



Ron Johnson's Ad Hominem Attacks Are Wrong

November 30, 2019

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

Consider Sen. Ron Johnson, who sent a letter 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, 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 on fallacies, mistaken beliefs based on faulty reasoning, students learned why ad hominem (attacks to the person) are unacceptable — why attacking a person is not only inappropriate but an irrelevant reason for rejecting what a person says.

And yet this is precisely what Sen. Johnson did in his despicable comment about Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman. To be clear, there is nothing wrong (even if I disagree) with suggesting that what Vindman offers in his testimony does not provide prima facie evidence for impeachment. But Johnson and other Republican toadies have crossed the line of decency by disseminating this ad hominem attack on a patriotic public servant.

Richard Cherwitz

Austin, Texas