

Psychiatry Group Tells Members They Can Ignore ‘Goldwater Rule’ and Comment on Trump’s Mental Health

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Featured image: Former US Senator Barry Goldwater (Source: NPR)

A leading psychiatry group has told its members they should not feel bound by a longstanding rule against commenting publicly on the mental state of public figures — [even the president](#).

The statement, an email this month from the executive committee of the American Psychoanalytic Association to its 3,500 members, represents the first significant crack in the profession’s decades-old united front aimed at preventing experts from discussing the psychiatric aspects of politicians’ behavior. It will likely make many of its members feel more comfortable speaking openly about [President Trump’s mental health](#).

The impetus for the email was “belief in the value of psychoanalytic knowledge in explaining human behavior,” said psychoanalytic association past president Dr. Prudence Gourguechon, a psychiatrist in Chicago.

“We don’t want to prohibit our members from using their knowledge responsibly.”

That responsibility is especially great today, she told STAT, “since Trump’s behavior is so different from anything we’ve seen before” in a commander in chief.

An increasing number of psychologists and psychiatrists have denounced the restriction as a “gag rule” and flouted it, with some arguing they have a “duty to warn” the public about what they see as Trump’s narcissism, impulsivity, poor attention span, paranoia, and other traits that, they believe, impair his ability to lead.

Reporters, pundits, and government officials “have been stumbling around trying to explain Trump’s unusual behavior,” from his seemingly compulsive tweeting to his grandiosity, said Dr. Leonard Glass, a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School. The rule against psychiatrists offering their analysis of the emotions, thought patterns, and beliefs underlying such behaviors, Glass said, robs the public “of our professional judgment and prevents us from communicating our understanding” of the president’s mental state.

Last week, in an [essay in Psychiatric Times](#), Glass called the prohibition on such communication “an unacceptable infringement on my right and duty” to discuss issues

“where the perspective of psychiatrists could be very relevant and enlightening.” He ended the essay by announcing his resignation from the American Psychiatric Association, which adopted the rule in 1973. He had been a member for 41 years.

Called the “Goldwater rule,” the prohibition on offering opinions about the mental state of public figures was adopted after some psychiatrists answered a 1964 survey on whether Sen. Barry Goldwater, the Republican presidential candidate that year, was mentally fit for the Oval Office. The rule states that it is unethical to offer a professional opinion about a public figure’s mental health, including the presence or absence of a disorder, without that person’s consent and without doing a standard examination. In March, the psychiatric association [reaffirmed the rule](#).

The group acted despite growing criticism that the Goldwater rule is outdated and even [unethical](#) for preventing psychiatrists from pointing out behaviors that raise questions about a government official’s mental state. No other medical specialty has such a rule; cardiologists are not prohibited from offering their views of an official’s fainting spell, for instance, as long as they make clear that they have not examined the person.

Although opposition to the Goldwater rule has existed for years, it intensified with Trump’s candidacy and then election. In October, a [book](#) titled “The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President” will be published.

“When the book comes out, there will be renewed furor about the Goldwater rule, since it is precisely about what is wrong with him,” said psychiatrist Dr. Lance Dodes, a retired professor at Harvard Medical School who is now in private practice in Los Angeles.

A number of psychologists have [spoken to reporters](#) about what Trump’s statements and actions might reveal about his emotional and cognitive state. Although the American Psychological Association “prefers” that its members not offer opinions on the psychology of someone they have not examined, it does not have a Goldwater rule and is not considering implementing one, an official told STAT.

The psychoanalytic association went further. In its July 6 email, it explicitly stated for the first time that the organization does not subscribe to the rule. That position had been implicit for years, but the association’s “leadership has been extremely reluctant to make a statement and publicly challenge the American Psychiatric Association,” said one psychoanalytic association member who asked not to be publicly identified criticizing the other group.

One stated rationale for the Goldwater rule is that psychiatrists need to examine patients in order to properly evaluate them. In fact, for decades the State Department and other federal agencies have asked psychiatrists to offer their views on the psychological state of foreign leaders, Glass pointed out, evidence that government officials believe it is possible to make informed inferences about mental states based on public behavior and speech.

“In the case of Donald Trump, there is an extraordinary abundance of speech and behavior on which one could form a judgment,” Glass said. “It’s not definitive, it’s an informed hypothesis, and one we should be able to offer rather than the stunning silence demanded by the Goldwater rule.”

The Goldwater rule has long been odd in that violating it carries no penalties. In principle the psychiatric association could file a complaint with a member's state medical board. That has apparently never happened. Nor has the association ejected a member for violating the Goldwater rule. That is something it, as a private association, would be legally permitted to do.

A state agency, however, is subject to the U.S. Constitution, civil liberties experts say, and penalizing psychiatrists for speaking out would likely be a violation of their First Amendment rights.

Correction: The headline of this story has been changed to make clear that the American Psychoanalytic Association has told its members that they are free to ignore the "Goldwater rule" and comment about public figures' mental state.

Sharon Begley covers science and discovery.

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