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The Political Scene

Trump vs. the "Deep State"

How the Administration's loyalists are quietly reshaping American governance.

By Evan Osnos

Two months after Donald Trump's Inauguration, the White House took a sudden interest in a civil servant named Sahar Nowrouzzadeh. At thirty-four, she was largely unknown outside a small community of national-security specialists. Nowrouzzadeh, born in Trumbull, Connecticut, grew up with no connection to Washington. Her parents had emigrated from Iran, so that her father could finish his training in obstetrics, and they hoped that she would become a doctor or, failing that, an engineer or a lawyer. But on September 11, 2001, Nowrouzzadeh was a freshman at George Washington University, which is close enough to the Pentagon that students could see plumes of smoke climb into the sky. She became interested in global affairs and did internships at the State Department and the National Iranian American Council, a Washington nonprofit. George W. Bush's Administration appealed for help from Americans familiar with the culture of the Middle East, and, after graduation, Nowrouzzadeh became an analyst in the Department of Defense, using her command of Arabic, Persian, and Dari. (Her brother, a Navy doctor, served in Iraq.) For nearly a decade, Nowrouzzadeh worked mostly on secret programs, winning awards from the Departments of Defense and State, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and the F.B.I.

In 2014, she was detailed to the National Security Council, as an Iran specialist, and helped to broker the nuclear deal. One of the most intensely debated questions among American negotiators was how far they could push Iran for concessions, and Nowrouzzadeh proved unusually able to identify, and exploit, subtle divides in Tehran. "She was aggressive," Norman Roule, the C.I.A.'s highest-ranking Iran specialist at the time, told me. "She worked very hard to follow policymakers' goals. She could speak Persian. She could understand culture. She is one of the most patriotic people I know." In 2016, Nowrouzzadeh joined the policy-planning staff of the State Department, a team of experts who advised Secretary of State John Kerry. At times, she advocated a harsher approach to Iran than Kerry was pursuing, but he cherished Nowrouzzadeh's "unvarnished judgment," he

told me. “I liked someone who relied on facts and could tell me when she disagreed with my interpretation. Give me that any day over a bunch of yes-men.”

On March 14, 2017, Conservative Review, a Web site that opposed the Iran deal, published an article portraying Nowrouzzadeh as a traitorous stooge. The story, titled “Iran Deal Architect Is Running Tehran Policy at the State Dept.,” derided her as a “trusted Obama aide,” whose work “resulted in an agreement that has done enormous damage to the security interests of the United States.” David Wurmser, who had been an adviser to Vice-President Dick Cheney, e-mailed the article to Newt Gingrich, the former Speaker of the House. “I think a cleaning is in order here,” Wurmser wrote. Gingrich forwarded the message to an aide to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, with the subject line “i thought you should be aware of this.”

As the article circulated inside the Administration, Sean Doocey, a White House aide overseeing personnel, e-mailed colleagues to ask for details of Nowrouzzadeh’s “appointment authority”—the rules by which a federal worker can be hired, moved, or fired. He received a reply from Julia Haller, a former Trump campaign worker, newly appointed to the State Department. Haller wrote that it would be “easy” to remove Nowrouzzadeh from the policy-planning staff. She had “worked on the Iran Deal,” Haller noted, “was born in Iran, and upon my understanding cried when the President won.” Nowrouzzadeh was unaware of these discussions. All she knew was that her experience at work started to change.

Every new President disturbs the disposition of power in Washington. Stars fade. Political appointees arrive, assuming control of a bureaucracy that encompasses 2.8 million civilian employees, across two hundred and fifty agencies—from Forest Service smoke jumpers in Alaska to C.I.A. code-breakers in Virginia. “It’s like taking over two hundred and fifty private corporations at one time,” David Lewis, the chair of the political-science department at Vanderbilt University, told me.

Typically, an incoming President seeks to charm, co-opt, and, when necessary, coerce the federal workforce into executing his vision. But Trump got to Washington by promising to unmake the political ecosystem, eradicating the existing species and populating it anew. This project has gone by various names: Stephen Bannon, the campaign chief, called it the "deconstruction of the administrative state"—the undoing of regulations, pacts, and taxes that he believed constrain American power. In Presidential tweets and on Fox News, the mission is described as a war on the "deep state," the permanent power élite. Nancy McEldowney, who retired last July after thirty years in the Foreign Service, told me, "In the anatomy of a hostile takeover and occupation, there are textbook elements—you decapitate the leadership, you compartmentalize the power centers, you engender fear and suspicion. They did all those things."

This idea, more than any other, has defined the Administration, which has greeted the federal government not as a machine that could implement its vision but as a vanquished foe. To control it, Trump would need the right help. "I'm going to surround myself only with the best and most serious people," he said, during the campaign. "We want top-of-the-line professionals."

Every President expects devotion. Lyndon Johnson wished for an aide who would "kiss my ass in Macy's window at high noon and tell me it smells like roses. I want his pecker in my pocket." But Trump has elevated loyalty to the primary consideration. Since he has no fixed ideology, the White House cannot screen for ideas, so it seeks a more personal form of devotion. Kellyanne Conway, one of his most dedicated attendants, refers reverently to the "October 8th coalition," the campaign stalwarts who remained at Trump's side while the world listened to a recording of him boasting about grabbing women by the genitals.

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

Over time, Trump has rid himself of questioners. He dismissed James Comey, the head of the F.B.I., and then Andrew McCabe, his acting replacement. Gary Cohn, the head of the National Economic Council, resigned early this March, after months of private resistance to Trump's plan for sweeping trade tariffs. A week later, Tillerson was fired by tweet, receiving notice by phone while he was on the toilet. Nine days after that, the national-security adviser, H. R. McMaster, who had pressed the President to maintain the nuclear deal with Iran, was asked to go, followed quickly by David Shulkin, the head of Veterans Affairs. John Kelly, the once assertive chief of staff, has lost control of access to the Oval Office and of the President's phone calls; Trump has resumed using his personal cell phone for late-night calls to such confidants as Sean Hannity, of Fox News, who is known in the capital as his "unofficial chief of staff."

In Washington, where only four per cent of residents voted for Trump, the President hews to a narrow patch of trusted terrain: he rarely ventures beyond his home, his hotel, his golf course, and his plane, taking Air Force One to Mar-a-Lago and to occasional appearances before devoted supporters. He has yet to attend a performance at the Kennedy Center or dine in a restaurant that is not on his own property. As a candidate, Trump rarely went a week without calling a news conference. But in office, as he contends with increasingly intense investigations, he has taken to answering only scattered questions, usually alongside visiting heads of state. He has now gone more than four hundred days without a solo press conference. (Obama held eleven in his first year.)

A culture of fealty compounds itself; conformists thrive, and dissenters depart or refuse to join. By May, the President was surrounded by advisers in name only, who competed to be the most explicitly quiescent. Peter

Navarro, the head of the White House National Trade Council, told an interviewer, “My function, really, as an economist is to try to provide the underlying analytics that confirm his intuition. And his intuition is always right in these matters.” Jeff Sessions, the Attorney General, remained in office despite the President’s descriptions of him as “weak,” “*DISGRACEFUL*,” and an “idiot.” Sessions has been forgiving, telling a radio show in his home state of Alabama, “That’s just his style. He says what’s on his mind at the time.” Trump has turned, more than ever, to those he knows, often to their detriment. On a whim, he nominated his White House physician, Ronny Jackson, to head the Department of Veterans Affairs. The White House reportedly had not bothered to vet Jackson, leaving it to Congress to discover allegations that he drank on the job and dispensed medication so freely that he had acquired the nickname Candyman. Jackson, who denied these allegations, withdrew his nomination, his reputation wrecked.

“You don’t see many season tickets to the opera just handed out like that.”

After sixteen months, Trump is on his third national-security adviser and his sixth communications director. Across the government, more than half of the six hundred and fifty-six most critical positions are still unfilled. “We’ve never seen vacancies at this scale,” Max Stier, the president and

C.E.O. of the Partnership for Public Service, a nonpartisan group that works to make the government more effective, said. “Not anything close.”

Some of the vacancies are deliberate. As a candidate, Trump promised to “cut so much your head will spin.” Amid a strong economy, large numbers of employees are opting to leave the government rather than serve it. In Trump’s first nine months, more than seventy-nine thousand full-time workers quit or retired—a forty-two-per-cent increase over that period in Obama’s Presidency. To Trump and his allies, the departures have been liberating, a purge of obstructionists. “The President now has people around him who aren’t trying to subvert him,” Michael Caputo, a senior campaign adviser, told me. “The more real Trump supporters who pop up in the White House phone book, the better off our nation will be.”

Americans are inured to the personnel drama in the White House—the factions and flameouts and new blood and walking wounded. But the larger drama, Stier said, is unfolding “below the waterline,” far from the cameras and the West Wing, among little-known deputies and officers in the working ranks of government. A senior Administration official called them the “next-level-down guys.” These are the foot soldiers in the war over the “deep state.” “They’re not talked about,” he said. “But they’re huge.”

When Nowrouzzadeh saw the article about her in Conservative Review, she e-mailed her boss, a Trump appointee named Brian Hook. “I am very concerned as it is filled with misinformation,” she wrote. She pointed out that she had entered government under George W. Bush, and added, “I’ve adapted my work to the policy priorities of every administration I have worked for.” Hook didn’t reply. Instead, he forwarded her message to his deputy, Edward Lacey, who dismissed her complaint, writing that she was among the “Obama/Clinton loyalists not at all supportive of President Trump’s foreign policy agenda.”

In the 2013 novel "A Delicate Truth," John le Carré presents the "deep state" as a moneyed, cultured élite—the "non-governmental insiders from banking, industry, and commerce" whose access to information allows them to rule in secret. Trump's conception is quite different. A real-estate baron, with the wealthiest Cabinet in U.S. history, Trump is at peace with the plutocracy but at war with the clerks—the apparatchiks who, he claims, are seeking to nullify the election by denying the prerogatives of his Administration.

From the beginning, Americans have disagreed about how to balance partisan loyalty and nonpartisan expertise. When the populist Andrew Jackson reached the White House, in 1829, he packed the government with friends and loyalists, arguing that "more is lost by the long continuance of men in office than is generally to be gained by their experience." A Jackson ally in the Senate, William Learned Marcy, said, famously, "To the victor belong the spoils of the enemy." Thus began the "spoils system," in which a winning candidate dispensed most government jobs as gifts. It lasted until 1881, when President James Garfield was shot by a man who believed that he was due a diplomatic post as a reward for supporting Garfield's campaign. In response, Congress created a civil service in which hiring was based on merit, in the belief that only a workforce free from political interference could earn public trust.

To admirers, America's civil service became the ballast in the ship of state, exemplified by the National Laboratories, Neil Armstrong, and generations of humble bureaucrats who banned unsafe medications, recalled defective motor vehicles, and monitored conditions at nursing homes. According to the Partnership for Public Service, the federal workforce has included at least sixty-nine winners of the Nobel Prize, most of them scientists with little public profile. All U.S. public servants are bound by an official code of ethics that demands "loyalty to . . . country above loyalty to persons, party or government department." Ryan Crocker, a diplomat who served in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria, told me, "I was an Ambassador six times—

three times for Republican Administrations, three times for Democratic Administrations. No one elects us. We will, obviously, give policy advice, but when policy is decided we do everything we can to carry it out. I didn't think the 2003 invasion of Iraq was a spectacularly good idea, but once our troops crossed the line of departure that argument was over."

But the old tension between loyalty and expertise never subsided. Since the Great Depression, the government has expanded the ranks of specialists. According to the historian Landon R. Y. Storrs, of the University of Iowa, that effort shifted power from lawmakers to career civil servants, who were often more educated and skillful. Advocates of limited government, Storrs notes, have long regarded the civil service as a "snivel service" of Ivy Leaguers, "a bureaucracy of short-haired women and long-haired men, bent on replacing the traditional American family." In 1951, "Washington Confidential," a best-seller by two journalists working for the conservative press mogul William Randolph Hearst, presented the civil service as a domain of "mediocrity and virtual anonymity," in a city of "economic parasites."

When George W. Bush appointed Lynn Scarlett as an Assistant Secretary of the Interior, in 2001, she concluded that this view was a caricature. "If there are seventy thousand employees and they average, let's say, ten years of experience, that means they have seven hundred thousand years of experience," she said. "I had zero. Now, I wasn't naïve. There were some people who were not as vigorous as others. There were some who had their own agenda. But, for the most part, I really found people kept their politics at home. And, if you asked, they would come and say, 'Well, here's how I see this tough problem.' Or 'Here's how it was done before.' "

The modern conservative movement has spent decades calling for the reduction of the federal workforce, in the belief that it is feckless, bloated, and out of touch. Richard Nixon's aides produced an eighty-page manual on the removal of "undesirable" careerists, which proffered a system for

grading civil servants on political "dependability," ranging from "L" (for "Let's watch this fellow") to "O" (for "Out"). To marginalize the troublesome ones, it suggested a "New Activity Technique": create an "apparently meaningful, but essentially meaningless, new activity to which they are all transferred." Such an activity, Nixon's aides wrote, could serve as "a single barrel into which you can dump a large number of widely located bad apples." After the manual became public, during the Watergate hearings, Congress passed a law to prohibit discrimination against federal workers for "political affiliation, race, color, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, age, or handicapping condition."

But Presidents have retained broad latitude to reshuffle civil servants without breaking the law in obvious ways. That would prove indispensable for the Trump Administration as it set out to "deconstruct the administrative state." Trump, who hung a portrait of Andrew Jackson in the Oval Office, left no doubt about where he stood on the matter of loyalty versus expertise. "Oh, we need an *expert*. The experts are terrible!" he said, at a campaign rally in Wisconsin, in April, 2016. "They say, 'Donald Trump needs a foreign-policy adviser.' Supposing I didn't have one?"

In the weeks after the Conservative Review article about Nowrouzzadeh appeared, it generated a barrage of threats. On Facebook, the accusations circulated beneath the headline "Trump Caught Obama's Iranian Spy at WH, Patriots Love What He Did Next." In comments, people wrote, "Shoot the bitch," and "Hang [her] on the White House lawn." Nowrouzzadeh asked the State Department to publicly rebut the accusations, but it offered little help. On April 6, 2017, she was told to clean out her desk and move downstairs to an unspecified position at the Office of Iranian Affairs. With her credentials, it was the bureaucratic equivalent of Siberia.

Nowrouzzadeh filed a complaint with the department's Office of Civil Rights, alleging unlawful discrimination. Among civil servants, the case attracted attention as a rare window onto the Administration's strategy for

confronting the “deep state.” Crocker said, “They weren’t saying that she doesn’t have the expertise or the qualifications. They were saying that she had served the Administration for which she was working. It could have some extremely harmful consequences, both for the individuals and for the country, if the best and the brightest are blackballed.” (In response to questions about Nowrouzzadeh, a spokesperson said that the State Department does not discuss individual cases, adding, “The department is committed to principles of diversity and inclusion.”)

Nowrouzzadeh and the department reached a settlement in August, and she has stayed in government. She took a leave of absence for a research fellowship at Harvard, but told friends that she hopes to return to State, saying, “My heart is still in public service.”

Her case might have ended there, but a whistle-blower gave Democratic members of Congress copies of the White House’s e-mails about Nowrouzzadeh’s background, her work under the Obama Administration, and the need for a “cleaning.” This March, Representatives Eliot Engel, of New York, and Elijah Cummings, of Maryland, called for an investigation. In a letter to the White House and the State Department, they argued that the messages revealed an “extremely disturbing” effort to purge career civil servants for being “insufficiently ‘supportive.’ ” The department’s Inspector General launched an investigation. As a current employee, Nowrouzzadeh declined to comment for this article. But, in an e-mail to colleagues about her leave, she referred to an address given by President Truman in 1951, during Senator Joseph McCarthy’s attacks on government workers. “When even one American—who has done nothing wrong—is forced by fear to shut his mind and close his mouth, then all Americans are in peril,” Truman said.

Since taking office, Trump has attacked the integrity of multiple parts of his government, including the F.B.I. (“reputation is in tatters”) and the Department of Justice (“embarrassment to our country”). His relationship with the State Department is especially vexed. In January, 2017, when he

issued an executive order barring travellers from seven Muslim countries, more than a thousand U.S. diplomats criticized it in an official dissent cable. In response, Sean Spicer, the press secretary at the time, said that public servants should "either get with the program or they can go." In the months that followed, Tillerson dismantled large parts of the department: as the White House proposed a thirty-one-per-cent budget reduction, the department accepted the lowest number of new Foreign Service officers in years. Sixty per cent of the highest-ranked diplomats have departed.

Veteran U.S. diplomats say that the State Department is in its most diminished condition since the nineteen-fifties, when McCarthy called it a hotbed of "Communists and queers" and vowed to root out the "prancing mimics of the Moscow party line." McEldowney, the retired Ambassador, said, "I believe to the depth of my being that by undermining our diplomatic capability we are putting our country at risk. Something awful is inevitably going to happen, and people will ask, 'Where are the diplomats?' And the tragic answer will have to be 'We got rid of them in a fire sale.' "

Nowrouzzadeh's case is not unique; in a kind of revival of Nixon's New Assignment Technique, hundreds of State Department employees have been banished to a bizarre form of bureaucratic purgatory. Last October, Tillerson's office announced the launch of a "*FOIA* Surge," a campaign to process a backlog of Freedom of Information Act requests, which would require three hundred and fifty State Department staffers. The work was rudimentary ("You could do it with smart interns," one participant said), but the list of those assigned to it included prominent Ambassadors and specialized civil servants. They quickly discovered something in common: many had worked on issues of priority to the Obama Administration. Lawrence Bartlett had been one of the department's top advocates for refugees. Ian Moss had worked to close the prison at Guantánamo Bay. (Bartlett and Moss declined to comment.) "It seemed designed to demoralize," one participant said.

In Washington, the tactic of marooning civil servants in obscure assignments is known as sending them to the "turkey farm." The turkey farms are reminiscent of the "rubber rooms" of New York City. Until the practice was banned, in 2010, the city's Department of Education exiled hundreds of troublesome teachers to reassignment centers, where they idled, sometimes for years, reading newspapers and dozing. An Asia specialist assigned to the turkey farm likened the experience to a Japanese tradition in which unwanted workers are relegated to a "banishment room," to encourage them to resign out of boredom and shame. Another turkey-farm inhabitant, who has held senior intelligence and national-security posts, told me that he joined the government during the Reagan Administration and never conceived of himself as an opponent of Trump. "I'm a Reagan holdover," he said, shaking his head in bewilderment. "I sometimes don't go in before ten, and then leave before five. You just float." (Asked about the complaints, the spokesperson said that the State Department is "continuing to highly value career employees.")

"It seems to be happening throughout the civil service," Representative Adam Smith, of Washington, the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, told me. "They're taking out people, and I think that is undermining the over-all competency and capability of the government, irrespective of ideology." In some cases, sidelined experts have found new posts at the Pentagon, where Secretary of Defense James Mattis has deflected White House attacks on public servants. "Mattis has done a remarkable job of being the exception to this rule," Smith said.

Civil servants who think that they have been mistreated can appeal to a semi-judicial agency called the Merit Systems Protection Board. By law, though, the board needs two members to function, and one left just before Trump's Inauguration, so for sixteen months it has issued no judgments. For a while, the staff continued to work—reading complaints, marking them with notes—assuming that a new hire would arrive soon. (Since 1979, the

board had never been without a quorum for longer than a few weeks.) But, as complaints kept coming in, the staff was forced to store them, unresolved, in vacant rooms of the office, which occupies part of a commercial building in downtown Washington.

When I dropped by, Mark A. Robbins, the remaining board member, flipped on the lights in a storeroom. Cardboard cartons towered in sagging, listing piles. “As of last Friday, the backlog is eight hundred and ninety-six,” Robbins said. “We’re running out of space.”

Robbins is a lawyer with small round glasses, a shaved head, and an air of earnest perseverance. Despite his predicament, he has continued to read cases and recommend judgments, so that things will move faster when operations resume. In March, he got what appeared to be good news: the White House had nominated a new member. Then he discovered that the appointment was not to the empty post but to his post. As a result, all the work he has conducted since January, 2017, will be legally void. At first, he wondered if there had been a clerical error, but officials at the White House confirmed that there had not, offering no further explanation. “It is mind-boggling that everything I’ve been doing for a year and a half will be wiped off the map,” he told me.

A few days after my visit, the White House finally appointed a second new member. If the nominee is confirmed, the board can resume operations, but it will take an estimated two years to get through the backlog. Jeff Ruch, the executive director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, an advocacy group, told me, “This seems to be either monkey-wrenching or just incredible incompetence. You have a civil-service system without the means to adjudicate disputes. The Trump philosophy is they just don’t want the agency to function at all.”

While the Administration wrestled the civil service into submission, it began introducing Washington to Trump’s “best and most serious people.” He had four thousand jobs to fill, and the White House was determined to subvert the traditional ways of doing so.

To vet candidates, the Obama campaign had used a questionnaire with sixty-three queries about employment, finances, writings, and social-media posts. The Trump team cut the number of questions to twenty-five, by dropping the requests for professional references and tax returns and removing items concerning loans, personal income, and real-estate holdings. The questionnaire was speckled with typos, and seemed carelessly put together. Robert Rizzi, a prominent lawyer who has helped with every transition since Bill Clinton took office, told me, “They would call it ‘the paperwork.’ We’d say, ‘Well, it takes months.’ They’d say, ‘Just to do paperwork?’ I’d say, ‘It has huge consequences if you do it wrong.’ ”

The vetting was led by Donald F. McGahn II, the White House counsel, who struck observers as keen to abbreviate the process. According to one lawyer, the transition sought “work-arounds”—ways that incoming officials could retain investments without breaking the laws against conflicts of interest. “If you look at them as technical rules that lawyers should be able to ‘get around,’ that gives you a whole different approach,” the lawyer told me. “It’s like tweeting after a couple of beers. It’s not going to end well.”

Republican think tanks and donors succeeded in installing preferred nominees. The earliest wave arrived from the Heritage Foundation; subsequent ones came from Charles and David Koch's network of conservative advocacy groups and from the American Enterprise Institute. But the White House maintained a virtual blockade against Republicans who had signed letters opposing Trump's candidacy. "I've been asked, 'Can you recommend somebody for this or that position?' " Elliott Abrams, a foreign-affairs official under Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, told me. "I've come up with the perfect person, and the people I'm talking to at State or Defense say, 'Oh, my God, she's great. But she didn't sign one of the letters, did she?' 'Yeah, she did.' 'O.K., we're done here.' "

The White House brought in an array of outsiders, who, at times, ran into trouble. As an assistant to the Secretary of Energy, the Administration installed Sid Bowdidge, whose recent employment had included managing a Meineke Car Care branch in Seabrook, New Hampshire. Bowdidge departed after it emerged that he had called Muslims "maggots." In December, Matthew Spencer Petersen, a nominee to the federal bench, became a brief online sensation when Senator John Kennedy, a Republican from Louisiana, asked him a series of basic law-school questions, which revealed that Petersen had never argued a motion, tried a case, or taken a deposition by himself. Embarrassing details came out about other judicial nominees: Brett Talley, who had never tried a case in federal court, wandered cemeteries hunting for ghosts; Jeff Mateer had called transgender children part of "Satan's plan." All three nominations were withdrawn.

Despite the attention that these cases attracted, the vast majority of appointees, other than those who are named in Senate hearings or serve in the President's executive office, are not reported to the public. "The idea that the American people do not know the names of those running the government is nutty," Stier, of the Partnership for Public Service, said.

“Many appointees get parachuted in below the radar, and no one knows they’re there until they hit a trip wire.”

Some of those who have hit the trip wire are recent college graduates, installed in jobs usually reserved for officials with decades of experience. Taylor Weyeneth, a twenty-three-year-old whose only previous employment was with the Trump campaign, became one of the White House’s top-ranking officials addressing the opioid epidemic. He served as deputy chief of staff in the Office of National Drug Control Policy until January, when the Washington *Post* discovered that his résumé listed a job at a law firm from which he had been discharged for not showing up and a master’s degree he did not possess. The *Post* also noted that the White House Office of Presidential Personnel, which hired Weyeneth for the job, was itself a youthful operation: a “social hub” where young Trump aides “hang out on couches and smoke electronic cigarettes.” At a happy-hour party in January, the office celebrated one aide’s thirtieth birthday with a drinking game that involved “hiding a bottle of Smirnoff Ice, a flavored malt liquor, and demanding that the person who discovers it, in this case the deputy director, guzzle it.” When I asked the senior Administration official about the story, he said, “That was pretty common knowledge. That was their style.”

Trump sometimes tested ethical standards in the hiring process. In January, shortly before the Justice Department named Geoffrey Berman to be the interim U.S. Attorney in the Southern District of New York—a position with jurisdiction over the headquarters of Trump’s business empire—Trump personally interviewed Berman for the job. Criminal-justice experts were alarmed. “I am not aware of any President in recent history that personally conducted such interviews,” Marcos Daniel Jiménez, a former U.S. Attorney appointed by George W. Bush, told me. William Cummings, a U.S. Attorney appointed by Gerald Ford, said, “In the situation where the sitting President has publicly been noted to be the subject of an investigation by the F.B.I. or special counsel, I think it is unseemly.”

By April, at least six of Trump's Cabinet secretaries were being investigated for their expenses. Scott Pruitt, the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, was the most embattled: he was facing eleven federal investigations, many of them related to his security arrangements. Pruitt had acquired a custom S.U.V., biometric locks on his office door, a forty-three-thousand-dollar soundproof phone booth, and a retinue of round-the-clock guards. He insisted on flying first class, because, he said, of threats in coach. When Ben Carson, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, was found to have outfitted his office with a bespoke dining set ($31,561), defenders said that he was not to blame. The Republican congresswoman Claudia Tenney, of New York, told an interviewer that the fault for the furniture lay with "somebody in the deep state. It was not one of his people, apparently."

Trump's struggle to attract competent people reflects a broader problem. For decades, Presidents and Congress have created a steadily increasing number of political appointees. Kennedy submitted two hundred and eighty-six appointments for Senate approval; Trump is allotted more than twelve hundred. Stier said, "The system we have now is crazy. It's unique among democracies. There is an entourage of these special assistants, special counsels, confidential assistants, and others. To insure that the President's policy is carried out, the number of appointees could be in the dozens or the hundreds." He added, "We have a resurgent spoils system. It is the breaking of an organization that was already under stress. It is unmanageable and dangerous in a world when crises are happening in the blink of an eye."

During the winter and spring, I spoke to dozens of men and women throughout the federal government about Trump's war on Washington. None of them described a more abrupt change than the civil servants at the Department of the Interior—a behemoth that oversees all of America's federal public lands, which constitute an area larger than Western Europe.

One of Trump's most ardent lieutenants is Ryan Zinke. Six feet two, with broad shoulders and a cleft chin, Zinke is a fifth-generation Montanan who was recruited as a linebacker at the University of Oregon and spent twenty-three years in the Navy *SEAL*s. In 2008, he entered politics, in the Montana State Senate. After one term in Congress, he was appointed Secretary of the Interior, and arrived for his first day of work on horseback, riding down C Street in a ten-gallon hat and jeans. Since then, Zinke has attracted attention mostly for his zealous embrace of Trump's energy agenda. He has opened up America's coasts to offshore oil and gas drilling; overturned a moratorium on new leases for coal mines on public land; and recommended shrinking national monuments in Utah by two million acres, the largest reduction of protected lands in American history.

Within the department, Zinke has adopted the President's approach to expertise, loyalty, and dissent. In April, 2017, a scientist named Joel Clement, the director of the department's Office of Policy Analysis, visited Zinke for a briefing. He noticed that Zinke had redecorated the office with a grizzly bear, mounted on its hind legs, and a collection of knives. Zinke has no professional experience in geology, but he routinely describes himself as a "geologist," because he majored in geology in college. (In a 2016 memoir, "American Commander," Zinke wrote that he chose it by "randomly pointing to a major from the academic catalog.") "He doesn't read briefing materials," Clement told me. "He comes over and sits down, and he says, 'O.K., what are we here for?' " To keep Zinke's attention, staff hewed to subjects related to his personal experience. "I briefed him on invasive species," Clement said. "It was one issue where it looked like we might actually get a little traction, because in Montana they had just discovered mussels that could really screw up the agricultural economy." The strategy failed. "He didn't understand what we were talking about. He started talking about other species—ravens and coyotes. He was filling the intellectual vacuum with nonsense. It's amazing that he has such confidence, given his level of ignorance."

A couple of months later, Zinke ordered the involuntary reassignment of dozens of the department's most senior civil servants. Clement, who had been his agency's public face on issues related to climate change, was assigned to the accounting office that handles royalty checks for oil and gas and coal extraction. His new job had no duties and appeared on no organizational chart. Clement filed a whistle-blower complaint; he believed that his post was retaliation for speaking about the dangers that climate change poses to Alaska Native communities. In October, he quit. "I really didn't feel like I had a choice," he told me. "I wanted to keep my voice more than I wanted to keep the job." In a resignation letter, Clement accused Zinke and Trump of having "waged an all-out assault on the civil service by muzzling scientists and policy experts." (A department spokesperson declined to comment for this article, citing "loaded and flat-out false information.")

Like his Commander-in-Chief, Zinke makes no secret of his distrust. "I got thirty per cent of the crew that's not loyal to the flag," he said, in September, to an advisory board dominated by oil and gas executives. He likened his leadership of the department to capturing a ship at sea, and vowed to prevail over resistant employees. Zinke's comment drew a rebuke from fifteen former Interior appointees, in Republican and Democratic Administrations, who appealed to him to let public servants "do their jobs without fear of retaliation on political grounds." In a private mutiny, some of his staff printed T-shirts that read "30% *DISLOYAL*" and took to calling themselves "the disloyals."

One of the department's largest divisions, the Bureau of Land Management, has distributed plastic badges, called "vision cards," for employees to wear, bearing an image of an oil rig on one side and cattle ranchers on the other. The bureau said they are not mandatory, but an employee told me, "If you're not wearing them, I think management in some places looks at you like maybe you're not loyal to the flag." Under Zinke, the employee said, policy

debate has dried up: “We’re supposed to provide back-and-forth perspective, so that you make the best decision based on science and based on the law. But that’s a pretty big struggle right now.” The employee went on, “I hunt and fish—I’m actually kind of a redneck. But I believe in the public good and public land. When Trump talks his b.s. about the ‘deep state,’ that’s who he’s referring to. I totally reject that kind of characterization. That’s how these guys see it: if you’re not a tool of the most high-powered lobbyists in Washington or following orders, then they really don’t want you around.”

Zinke has also adopted the White House’s preoccupation with quashing unflattering information. In April, 2017, he came under criticism after internal memos were leaked, revealing his intention to roll back protections on public land. To prevent that from happening again, Matthew Allen, the B.L.M.’s communications director, was ordered to stop the leaks. Allen pointed out that very little of Interior’s work is classified. “I can’t stop these leaks, because I don’t have the resources or the authority,” he said. “I don’t think it’s legal.”

Last fall, Trump appointees in the department became frustrated by bad press over efforts to expand mining and drilling, and by Freedom of Information Act requests that sought details of their contacts with powerful industries. Allen received another order: send *FOIA* requests about political appointees to the subjects themselves before releasing the results to the public. He was taken aback. “It was just a blatant conflict of interest,” he said. “The person who may be under suspicion, that they’re requesting records on, is going to be an approval authority in the chain. That just doesn’t seem O.K.”

After another leak, Allen was turkey-farmed—reassigned to the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, in a newly created position with no staff and no responsibilities. Allen filed a complaint with the Office of Special Counsel. “I did not swear an oath to Ryan Zinke, Donald Trump, or

any other person," he told me. "My oath is to the Constitution. I work for the American people. I still feel like I am helping to uphold the Constitution, even if it's by insuring the First Amendment by having this conversation."

In one agency after another, I encountered a pattern: on controversial issues, the Administration is often not writing down potentially damaging information. After members of Congress requested details on Carson's decorating expenses, Marcus Smallwood, the departmental-records officer at *HUD*, wrote an open letter to Carson, saying, "I do not have confidence that *HUD* can truthfully provide the evidence being requested by the House Oversight Committee because there has been a concerted effort to stop email traffic regarding these matters." At the Department of the Interior, the Inspector General's office investigated Zinke's travel expenses but was stymied by "absent or incomplete documentation" that would "distinguish between personal, political, and official travel." According to Ruch, of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, when environmentalists filed suit to discover if industry lobbyists had influenced a report on Superfund sites, they were told, "There are no minutes, no work product, no materials." Ruch added, "The task-force report was a product of immaculate conception." He believes that the Administration is "deliberately avoiding creating records."

"Oh! Sad! Sad man! Man who is sad! Sad man who is sad inside!"

For many in government, Trump's antagonistic relationship to facts is no longer just a matter of politics. It now affects day-to-day governance. One

afternoon in February, James Schwab, the spokesman for the San Francisco office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, confronted a dilemma. The mayor of Oakland, Libby Schaaf, had infuriated the White House by warning undocumented residents of a forthcoming sweep. Jeff Sessions accused her of sabotage, saying, "*ICE* failed to make eight hundred arrests that they would have made if the mayor had not acted as she did." That figure became an instant talking point on cable news. And, in comments the next day, Trump elevated the eight hundred to "close to a thousand people."

At the *ICE* office in San Francisco, Schwab knew that the numbers were nonsense. Internally, the agency had projected that, out of a thousand and twenty targets in the area, it would be lucky to find two hundred. (In the event, it arrested two hundred and thirty-two.) Schwab has been a government spokesman for more than a decade, first in the Army, where he served at the North Korean border, and then at *NASA*. "I contacted the headquarters and said, 'How are we going to respond to this when we know this is inaccurate?' " he recalled. Schwab was told not to elaborate or correct the error; instead, he should refer reporters to existing statements. "That just shook me," he told me.

Rather than aiding in the deception, Schwab resigned. "A lot of people in the federal government are holding on tight, trying to keep everything going properly," he told me. "And people are fearful to say anything. I was fortunate enough to be able to quit my job and say something, but most people aren't able to do that." The White House has politicized work that was once insulated from interference, Schwab said. "We see that in the F.B.I. very publicly, and then I saw that at *ICE* from the highest levels of the White House. Who knows where else it's happening in the rest of the government."

A White House that is intent on politicizing and falsifying information can achieve its objectives before other branches of government know enough to stop it. From 2002 to 2005, Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson was Colin Powell's

chief of staff. He helped prepare the fateful speech to the U.N. Security Council in which Powell argued for the invasion of Iraq, saying, “Unless we act, we are confronting an even more frightening future.” Wilkerson is concerned that the Trump Administration is using “much the same playbook” to heighten a sense of menace around threats posed by Iran. “The talk has been building,” he told me. In December, Nikki Haley, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, claimed that there is “undeniable” evidence that Iran has supplied weapons to insurgents in Yemen. The claim was met with skepticism at the U.N., where other member states worry that the U.S. will use that charge to build a case for attacking Iran. “It just brought back the image of Powell holding that alleged anthrax bottle up at the U.N. Security Council,” Wilkerson told me. “It’s some of the same characters as in 2002 and 2003. History repeats itself, first as tragedy and then as farce.”

On May 8th, Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, saying that it was “defective at its core.” Observers of the region warned of a potential crisis, but Trump expressed confidence in his intuition; he had opposed the accord since the campaign, and, he said, “I’ve been one hundred per cent right.” Nowrouzzadeh issued a brief statement, lamenting the withdrawal: “Our ability to influence or incentivize Iran’s nuclear decision-making in a manner favorable to U.S. interests will be severely undermined.” But State Department regulations prevented her from saying more, and most of her colleagues in negotiating the deal had left. The Trump advisers who favored preserving it had been effectively silenced; McMaster and Tillerson were gone, and Mattis had given up making the case.

In their place was John Bolton, a former State Department official who was recently appointed the national-security adviser after a long term as a Fox News backbencher. Bolton, known in Washington as a maximalist hawk, is arguably the most volatile addition to the Administration since its inception—an unrepentant advocate of the Iraq War who has also argued for

regime change in Iran and in North Korea. “He lied repeatedly during his time at State,” Wilkerson told me. In 2002, when Bolton was the department’s top arms-control official, he planned to accuse Cuba of developing a secret biological-weapons program. When a lower-ranking intelligence official, Christian Westermann, spoke up to say that the accusation was unsupportable, Bolton tried to have him fired, telling his boss that he wouldn’t take orders from a “mid-level munchkin.”

To Wilkerson, Bolton’s arrival at the center of American national security is alarming. He recalled an encounter in 2002, when Bolton was publicly calling for Bush to confront North Korea. At the time, Wilkerson, who had served thirty-one years in the Army, cautioned Bolton that an attack on Seoul would result in enormous casualties. “John stops me mid-sentence and says, ‘Wait a minute, I don’t do casualties and things like that. That’s your bailiwick, ’ ” Wilkerson told me. “The man has no comprehension of the young men and women that have to carry out his goddam wars.” He continued, “He thinks it’s right to shape a narrative that’s false, so long as that narrative is leading to a ‘better’ purpose.”

During Trump’s march to Washington, he framed his mission as nothing less than regime change: America’s capital was a defeated empire in need of occupation. In the months after the Inauguration, as I watched that rhetoric turn to action, the tactics and personae started to remind me of another experience with regime change. As a reporter embedded with the Marines, I arrived in Baghdad in April, 2003, on the day that Saddam’s statue fell. I covered Iraq off and on for two years, a period in which the U.S. occupation was led from the Green Zone, a fortified enclave in the country’s capital, where Americans lived and worked in a sanctum of swimming pools and black-market Scotch. The Green Zone—officially, the home of the Coalition Provisional Authority—functioned as an extension of the White House, led by political appointees, staffed by civil servants, and attended by waiters in bow ties and paper hats. It was Iraq as the war planners had imagined it

would be: orderly, on-message, and driven by the desire to remake the country in the name of capitalism and democracy.

After a year, the Green Zone had acquired another connotation, as a byword for disastrous flaws in the invasion: the failure to stop looters or to restore Iraq's electricity; the decision to disband the Iraqi Army; the blindness to a growing resistance to the occupation. As the problems accumulated, so did the vacant offices in the Green Zone, because people in Washington were unwilling to join. The Administration turned, more than ever, to loyalists. Officials screening new American prospects sometimes asked whether they had voted for Bush and how they saw Roe v. Wade. A cohort of recent college grads, recruited because they had applied for jobs at the Heritage Foundation, were put in charge of Iraq's national budget. The rebuilding of the stock market was entrusted to a twenty-four-year-old. "They wanted to insure lockstep political orientation," Wilkerson recalled. "And what we got out of that was a lockstep-stupid political orientation."

In the outside world, the mistakes were well documented. But inside the Green Zone the lights and air-conditioning were always on, there was no unemployment, and no one debated America's role in Iraq. It was rhetoric over reality ("Mission Accomplished!"), and appearances mattered most: the press office distributed rosy, misleading statistics and obscured the dismal progress in restoring electricity and recruiting new police. The philosophy of governance—defined by loyalty, hostile to expertise, and comfortable with lies—created a disaster, even as its adherents extolled American values. Those who recognized the self-delusion and incompetence began referring to the Green Zone as the Emerald City.

The early mistakes in Iraq were like land mines sown in the soil. They continued erupting for years, in the form of division and decay. Similarly, the mistakes that the Trump Administration has made are likely to multiply: the dismantling of the State Department; the denigration of the civil service; the exclusion of experts on Iran and climate change; the fictional statistics

about undocumented immigrants; and the effort to squelch dissent across the government. Absent a radical change, the Administration has no mechanism for self-correction. It will not get normal; it will get worse.

Trump is less impeded than ever, a fact that impresses even those he has mocked and spurned. Stephen Bannon (who Trump said had "lost his mind") recently told me, "He is unchained. This is primal Trump—back to the leader he was during the campaign, the same one the American people voted into office. There are no more McMasters in the apparatus. He's got shit he's got to get done, and he's just going to get it done."

Midway through its second year, Trump's White House is at war within and without, racing to banish the "disloyals" and to beat back threatening information. Bit by bit, the White House is becoming Trump's Emerald City: isolated, fortified against nonbelievers, entranced by its mythmaker, and constantly vulnerable to the risks of revelation. ◆

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