

OPEN LETTER TO MARY TRUMP—Another Response to her plea to American Psychiatry

Dear Ms Trump,

On October 25 the Washington Post published an essay by psychologist Mary Trump calling on the APA to allow psychiatrists to help inform voters about the dangers that her uncle, President Donald Trump would pose in a second term (1) . On October 27, one week before the election, the Post published a response by APA President Dr Jeffrey Geller which is copied below. In addition to attempting to defend the APA's continued support for the so-called "Goldwater Rule" which prohibits psychiatrists from rendering professional opinions on public figures, Dr Geller called into question Ms Trump's ethics as well as her patriotism. As an APA Life Member involved for many years in various components of the APA in Missouri and at the national level, I was deeply disappointed by Dr Geller's response and believe we can do better. Criticizing a written guideline or commenting on potentially dangerous behaviors of an authoritarian leader is neither unethical and unpatriotic.

I would like to address several points raised in Dr Geller's letter while also attempting to shed light on the origins of the Goldwater Rule and some of the problems associated with it as an ethical principle.

1. One of the APA's primary defenses of the Goldwater Rule which Dr Geller re-asserts is that providing opinions about the psychological and behavioral features of a public figure "creates more prejudice and stigma against people with mental illness". This is not only an assertion without data to support it, it is a uniquely misplaced defense in the context of what many people in all walks of life have observed over and over about the current President, namely speech and behavior which is in and of itself highly prejudicial and stigmatizing.
2. Dr Geller and the APA are right in trying to protect individuals suffering from severe mental illness discrimination and stigma, but if anything, confronting such behavior by leaders in powerful positions should be encouraged, not condemned. Even without making diagnoses or commenting individual psychological factors, [the APA's newer, 2017 interpretation](#) (which you reference) of what constitutes a "professional opinion" prohibits psychiatrists from even commenting on speech or behavior. One unintended consequence of the APA's vigorous and repeated defenses of the Goldwater Rule may have been to discourage any criticism at all of autocratic leaders. I agree with your comment that this attempt to remain neutral "serves to normalize dysfunctional behavior".
3. I am in agreement with the argument that the Goldwater Rule [less about ethics and more about protecting the psychiatric profession](#) from the kind of public embarrassment which occurred in the wake of the the FACT magazine fiasco in which some psychiatrists who responded to the survey the magazine sent out made wild, speculative psychological assessments of the 1964 presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. Protecting the profession is not a bad thing in and of itself and the APA clearly needed to respond to the reckless sort of "armchair diagnosing" that occurred

with the Goldwater affair. But protecting the profession should not pre-empt other, more foundational ethical principles which could in some cases conflict with the Goldwater Rule. It should be noted that it was not developed until 9 years after 1964 election when it became one of the “annotations applicable to psychiatry” which were all published in 1973. The “annotations” are modifications added to the AMA Code of Ethics, in this case it’s an annotation to the broader ethical guideline (Section 7) which provides an affirmative obligation for physicians to “participate in activities contributing to the improvement of the community and the betterment of public health”. This could certainly include situations in which a psychiatrist feels ethically obligated to publicly comment on the speech and behavior of government leaders which may put the public at risk. One could argue that in extreme cases as we have seen with this President that this broader, affirmative guideline supersedes the exception to it described by the Goldwater Rule.

4. Even though you are neither an APA member or psychiatrist Dr Geller compares your recent warnings about the President to the use of mental illness labels to “persecute political dissenters” as occurred for decades in the former Soviet Union. It’s difficult to follow the logic of this: you and “other Goldwater Rule critics” are private citizens trying to sound an alarm bell based on your professional expertise, not members of a repressive government who literally were “weaponizing mental health” for political purposes. It’s ironic that the current President’s behaviors and policies which many Americans across many disciplines have expressed alarm about are disturbingly reminiscent of those of other authoritarian leaders and repressive governments. It’s also likely that, in addition to protecting the APA from further embarrassment, the organization’s ongoing vigorous defense of the Goldwater Rule arises out of a desire to avoid the kind of revenge attacks seen with repressive governments in general and which numerous critics of the President and his administration have also experienced. Caution in this regard may be wise (up to a point) from an organizational standpoint but should not lead to overzealous monitoring of First Amendment rights of free speech by individual member psychiatrists, many of whom may be motivated not by personal gain or even political partisanship but rather by a deep sense of duty to the public good as referenced in Section 7 of the Ethics Code.
5. I am in overall agreement with the last two statements from Dr Geller’s letter, that (in general) the “APA has not been silent” and has engaged in “vigorous advocacy efforts on addressing the mental health of our nation”. In 2018, shortly after becoming APA President Dr Altha Stewart vigorously condemned the trauma-inducing, Trump Administration policy of separating immigrant children from their parents at the southern border, making the APA the first U.S. medical organization to do so. In early June of this year, APA leadership, including Dr Geller put out a strong statement condemning police brutality and structural racism following the police killing of George Floyd. The APA can and should speak out more and should also encourage its members to do so. It should also enlist the Ethics Committee in outlining distinctions between reckless “diagnosing at a distance” which occurred during the Goldwater era and informed, principled critiques of behaviors and policies of our leaders.

6. As you know, the U.S. is now facing multiple ongoing crises including the worst spike in COVID-19 cases since the pandemic began. And even though the election is over and Joe Biden has widely been acknowledged as President-Elect ([including by the APA](#)), President Trump has continued to focus not on the health of the nation but rather on spreading conspiratorial theories about the election fraud and that it was “stolen” from him. More concerning to many, including military and national security experts is that, during what is supposed to be a peaceful transfer of power, Donald Trump has fired several people at the highest level of the Department of Defense and the Pentagon. [<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/trump-s-firing-esper-raises-concerns-about-national-security-during-n1247167>]. This is being widely recognized as particularly as untimely, irresponsible behavior which places our national security at increased risk during a vulnerable time period.
7. Even after your uncle leaves office on January 20, we will still be dealing for some time with the forces of violent, racist, and anti-science, conspiratorial ideologies which have been unleashed over the last 4 years. All these phenomena will continue to impact the mental health of our citizens. The APA is unlikely to eliminate the Goldwater Rule completely, but we can do much better. Guidance is needed from the APA Ethics Committee and from outside experts on how to responsibly utilize our expertise in the public interest as our ethics code requires. We should join you and other mental health professionals as well as social scientists, security experts and government and community leaders to address these issues. Thank you for starting this dialogue with American psychiatry and for calling us to our higher purpose which is already a vital but unappreciated aspect of our code of ethics. May you stay safe and may you continue to feel empowered to speak truth and justice to powerful people and institutions.

Sincerely,

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REFERENCES

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2. Don’t try to diagnose President Trump, Jeffrey Geller, Washington Post, October 27, 2020
3. APA Reaffirms Support for Goldwater Rule, March 16, 2017. American Psychiatric Association
4. The Ethics of APA's Goldwater Rule, Jerome Kroll and Claire Pouncey, Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law Online June 2016, 44 (2) 226-235
5. APA Congratulates President-Elect Joe Biden and Vice President- Elect Kamala Harris; Pledges to Work with Them on Advancing Mental Health Nov. 7, 2020. American Psychiatric Association