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## **Op-Ed: Amanda Knox: Donald Trump supported me when I was wrongly accused of murder. What do I owe him?**

**By Amanda Knox**

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Donald Trump supported me during the worst crisis and most vulnerable moment in my life, defending my innocence when I was on trial in Italy for murder. He is now the president of the United States and reportedly “very upset” with me because I didn’t vote for him.

Do I owe him my loyalty?

Trump’s remarks were reported by the New York Times in a profile of his neighbor George Guido Lombardi. Yet I received negative backlash from his supporters even before Lombardi’s comments were published. They felt that I owed Trump my allegiance and were outraged at columns I wrote in which I criticized his policies and explained my reasons for endorsing Hillary Clinton. One person commented:

“I’m sorry I ever supported you. You have turned into a left wing lunatic. I see your experience in Italy has left you completely ungrateful to be an American. ... Donald Trump stood by you, but now you turn around and indirectly attack him? You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Another wrote that, while I needn’t endorse Trump, my criticism of him wasn’t “nice.”

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The message was clear: Trump defended me in the past; how dare I not defend him now? Never mind that Trump doesn’t share my values. If I won’t endorse him, at the very least I should keep my “left-wing lunacies” to myself.

This conviction is both undemocratic and dangerous. Just as a person’s

support of me should not be based upon my politics or identity, hinging instead on the fact of my innocence, so should my politics hinge on the merits of policy, not personal loyalty.

In “The Righteous Mind,” Jonathan Haidt describes loyalty as one of the moral foundations that conservatives feel more strongly than liberals. It’s part of what makes morality “a force that binds and blinds.” Loyalty can bind people together under a common cause, but it can also blind people as to whether or not their cause is just.

I discovered just how blinding loyalty could be when, in December 2009, an Italian court convicted me of a murder I didn’t commit. That judgment rested heavily on the court’s bias in favor of the prosecution, which represented the Italian people and the Italian state, over the defense, which represented a foreigner.

This is loyalty taken too far. And it calls to mind the party-over-policy approach that currently plagues our own politics.

Yes, Trump donated to my defense. And yes, Trump defended my innocence, recognizing that coercive interrogations produce false testimony authored by the interrogators themselves, a well-studied and documented fact.

But Trump claimed the exact opposite in the Central Park Five case, calling for the death penalty even though the accused teens’ rape convictions rested solely on coerced false confessions. Even now he views them as guilty, years after they were exonerated based on DNA evidence.

Trump recognized me as a fellow American who deserved to be assumed innocent until proven guilty, but he condemned the Central Park Five as “other” — guilty until proven innocent. Loyalty motivated Trump to call for all Americans to boycott Italy, even though, ironically, it only served to amplify anti-American sentiment in the courtroom, stacking the deck against me.

There is a kind of loyalty I wholeheartedly support: loyalty to our ideals of due process, equal protection under the law, the freedom to speak one’s mind and to vote according to one’s principles. Only in banana republics do political leaders dole out favors to citizens in exchange for their silence and

their vote. By holding personal loyalty above all else, Trump and some of his supporters create a political environment where reason and justice hold little sway. He was probably right when he said he could “stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody” and not “lose voters” — that’s what happens when personal loyalty is paramount.

I know many Republicans who recognized the danger of Trump’s worldview, and broke party loyalty this past election. My dad was one of them. It’s to their credit that they could be critical of their own party for the sake of the country.

And it’s to Italy’s credit that the Italian Supreme Court ruled against the popular opinion of the Italian people when they acquitted me. I owe my freedom to those people who saw reason beyond loyalty.

What do I owe Trump? A thank you for his well-intentioned, if undiplomatic, support. So for the record: Thank you, Mr. President.

But the more important question is, what do I owe my country? Civic engagement, careful consideration of issues that affect my fellow citizens, and support for policies that deserve support, even if it makes the president “very upset.”