldn't be carried out and you could talk sense into him," Barr said. "I don't think he would actually go and kill political rivals and things like that." Barr said he intends to vote for Trump.

"Just to be clear," Collins said, "you're voting for someone who you believe tried to subvert the peaceful transfer of power, that can't even achieve his own policies, that lied about the election even after his attorney general told him that the election wasn't stolen.... You're going to vote for someone who is facing 88 criminal counts?"

"The answer to the question is yes," Barr said. "I think the real threat to democracy is the progressive movement and the Biden administration."

The contention of the former attorney general—who had been responsible for enforcing the rule of law in the United States of America—that a man who has demanded the execution of people he dislikes is a better candidate for the presidency than a man who is using the power of the federal government to create jobs for ordinary people, combat climate change, protect the environment, and promote health and education, illustrates that Republican leaders have abandoned democracy.

In November 2019, in a speech to the right-wing Federalist Society, Barr ignored the Declaration of Independence, which is a list of complaints against King George III, to argue that Americans had rebelled in 1776 not against the king, but rather against Parliament. In the modern world, Barr argued, Congress has grown far too strong. The president should be able to act on his own initiative and not be checked by either congressional or judicial oversight.

That theory is known as the theory of the “unitary executive,” and it says that because the president is the head of one of the three unique branches of government, any oversight of that office by Congress or the courts is unconstitutional, although in fact presidents since George Washington have accepted congressional oversight.

The theory took root in 1986, when Samuel Alito, then a 35-year-old lawyer for the Office of Legal Counsel in the Department of Justice, proposed the use of “signing statements” to take from Congress the sole power to make laws by giving the president the power to “interpret” them. In 1987, president Ronald Reagan issued a signing statement to a debt bill, declaring his right to interpret it as he wished and saying the president could not be forced “to follow the orders of a subordinate.”

In 2004, when Congress outlawed the newly-revealed U.S. torture program at remote sites around the world, President George W. Bush issued a signing statement rejecting any limitation on “the unitary executive branch.” In April 2020, to justify his demands for states to reopen in the face of the deadly pandemic, Trump told reporters, “When somebody is the president of the United States, the authority is total....” Now, in 2024, Trump’s lawyers are in court arguing that the president has criminal immunity for his behavior in the White House, possibly including his right to order the executions of those he sees as enemies.

As Republicans have embraced unlimited power for the president, they have also turned against the right of American citizens to have a say in their government. Beginning with so-called ballot integrity measures in 1986, they embraced methods to knock voters off the voting rolls. That policy intensified after Democrats passed the so-called Motor-Voter Law in 1993, making it easier to register to vote.

After voters nonetheless elected Democrat Barack Obama in 2008, the Supreme Court handed down the 2010 *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* decision, permitting unlimited

donations to political campaigns, and corporate money flowed into them. In that same year, Republican operatives launched Operation REDMAP to elect Republicans to state legislatures ahead of the redistricting required after the 2010 census. Operation REDMAP resulted in extreme partisan gerrymandering that would make it virtually impossible for Democrats to win elections even if they won a majority of the vote.

Then, in 2013, the Supreme Court decided *Shelby County v. Holder*, which gutted the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That law had required states with a history of racial discrimination to get clearance from the Department of Justice before they changed their voting laws. The court said that preclearance was no longer necessary. Within hours of the decision, Republican-dominated states proposed new laws that discriminate against voters of color.

In 2019, Barr explained to an audience at the University of Notre Dame the ideology behind the strong executive and weakened representation. Rejecting the clear words of the Constitution's framers, Barr said that the U.S. was never meant to be a secular democracy. When the nation's founders had spoken so extensively about self-government, he said, they had not meant the right to elect representatives of their own choosing. Instead, he said, the founders meant the ability of individuals to "restrain and govern themselves." And, because people are willful, the only way to achieve self-government is through religion.

Those who believe the United States is a secular country, he said, are destroying the nation. It was imperative, he said, to reject those values and embrace religion as the basis for American government.

The idea that the United States must become a Christian nation has apparently led Barr to accept the idea that a man who has called for the execution of those he sees as enemies should be president, apparently because he is expected to usher in an authoritarian Christian state, in preference to a man who is using the power of the government to help ordinary Americans.

Saturday night, journalists, politicians, and celebrities gathered for the White House Correspondents' Dinner, an annual fundraiser for the White House Correspondents' Association, which protects press passes for journalists who regularly cover the White House, assigns seats in the briefing room, funds scholarships for aspiring journalists, and gives awards for outstanding

journalism. It is traditionally an evening of comedy, but last night, after a humorous speech, President Joe Biden implored the press to take the threat of dictatorship seriously.

“I’m sincerely not asking of you to take sides but asking you to rise up to the seriousness of the moment; move past the horse race numbers and the gotcha moments and the distractions, the sideshows that have come to dominate and sensationalize our politics; and focus on what’s actually at stake,” he said. “Every single one of us has... a serious role to play in making sure democracy endures.... I have my role, but, with all due respect, so do you.”

George Stephanopoulos of ABC’s *This Week* apparently took this reminder to heart. “Until now,” he said in the show’s opener on Sunday, “[n]o American president had ever faced a criminal trial. No American president had ever faced a federal indictment for retaining and concealing classified documents. No American president had ever faced a federal indictment or a state indictment for trying to overturn an election, or been named an unindicted co-conspirator in two other states for the same crime. No American president ever faced hundreds of millions of dollars in judgments for business fraud, defamation, and sexual abuse....

“The scale of the abnormality is so staggering, that it can actually become numbing. It’s all too easy to fall into reflexive habits, to treat this as a normal campaign, where both sides embrace the rule of law, where both sides are dedicated to a debate based on facts and the peaceful transfer of power. But, that is not what’s happening this election year. Those bedrock tenets of our democracy are being tested in a way we haven’t seen since the Civil War. It’s a test for the candidates, for those of us in the media, and for all of us as citizens.”