BuzzFeed News claims Donald Trump instructed Michael Cohen, above, to lie to Congress. But until this can be corroborated, any action against Trump is a mistake. Photo: Chang W. Lee /New York Times

Ever since Donald Trump was elected, and especially since the appointment of a special prosecutor, the question of impeachment has been the focus of speculation by political pundits and the media.
Almost weekly, sometimes daily, news stories suggest a variety of wrongdoings — both legal and ethical — committed by the president, as well as members of his administration and 2016 campaign team.

On Jan. 17, perhaps the most damning story to date was posted by BuzzFeed. For the first time, unnamed sources revealed that the president may have obstructed justice by encouraging his former attorney to lie to Congress — something that would be a felony and one that William Barr, nominated by Trump to be attorney general, said would constitute subornation of perjury and obstruction of justice, thus potentially leading to a legal indictment.

Not surprisingly, this story dominated the news on Friday and resulted in an outcry by Democrats in the House and Senate.

To be sure, they have good justification for wanting to get to the bottom of the BuzzFeed report. We must know whether it is true, as the story reported, that President Trump instructed Michael Cohen to lie to Congress about the Moscow tower project. If that was the case, this indeed would be a crime and an impeachable offense.

However, patience and caution are required. Until the story can be corroborated and all the anonymous sources interrogated, it would be a political mistake, not to mention legally inappropriate, for Democrats to call for impeachment or conclude prematurely that there is prima facie evidence to suggest that Trump committed a crime. This is especially critical since Mueller’s office Friday evening disputed at least some of BuzzFeed’s report.

I tend to think the story is at least partially accurate and reflective of a recurring pattern, that there may be supporting documents to substantiate the allegation, and that additional similar examples very well could emerge in the days to come. Moreover, there can be little doubt that special counsel Robert Mueller knows far more than the public or media does about this and other damaging allegations about Trump.

Nevertheless, from a political standpoint, now is not the time for Democrats to get out in front of what is known.

Beyond the obvious fact that no one yet has been able to corroborate BuzzFeed’s reporting, the salient question is about timing and political costs.

Allow me to offer a legal analogy: Democrats may not get two bites at the apple. As a colleague of mine astutely argued, there probably will not be two opportunities to impeach this president. Hence, just like a prosecutor knowing a target is guilty but delaying the indictment until the case is solid, Congress needs to carefully investigate, gather hard and diverse evidence, and build multiple articles of impeachment. Rushing in with one or two issues could easily result in a failure to convict in the Senate. That, in
turn, could make any other attempt at impeachment look purely political — no matter the evidence amassed.

I continue to believe, therefore, that Democrats must not allow their opposition to Trump to overwhelm sound political judgment. There is nothing wrong with the House undertaking an investigation into the details of the BuzzFeed story, requesting that Mueller guide them on what is permissible given his ongoing investigation. It will be recalled, after all, that President Richard Nixon was investigated by the Congress prior to the conclusion of the special prosecutor’s investigation.

Put simply, patience and caution are in order — and perhaps even a realization that Trump may remain in office until 2020 when Americans will be able cast a vote based on all that has transpired.

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