While I’m going to use most of my words today to try to talk down Donald Trump’s enemies, we can’t overlook that we have a president who acts like a nut job: euphoric at midnight, paranoid a few hours later about phantom prowlers on the roof. Let’s leave aside the debate over how much of a point Trump may have had when he accused Barack Obama of being a “Bad (or sick) guy” who had overseen efforts to “tapp [sic] my phones during the very sacred election process.” (As they say on Twitter, huge if true.) Even if the accusation were perfectly accurate—which no one, including Trump, seems to believe—the manner in which he chose to reveal it was less that of a president than that of a dementia patient
But I submit that Trump hatred has become a serious danger of its own. Trump inspires in his foes a revulsion so severe that even people who normally know better, and behave better, seem to feel the ends justify the means in getting rid of him. To these Americans, Trump’s victory was like getting impaled by a garden stake. (Forgive the stream of metaphors, but it’s Thomas Friedman Week.) And playing by the rules is like leaving the stake protruding from your ribs until the doctor can see you, which you’re informed is in two years. You want to see that doctor now—right now—and get that stake removed. Just get it out. If it means cheating and cutting in line or knocking over toddlers, fine, but get it out. This is one reason why we’re seeing such coordination among intelligence agencies, Democrats, some Republicans, and journalists to remove Trump, and fast. As Bill Kristol infamously tweeted, “Obviously strongly prefer normal democratic and constitutional politics. But if it comes to it, prefer the deep state to the Trump state.”

That makes it especially tempting to believe—or, worse still, not believe but cynically promote—the narrative that Russia has its hooks deep into this White House and our politics. As I’ve averred before, anything is possible. I would have found so many of the conspiracies of the past 20 years—our government telling us certain intelligence was “certain” when it wasn’t, Pakistan harboring our arch enemy, to name a couple—almost impossible to believe if they hadn’t later been proven true. But let’s never forget a simple fact about nearly all of these Russia-related stories: they’re based on unverifiable information from unseen sources with unknown goals. Anyone who takes this and runs with it in order to depose Trump is at risk not just of getting things way wrong, but also in creating a host of unintended consequences.

Scholars of the media have known for years that journalists—like all of us—have a tendency to latch onto a theory and stick to it long after they should have ditched it. It isn’t just that they disregard inconvenient evidence. It’s also, as authors S. Holly Stocking and Paget H. Gross observe in a 1989 book called How Do Journalists Think: A Proposal for the Study of Cognitive Bias in Newsmaking, that “theories are tested sequentially, not in parallel fashion.” Journalists focus on whether Vladimir Putin is pulling the strings rather than on a range of possible explanations for Trump’s actions or policies. The hypothesis favored by some Trump supporters, for instance, is that hatred for Putin runs so deep in Washington that people behind the
scenes are dead set on finding any way possible to box Trump in and prevent him from making friendly overtures to Russia. Like all theories, it probably accounts better for some points and leaves others more poorly explained. But the point is that it’s not even on the table.

I’ve digressed, but here is my point: the pain of the garden stake that is Donald Trump is causing people to succumb to dangerous temptation to look for any way to remove it, even if it means abandoning normal restraint. You can tell yourself that Trump is an illegitimate president—that he lost the popular vote and therefore doesn’t count, or that he won only because John Podesta’s tech guy fell for a phishing e-mail that even a four-year-old hacker could have devised, or that James Comey threw the election to Trump at the last minute, or that Moscow engineered it all. But even someone as icily competent as Putin, with his alleged record of serving polonium-210-laced tea to overseas enemies, could not have engineered Trump’s near-sweep in the primaries, or the 85 percent approval rating he now has among Republicans, or the flipping from blue to red by states that hadn’t gone Republican in over 30 years. The victory of Trump caused something approaching trauma in the psyches of millions of Americans, and that’s understandable, because old truths were overturned and suddenly everything was in the air. But let’s not pretend it was a coup d’État or a subversion of democracy.

So we’ve got to live with the garden stake, at least until the doctor will see us in 2018 or 2020. As temperamentally unsuited for office as our demented granddad might be, until he’s had a chance to govern, until his own supporters have seen fire and not just smoke, attempts to eject Trump prematurely from his post could unleash demons far worse than any we imagine we’re seeing now. It would be like what Republicans did to Bill Clinton—which was plenty bad, and for which voters punished them in 1998—but much worse, because of the particular dynamics of this moment, in which millions feel that they’re part of a populist movement to reclaim their voice. If an imperfect but democratically elected leader is taken out by means viewed as illegitimate, then people can do terrible things. We can look at near-failed states around the world for reminders.

Liberals—and plenty of conservatives—talk a lot about the violations of norms and scruples that Trump has committed. But if you don’t yourselves stick to norms and scruples, even when fighting those who don’t, you lose. This can feel like having your hands tied. But civilization depends upon keeping your hands tied. Let them rip, and good luck ever getting them back under control. We’ll manage Trump, if we manage ourselves.