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Iron fist, velvet glove

Trump's maiden State of the Union address pleaded for unity – and unprecedented presidential powers

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Donald Trump's first State of the Union was a dangerous speech.

It was dangerous because of the way it aped European leaders like Hungarian President Viktor Orban who understand how to give authoritarian populism a glossy sheen.

Like them, Trump eschewed openly racist remarks in his speech, even emphasising his (supposed) concern over the fate of Latinos and African-Americans.

Like his European counterparts, Trump called for economic policies such as paid family leave that would benefit ordinary people. And like them, he cast himself as the only man willing to prioritise the interests of his supporters over those of foreigners and political elites.

It was 'Bannonism' without former chief strategist Steve Bannon's penchant for shock and awe. And it played well.

But Trump's speech was dangerous for another reason. Alongside the soothing rhetoric about unity and bipartisanship, Trump called on Congress to give him unprecedented anti-democratic powers.

'Tonight,' he said, 'I call on the Congress to empower every cabinet secretary with the authority to reward good workers – and to remove Federal employees who undermine the public trust or fail the American people.'

It is easy to overlook the significance of that statement. Republican's often talk about the need to hold lazy public servants to account.

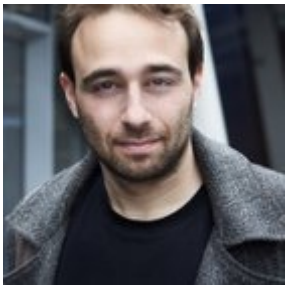
But dwell on it for a moment, and imagine what it would look like in

practice. Under Trump's proposal, any cabinet secretary could decide that, say, a law enforcement official investigating the president had 'undermined public trust' or 'failed the American people' – and fire them on the spot.

At a time when the president is weighing up whether to prosecute Special Counsel Robert Mueller, and the House Speaker Paul Ryan wants to 'cleanse' the FBI, the upshot's clear. Trump is calling for an end to any semblance of independence for the Internal Revenue Service, the FBI, the Department of Justice, or any other federal agency.

To be sure, such legislation is unlikely to pass. While frequent standing ovations for Trump from the Republican benches demonstrate the degree to which the GOP has embraced the president, Republicans are not all ready to dismantle the rule of law. Even if they did, the Supreme Court might strike such a law down as unconstitutional.

But the fact Trump is demanding more control to hire and fire civil servants ought to have us all worried. And that should be making headlines.



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