In watching the impeachment hearings, the question that keeps arising is: How far will Republicans go to prevent President Donald Trump from being held accountable?

Consider Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., who sent a letter on Monday (November 19, 2019) to the ranking Republicans on the House Intelligence and Oversight Committees in which he cast doubt on one of the impeachment inquiry’s key witnesses just a day before the official’s planned testimony.

Johnson wrote in his letter that Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, a National Security Council official who is scheduled to testify before the House Intelligence Committee Tuesday, is one of “a significant number of bureaucrats and staff members within the executive branch who have never accepted President Trump as legitimate and resent his
unorthodox style and his intrusion onto their turf. They react by leaking to the press and participating in the ongoing effort to sabotage his policies and, if possible, remove him from office. It is entirely possible that Vindman fits this profile.”

For over 40 years I taught a course in Argumentation and Advocacy at one of the nation’s largest public universities. In a unit devoted to exposing fallacies, mistaken beliefs based on faulty reasoning, students learned about ad hominem arguments. Ad hominem is defined as an attack on the character or circumstances of an individual who is advancing a statement or an argument instead of seeking to disprove the truth of the statement or the soundness of the argument. Students come to realize that attacking a person is not only inappropriate and unacceptable but irrelevant.

And yet this is precisely what Sen. Johnson did in his despicable comment about Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman. It is not surprising, therefore, that Vindman in his opening statement was outraged. He declared: “I want to state that the vile character attacks on these distinguished and honorable public servants is reprehensible. It is natural to disagree and engage in spirited debate, this has been our custom since the time of our Founding Fathers, but we are better than callow and cowardly attacks.”

Vindman went on to note: “The uniform I wear today is that of the United States Army. The members of our all-volunteer force are made up of a patchwork of people from all ethnicities, religions, and socio-economic backgrounds who come together under a common oath to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States of America. We do not serve any particular political party, we serve the nation.”

To be clear, there is nothing wrong—even if I disagree—with suggesting that the factual evidence Vindman offers in his testimony does not provide prima facie evidence for impeachment. But Johnson and other
Republicans have crossed the line of decency by disseminating this ad hominem attack on a patriotic public servant. There is no excuse for this.

If we ever are to restore a culture of civil discourse, our politicians must refrain from ad hominin rhetoric. Hence, Sen. Johnson and others must be reprimanded for their discursive assaults—reminding Americans that principle must supersede political party and ideology.

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