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The personal politics of Donald Trump

How the American president is shaping policy around favouritism and personal loyalty

It was one of the more odd and bewildering scenes in recent American history: FBI director James Comey laughing off the news scrolls flashing on the screens behind him as a clever prank, while addressing FBI employees in California, only to find he had indeed been unceremoniously fired. It displayed an executive style new to the US presidency. It revealed the extent to which President Donald Trump will shape policy and narrative through his personnel choices – and dismissals. Personal loyalty at the service of his executive power is his principle requirement.

The manner and style in which Comey was dismissed – hand-delivered letter by Trump's personal director of security, Keith Schiller, to Comey's office at a time when the administration knew the FBI Director to be thousands of miles away – underlined that this matter of personnel politics was personal. Comey, in the president's eyes was "grandstanding" and had, as he noted in a '60 Minutes' interview, become "more famous than me."

It is not the first time Donald Trump has employed public humiliation as a political signalling device. This procedure was reminiscent of the public dressing-down given to a series of candidates for top administration jobs, including former Governor Mitt Romney, and the humiliation he intended to force upon German chancellor Angela Merkel when she visited the White House in March – two well-respected policy figures who had publicly criticised him.

In the case of Comey's dismissal, the gesture was intended to say more: it was designed to send a signal to all administrative branches of government that despite the normative and legal safeguards governing a liberal democracy against the arbitrary will of the executive, a Trump executive will at least attempt to use all avenues to concentrate power. Even if an agency is meant to be independent, above partisan politics and personal grudges, as is the case for the FBI (directors are appointed for 10-year terms), resistance is to be seen as futile. In a telling interview with

journalist Lester Holt, the president contradicted his own staff by admitting that he wanted to dismiss the director "all along" – this, after a January dinner the director had with the president, in which Comey refused to promise loyalty to Donald Trump.

Loyalty as a governing principle: the high theatre

A demand for personal loyalty has governed his cabinet and advisor choices from the outset, even when facts made these selections doubtful. Prime evidence: the selection of General Michael Flynn as national security advisor. Flynn is now at the centre of both the FBI and congressional committee investigations. Dismissed by the Obama administration from his role as defence intelligence chief, the outgoing president had warned Trump and advisors about Flynn's possible selection. Probing his contacts with Russian officials, the then-acting attorney general Sally Yates testified under oath just days before the Comey firing that the White House had known of Flynn's less than truthful accounting of Russian contacts to the vice president and others. In partial explanation for what was widely perceived as almost three weeks of inaction, the White House press secretary, Sean Spicer, offered this: "He (President Trump) *instinctively* thought that General Flynn did not do anything wrong."

In the weeks since Flynn's dismissal, President Trump has seemingly embraced a two-pronged strategy: first, increasing his dependence on family loyalty – including his daughter and son-in-law, Jared Kushner, increasingly empowering them in his inner decision-making circle. Second, he has stepped up his efforts to fiercely police any potential alternative power centres. Comey's removal is one example, another is the close management and reining in of Flynn's successor, HR McMaster.

McMaster, a formidable and respected figure in Washington, was brought in to staunch the reputational bleeding caused by Flynn's ignominious departure. The early weeks, with both the Syria strike and the bombing of ISIS hold-outs in Afghanistan generating a much-needed bump in the president's approval rating, seemed a success. His leash, however is short. This week, a series of articles revealed the fissures emerging between the president (notably on the financing of the South Korean missile shield) and McMaster. Where the former top military official aims to create a sufficient radius of action to engage in long-term policy design and alliance assurance, the president, keen to see short-term, strong-arm interventions linked to his leadership, undermines him and cuts him down to size.

Starve –ignore – dismantle: the low theatre

Elsewhere, the president's strategy tracks the Steve Bannon philosophy of "deconstructing" the administrative state, crippling all agencies he deems too large, too independent and a brake on the advancement of executive power. This seems to include, in Bannon's eyes, most of the federal bureaucracy. None has been quite as dramatically hit as the State Department.

By choosing policy neophyte Rex Tillerson as chief diplomat, he revealed his disdain for the deep expertise and insight of the State Department rank and file. In that (odd) sense he solved a decades-long conflict between the State Department and the National Security Council in the White House – in favour of executive control and military might. The net effect was to signal a preference for more immediate military action over the slow, often tedious, delicate and nuanced work of what Ronald Reagan's Secretary of State, George P Schultz referred to as "tending the garden of diplomacy." Gone are multilateral foreign policy objectives on climate change, pandemic prevention, democracy promotion and conflict prevention. But, as Harvard colleague Steve Walt has pointed out, "bludgeoning others into doing our [the US'] bidding is not diplomacy."

The announcement of a 31 percent cut to the State Department's budget, a further announced 9 percent staff reduction (2,300 jobs), an initial hiring freeze and the glacial pace of shortlisting – to say nothing of actually selecting – ambassadors and political officers within the State Department means the administration is starving America's diplomatic muscle. This will impact US foreign policy for decades to come. These shifts will dissuade a generation of young, talented individuals from joining the ranks of the foreign service.

Further, a failure to consult the State Department or the secretary of state ahead of foreign policy pronouncements underscores that the president is perfectly willing to let the agency wither on the vine. Two months ahead of the G-20 Summit in Hamburg, key questions on the global agenda are watched over by caretaker figures from the Obama administration, and yet there is no new policy line to be executed. US diplomats in the field report working either based on existing guidance – read Obama-era policies – or being forced into inaction that can only be likened to taking phone messages. Consular services in certain parts of the world have seen their fair share of disruption through the immigration bans issued by the administration, then fought by courts across the country. Despite having recently named a new head of the US development policy agency, USAID, his charge will be to oversee an elimination of 30-35 field

missions and cut regional bureaus by roughly 65 percent. In addition, global health policy as overseen by diplomatic and development personnel, will see an approximate 25 percent hit in funding, putting Americans at risk in the event of a major epidemic, according to specialists.

In total, 556 "key" positions, including cabinet secretaries, undersecretaries and ambassadors, have yet to be filled across the agencies. Even the nominee for US trade representative, Robert Lighthizer, was only voted out of committee in late April, meaning it will likely be another month before he is 'on the job.' Meanwhile, the agency's personnel page remains all but blank.

Is the audience still listening?

What we see emerging is an administration intent on strengthening and consolidating executive power, while continuing to at least demoralise if not dismantle the structures designed to inform or check that power. This theatre has a target audience, which lives far beyond the Washington beltway. The performance is designed to reinforce already existing scepticism about the effectiveness of government as exercised by existing institutions.

Until recently, it had appeal and a receptive audience: many of the president's supporters consider the FBI and congressional investigations to be a "witch hunt," and find the functionality of the State Department to be "obscure." Now, however, the tide of public perception might be turning: A Quinnipiac poll released on 10 May highlights a 10 point decline in the last few weeks among white voters without a college degree – a key part of the base that paved the way for this administration. This slip has given the President a near-record negative of 36 percent job approval rating.

This President may not have another mode. While he will attempt to bolster these numbers through executive action that promises popular support, and focus the spotlight on him, his personal and personnel choices will make the United States – and its allies – less, not more safe in the months and years to come.



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