

Trump Administration: Quiet Success Among Chaos

How One Conservative Think Tank Is Stocking Trump's Government

By placing its people throughout the administration, the Heritage Foundation has succeeded in furthering its right-wing agenda.

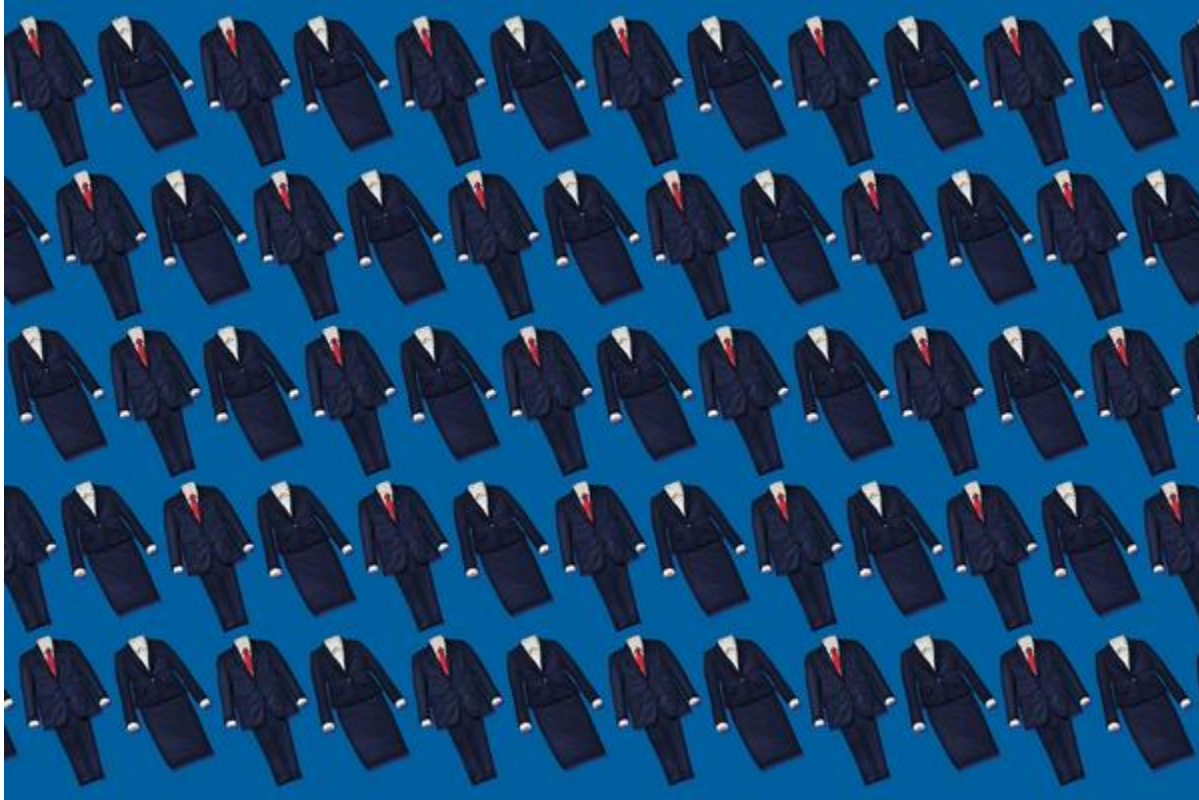
Jonathan Mahler, *The New York Times Magazine* Online, June 20, 2018.

On the day after Thanksgiving in 2016, Ed Corrigan, then the vice president for policy promotion at the Heritage Foundation, was summoned to Trump Tower in New York to join the senior leadership team of the Trump transition. From inside the building where the climactic personnel decisions of “The Apprentice” were once taped, Corrigan oversaw the staffing of 10 different domestic agencies. Donald Trump, the former reality-TV star, was now the president-elect of the United States, and he had an administration to fill.

The job of staffing the government is the first, and in many ways defining, challenge faced by every president. As the size of the government has grown to accommodate the nation's economy, frequent military interventions and increasingly complex geopolitical obligations, so have the scale and gravity of the task. In 1933, there were just over 200 presidential appointees in the executive and legislative branches. At the end of the Barack Obama's second term, there were 4,100.

Filling enough of these jobs in time to get the government off the ground on Jan. 20 is difficult in the best of circumstances, which is to say when the president-elect has some sort of pre-existing political infrastructure to draw upon. Even Ronald Reagan, who, like Trump, campaigned as a Washington outsider, relied on both his inner circle from the California Statehouse and a kitchen cabinet of mostly self-made millionaires who helped finance his political rise. Trump would be coming to the White House with little more than the remnants of a campaign staff that included his daughter and son-in-law, a contestant from his reality-TV show and his longtime bodyguard. What is more, in the days after his election, Donald Trump replaced the head of his preliminary transition operation, Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey, with Vice President-elect Mike Pence and purged Christie's allies from the team, throwing away months' worth of their work recruiting and vetting personnel; a senior Trump aide, Stephen K. Bannon, made a show of gleefully dumping binders filled with résumés into the trash.

Image



CreditPhoto illustration by Sam Kaplan. Stylist: Johnny Machado.

The Trump team may not have been prepared to staff the government, but the Heritage Foundation was. In the summer of 2014, a year before Trump even declared his candidacy, the right-wing think tank had started assembling a 3,000-name searchable database of trusted movement conservatives from around the country who were eager to serve in a post-Obama government. The initiative was called the Project to Restore America, a dog-whistle appeal to the so-called silent majority that foreshadowed Trump's own campaign slogan.

In some ways, Trump and Heritage were an unlikely match. Trump had no personal connection to the think tank and had fared poorly on a "Presidential Platform Review" from its sister lobbying shop, Heritage Action for America, which essentially concluded that he wasn't even a conservative. ("Despite his rhetoric, Trump's history suggests a reluctance to engage in debates over protecting civil society from the imposition of left-wing values," it read in part.) After Trump mocked John McCain's P.O.W. experience in Vietnam, Heritage Action's chief executive, Michael Needham, called the candidate "a clown" on Fox News and said "he needs to be out of the race." Trump claimed to want to shake up the Washington establishment. The Heritage Foundation is a Washington institution. Its large, stately headquarters sits just a few blocks from Capitol Hill.

And yet Heritage and Trump were uniquely positioned to help each other. Much like Trump's, Heritage's constituency is equal parts donor class and populist base. Its \$80 million annual budget depends on six-figure donations from rich Republicans like Rebekah Mercer, whose family foundation has reportedly given Heritage \$500,000 a year since 2013. But it also relies on a network of 500,000 small donors, Heritage "members" whom it bombards with millions of pieces of direct mail every year. The Heritage Foundation is a marketing company, a branding agency — it sells its own Heritage neckties, embroidered with miniature versions of its Liberty Bell logo — and a policy shop rolled into one. But above all, Heritage is a networking group. It has spent decades fashioning itself into the hub of a constellation of conservative individuals and organizations united by their opposition to government regulations — from taxes to gun control to environmental protections — and socially progressive causes like same-sex marriage.

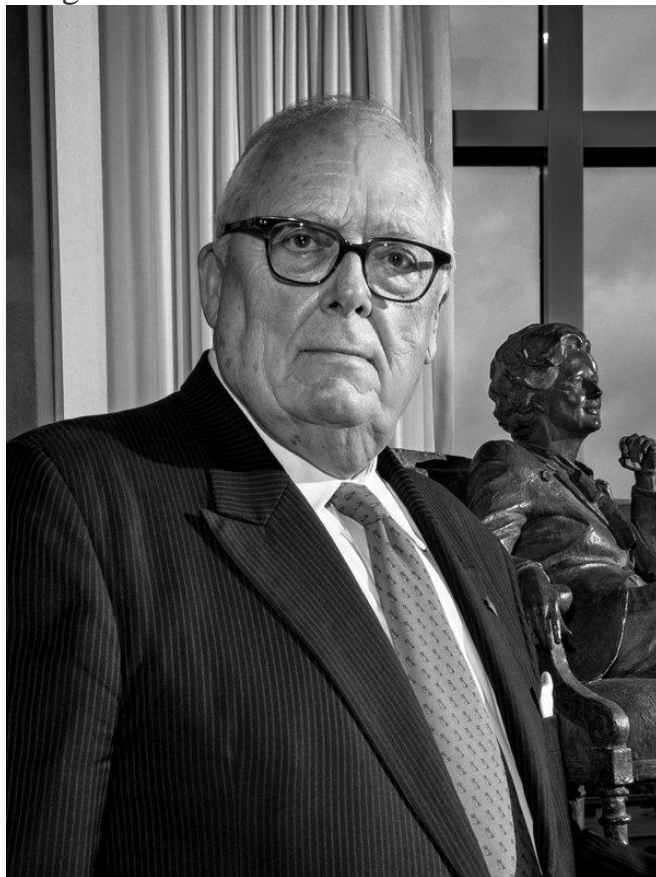
Today it is clear that for all the chaos and churn of the current administration, Heritage has achieved a huge strategic victory. Those who worked on the project estimate that hundreds of the people the think tank put forward landed jobs, in just about every government agency. Heritage's recommendations included some of the most prominent members of Trump's cabinet: Scott Pruitt, Betsy DeVos (whose in-laws endowed Heritage's Richard and Helen DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society), Mick Mulvaney, Rick Perry, Jeff Sessions and many more. Dozens of Heritage employees and alumni also joined the Trump administration — at last count 66 of them, according to Heritage, with two more still awaiting Senate confirmation. It is a kind of critical mass that Heritage had been working toward for nearly a half-century.

"Feulner's first law is people are policy," Ed Feulner, Heritage's founder and former president, told me recently. Feulner was the head of domestic policy for the Trump transition, charting the direction of the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Agriculture and several other agencies. We met late on a Friday afternoon, in a sitting room at the Metropolitan Club in Washington, a private social club founded by a group of Treasury Department officials during the Civil War. At his feet as we spoke sat a small box of table cards for a dinner he was hosting at the club that evening for the newly appointed director of Trump's National Economic Council, the television personality Larry Kudlow — another name on Heritage's Project to Restore America list. Now 76, ruddy, white-haired and content, almost jovial, Feulner founded Heritage decades ago as an ambitious young legislative aide with a radical dream built on a simple concept. As he put it, sinking deeper into his club chair: "First, you have to have the right people."

Heritage was born in the spring of 1971 in the basement cafeteria of the United States Capitol. Feulner had just turned 30 and was working for Representative

Philip Crane, an Illinois Republican who had written a book, “The Democrat’s Dilemma: How the Liberal Left Captured the Democratic Party,” arguing that left-wing radicals inspired by the Fabian Society, a socialist group in Britain, were secretly trying to turn America into a socialist state via the Democratic Party. As an undergraduate at Regis College, Feulner had been drawn to an emerging conservative movement that saw as its enemy not only Democrats but also moderate Republicans who threatened to do to their party what they believed the Fabians had done to the Democrats. In 1964, as a graduate student at the Wharton School, he organized a campus group to support the insurgent presidential candidacy of his political hero, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona.

Image



Ed Feulner Credit Jonno Rattman for The New York Times

Over breakfast at the Capitol, Feulner and another Hill aide, 28-year-old Paul M. Weyrich — later credited with coining the phrase “moral majority” — commiserated over a recent study from the American Enterprise Institute, an established conservative think tank, about a proposed supersonic transport plane. The report could have helped buttress their argument that the government should continue to fund the plane as part of its effort to win the Cold War, but A.E.I. had withheld it until after the Senate voted on the issue so as not to bias the debate. This was, to their thinking, the wrong approach.

What if they could create a new sort of think tank, one that would actively seek to cultivate and influence politicians, and in the process advance the cause of movement conservatism?

Soon after, they made their pitch to Joseph Coors, the highly motivated Colorado beer baron who would later, at the suggestion of the Reagan White House aide and future National Rifle Association president Oliver North, wire \$65,000 to a Swiss bank account to buy a cargo plane for Nicaraguan rebels. Coors had come to Washington in search of a conservative institution in which to invest. The meeting was held in the office of the irreverent ex-newspaperman and Nixon aide Lyn Nofziger. Weyrich had heard that Coors was also considering investing in A.E.I., which gave Nofziger the idea for “a little artifice,” as the official history of the Heritage Foundation describes it. Before Coors arrived, Nofziger sprinkled some cigar ashes on a thick American Enterprise Institute study resting on his bookshelf. When Coors asked about A.E.I., he took the book off-the-shelf and blew off the ashes. “A.E.I.?” he asked. “That’s what they’re good for — collecting dust.”

Coors invested \$260,000 in the new venture, and within a few years, Heritage had taken its place at the center of the growing conservative counterestablishment. Its initial fund-raising success foreshadowed the rise of the Republican donor class as a political force: Another early and generous giver was the banking and oil heir Richard Mellon Scaife, who went on to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in conservative media outlets and nonprofit organizations that, among other projects, targeted the Clintons during the 1990s. (Heritage trustees used to joke that Coors gave six-packs; Scaife gave cases.)

Feulner packaged his fledgling think tank’s ideology into five basic principles: free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional values and a strong national defense. They would guide Heritage’s agenda, which would be set by Feulner and his senior leadership team. Feulner also anticipated the danger of his new think tank’s being dismissed as a tool of rich Republicans. To build a Heritage member base that would assert the foundation’s anti-establishment identity, he turned to Richard Viguerie, the conservative marketing pioneer known for his high-quality mailing list and his uniquely apocalyptic warnings of imminent national collapse.

Think tanks are sometimes referred to as universities without students, suggesting intellectual diversity within a general philosophical orientation. Heritage, by contrast, was strictly results-oriented. Feulner once likened his strategy to Procter & Gamble’s approach to Crest toothpaste: “They sell it and resell it every day by keeping the product fresh in the consumer’s mind.” One way to promote Heritage’s brand was to inundate Congress with an unending barrage of bite-size “backgrounders”; another was by networking. Heritage

hosted weekend retreats for lawmakers, study groups for young congressional staffers and semester-long internships for college students, complete with Heritage housing. In its early years, Heritage took up numerous political battles: It published papers advocating making Social Security voluntary, argued against giving striking workers access to food stamps and warned parents about the danger posed by the advancement of “secular humanism” in public schools. To Feulner, they were all worthy fights, but they were just a prelude to what Heritage’s official history calls “the Big Gamble” — its decision to invest in the presidential candidacy of the 68-year-old Ronald Reagan. Feulner saw something in Reagan long before he became president. “We had met with him when he was governor in California; we had visited his ranch and seen copies of Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek with marginal notes in the book,” Feulner told me. “So we knew that he was one of us.” In the run-up to the 1980 election, Heritage spent \$250,000 to assemble a comprehensive guidebook for conservative rule that it called “Mandate for Leadership” and aggressively marketed it to members of Reagan’s transition team, in particular Edwin Meese, who was Reagan’s chief of staff in California and later became his attorney general in Washington. The big gamble paid off: Meese told me that Reagan asked that the 1,093-page document be distributed at his first cabinet meeting. Reagan also turned to Heritage and Feulner to help staff and organize his administration. An enduring, mutually beneficial friendship was born. Meese wrote a letter on White House stationery stating that members of Heritage’s President’s Club — at the time, donors of \$1,000 or more — would “provide a vital communications link between policymakers and those key people who made possible Reagan’s victory,” as Sidney Blumenthal reported in his 1986 book “The Rise of the Counter-Establishment.” The relationship worked both ways. When Reagan’s second term ended, Meese joined Heritage as its first Ronald Reagan Fellow in Public Policy, with an annual salary of more than \$400,000. Now 86, he remains at the think tank as distinguished fellow emeritus of the Meese Center for Legal and Judicial Studies.

Reagan’s image is everywhere at Heritage, the informal poses and settings — on a horse, on a putting green, relaxing at his ranch — suggesting less a political actor than a beloved family member. But Heritage had its complaints about Reagan at the time. On the first anniversary of his presidency, the think tank issued a report characterizing his tenure as a disappointment to conservatives. Heritage laid much of the blame on personnel who were insufficiently committed to the president’s agenda. “They were looking for competent people,” Nofziger, who had gone on to become a key political strategist for Reagan, later recalled. “I tried to explain to them that the first thing you do is get loyal people, and competence is a bonus.”

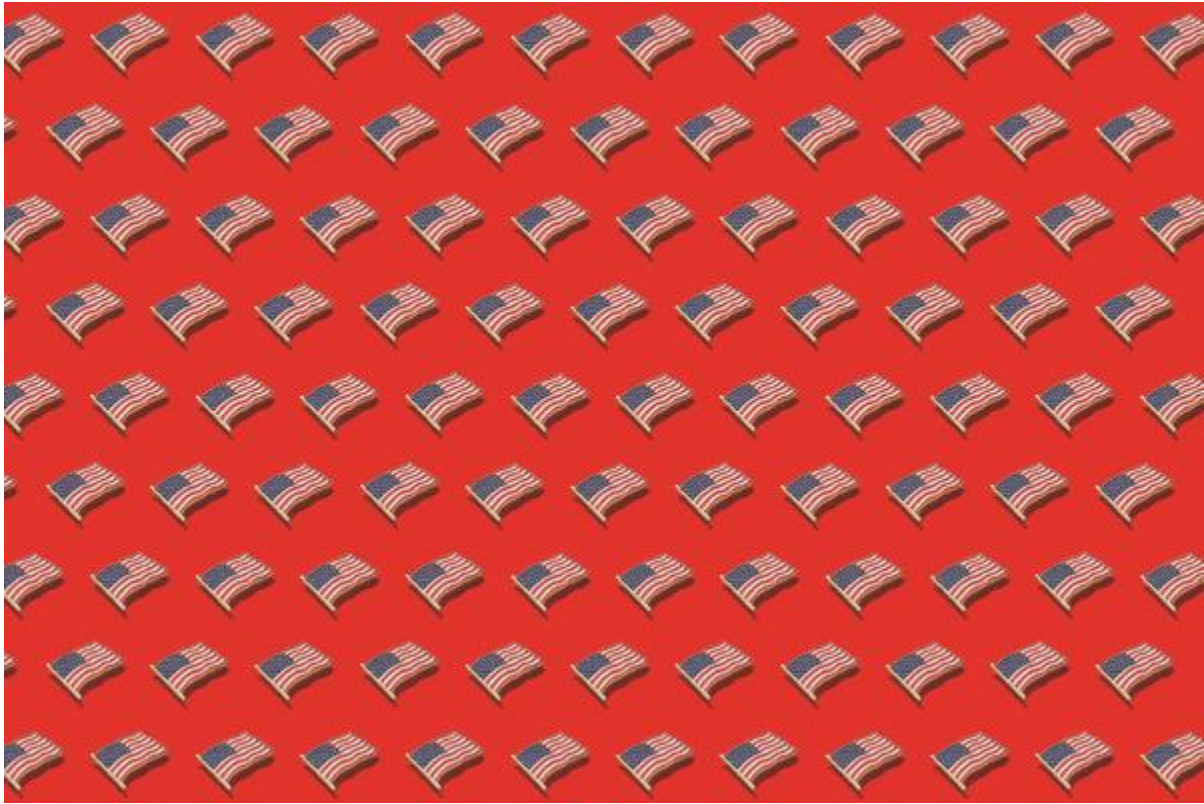


The Heritage Foundation headquarters in Washington. Credit Jonno Rattman for The New York Times

Over the following decades, Feulner continued to pursue his dream of turning the counterestablishment into the establishment. The prospects had perhaps never looked bleaker than they did in 2012, when Obama was easily elected to his second term. Having just turned 70, Feulner decided that it was time to retire. At that moment in conservative history, it was not difficult for him to see where the future of the think tank lay: the Tea Party. Heritage had helped organize and underwrite the anti-tax, anti-government — and, most of all, anti-Obama — movement, even creating a lobbying organization, Heritage Action, to help harness the energy it unleashed.

A couple of years earlier, in 2010, Feulner heard a talk given by one of the movement's leading figures, Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina, at a meeting of a conservative dinner group in Georgetown. "When it was over, Richard Viguerie said to Jim: 'That was such a fantastic speech. Why don't you run for president?'" Feulner told me, recounting the events of the evening. "DeMint locked eyes with me and said, 'The only thing I've ever wanted to be president of is the Heritage Foundation.'"

Feulner decided DeMint was someone to watch, and the next year, the senator earned the highest possible rating on Heritage Action's new congressional scorecard, which evaluated lawmakers' voting records on the think tank's



CreditPhoto illustration by Sam Kaplan. Stylist: Johnny Machado.

principles — higher than Michele Bachmann and much higher than Paul Ryan or Mitch McConnell. (“With each vote cast in Congress, freedom either advances or recedes,” Needham said when Heritage Action unveiled the new rating system.) DeMint had fought the federal bailouts of the banks and carmakers, supported school prayer and opposed abortion and Obamacare. No less important, DeMint, who had an M.B.A. from Clemson University, shared the Heritage belief that politics was as much about sales and recruiting as it was about legislating or governing. Before running for office at the age of 47, he had operated his own marketing company; as a senator, he created a political-action committee, the Senate Conservatives Fund, to raise cash for select conservative candidates. He was clearly a skilled fund-raiser, which was a big part of the Heritage job. He would have to be willing to give up his Senate seat to run a think tank, which was maybe not as far-fetched as it sounded. In addition to influence, Heritage offered something the government couldn’t: money. Without even having to taint his reputation by becoming a lobbyist, he would get a roughly 400 percent raise from his government salary, to nearly \$900,000 in his first full year.

DeMint started at Heritage in 2013. He created a new layer of senior staff that included allies from Capitol Hill, in the process effectively demoting many of Heritage’s veteran leaders. He also went on a hiring spree of young conservatives for the think tank’s media and internet operations.

“Conservative ideas are invigorating,” DeMint told The New York Times in 2014. “We had allowed them to become too serious.” (DeMint declined to be interviewed for this article.)

While Feulner and his senior staff had reserved the right to review policy papers, they generally avoided intervening in the research and publication process. DeMint and his leadership team were much more aggressive. Papers were heavily edited or even withheld from release altogether. Several scholars quit. DeMint replaced them, bringing in as Heritage’s chief economist Stephen Moore, a Wall Street Journal editorial writer and a founder of the Club for Growth, a lobbying group that advocates cutting taxes.

DeMint intensified the think tank’s marketing efforts, targeting Obamacare in particular. A Heritage billboard went up in Times Square — “Warning,” it read, “Obamacare may be hazardous to your health” — and DeMint led a “Defund Obamacare Tour” across the country. In Congress, he had been something of a one-man ideological enforcer. Now he had at his disposal the power of an \$80 million institution whose name was a one-word shorthand for movement conservatism; the backing of some of the country’s richest, most politically engaged Republicans; and a significant slice of the conservative base. Within months of his arrival, he was pressing House Republicans to send the president a spending bill that wouldn’t fund the Affordable Care Act, thus inviting a government shutdown. “There’s no question in my mind that I have more influence now on public policy than I did as an individual senator,” he said in an interview with National Public Radio in 2013.

But his most audacious bid for influence came the following year, when he inaugurated the Project to Restore America. “What we learned from talking to Heritage folks who had been in the Reagan administration was that we needed to be in the game early,” Ed Corrigan, one of DeMint’s Capitol Hill hires, told me. With its focus on staffing, the new effort was the logical extension of his fixation on recruiting the right conservatives for Congress, not to mention the concept at the very heart of Feulner’s vision for Heritage. To lead the project, DeMint turned to a woman who had spent decades building Heritage’s network and knew just how to staff a government: Becky Norton Dunlop, a former deputy personnel director for Reagan. “I know this is going to be hard to believe, but he said — and I agreed — that it was highly likely that a conservative would be elected president,” Dunlop told me, recalling her first conversation about the effort with DeMint. “We needed to be prepared.”



Becky Norton Dunlop Credit Jonno Rattman for The New York Times

Dunlop's name may be unfamiliar to most Americans, but she is something of a legend among movement conservatives. She came to Washington in 1973 straight from college to work for the American Conservative Union, the lobbying group best known for organizing the annual Conservative Political Action Conference, and later married an aide to Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, who gave her away at their wedding. (Her father, a Baptist minister, officiated.) Congress eventually pushed her out of the Interior Department for trying to demote or fire several National Park Service employees and replace them with political appointees. Years later, after a controversial stint as Virginia's secretary of natural resources — "Gunning for the Environment?" was the headline of a 1997 Washington Post profile in the Style section — she landed at Heritage as its vice president for external relations and has been there ever since.

Dunlop tapped her extensive network, groups like the Family Research Council, Liberty University and the Council for National Policy, an organization that brings together advocates of various conservative causes. "I talked to them all," Dunlop said. "You need to think about this, and you need

to spread the word. If you're interested, get your house in order, talk to your spouse and get ready, because we need to save our country.' ”

Not only was Trump an awkward fit for a staunch conservative like DeMint, but the Heritage president had strong ties to two of his primary opponents. His PAC had raised close to \$600,000 for Marco Rubio's 2010 Senate campaign, and he and Rubio were both associated with the C Street house, a group residence on Capitol Hill affiliated with the Fellowship Foundation, the nonprofit organization that sponsors the National Prayer Breakfast. Ted Cruz — to whom DeMint's PAC had given nearly \$1 million for his 2012 Senate run — had been a featured speaker on DeMint's "Defund Obamacare" tour. Trump's campaign promises to punish American companies that export jobs were anathema to Heritage's 45-year history of support for free trade, not to mention the interests of some of its biggest donors. Even as Trump was gaining momentum, some senior staff members continued to resist the idea of embracing him, arguing that it would damage Heritage's reputation, but DeMint decided to get out ahead of the rest of his party and work with Trump's insurgent campaign.

DeMint understood better than most what lit up the conservative base; after all, he had spent years stoking its anger at the Republican establishment. At a private dinner on Capitol Hill in January 2016, two weeks before the Iowa caucuses, DeMint was the only one of a group of a dozen conservatives, including Yuval Levin of the Ethics and Public Policy Center and Fred Barnes of The Weekly Standard, who predicted that Trump would win the nomination.

Trump's political views were less important than his approach to hiring. With DeMint's guidance, he could bring in trusted conservatives who supported a Heritage agenda that included opening offshore drilling on federal lands; opposing mandatory labeling of genetically engineered food; reducing regulations on for-profit universities; revoking an Obama executive order on green-energy mandates for federal agencies; phasing out federal subsidies for housing; and opposing marriage equality and nondiscrimination protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity. "The watchword of personnel is: Get people who you want on the bus, and then figure out what seat you want to put them in," Dunlop said.

In March 2016, the Republican establishment stepped up its effort to stop Trump. More than 100 Republican national-security experts signed an open letter publicly committing to fight his election, calling him a "racketeer" and denouncing his dishonesty and "admiration for foreign dictators." A number of the signatories were fellows of conservative think tanks; none were affiliated with Heritage at the time. Heritage treated Trump as it would any other candidate, giving his campaign staff more than a dozen briefings and

sending them off with decks of cards bearing Heritage policy proposals and market-tested “power phrases.” At the same time, Heritage’s leaders were lobbying furiously behind the scenes to secure senior appointments to Trump’s post-nomination transition team. “It was the top priority for *everyone* at Heritage,” Dunlop told me.

Later that month, Trump’s campaign lawyer (and future White House counsel) Donald McGahn convened a gathering of conservative leaders at the Capitol Hill offices of his law firm, Jones Day. Only a small group attended: Newt Gingrich, Senator Jeff Sessions, a handful of other sitting lawmakers who were supportive of Trump — and DeMint. “At that time,” Gingrich told me, “Trump’s views were so unknown to the average conservative the concern was, is he going to be reliable?” As the conversation evolved, an idea emerged: What if Trump could present to the public a list of Supreme Court nominees? DeMint enthusiastically volunteered to help provide one. When he returned to Heritage’s offices, though, some senior staffers balked. One concern they raised was that it would be counterproductive for Heritage to explicitly endorse possible judicial appointees: Because the think tank was considered to the right of the Republican mainstream, its approval of candidates could make them toxic in the confirmation process. But DeMint was adamant, insisting that this was an opportunity Heritage should not pass up. The head of Heritage’s Center for Legal and Judicial Studies, John Malcolm, ultimately wrote the list in the form of a post for Heritage’s news and commentary website, The Daily Signal. By then, Trump had already singled out Heritage at a news conference, announcing that it was one of the groups he was working with on a Supreme Court list.

Feulner, still active at Heritage as a member of its board, was the first from the think tank to join the Trump transition after the Republican National Convention. “August 2016, Christie calls, and then candidate Trump calls to confirm: Would I take over the domestic side?” Feulner told me. As he saw it, Trump held even more promise for Heritage than Reagan had. “No.1, he did clearly want to make very significant changes, and No.2, his views on so many things were not particularly well formed,” Feulner said. “And so if he somehow pulled the election off, we thought, wow, we could really make a difference.”

Yet even as he was drilling further into the Trump team, DeMint was running into trouble inside his own building. Over the summer, complaints about his heavy-handed management style started to reach some members of Heritage’s 22-person board. DeMint and his loyalists rejected the criticisms of his leadership, suggesting that they were the work of Mike Needham, the 36-year-old chief executive of Heritage Action. Needham came from a different world than DeMint. He grew up on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and joined the think tank straight out of Williams College, beginning as Feulner’s research assistant and rising to become his chief of staff. He left in 2007 to work on the presidential campaign of Rudolph W. Giuliani and then went on to attend

Stanford Business School but returned after he graduated. As DeMint and his allies saw it, Needham was trying to orchestrate a palace coup, turning a handful of isolated complaints about his hiring practices and handling of Heritage's research into a major case against DeMint as part of his own campaign to take control of the think tank. They knew, too, that Needham and Feulner were close and were convinced that Needham was trying to undermine DeMint with Heritage's founder.

By early November, the tension between DeMint and Needham had escalated, and the senior staff was divided by their respective loyalties. It was just the sort of factionalism that would soon come to define the nascent Trump administration, with its personnel conflicts and firings. As the election approached, it seemed to some at Heritage that DeMint's future was uncertain. The Republican Party appeared to be headed for defeat and years of soul-searching, which might present a natural occasion for new leadership at the think tank.

On election night, Heritage turned its first floor over to a viewing party with an open bar, chicken wings and red, white and blue cupcakes. The mood grew increasingly celebratory as the evening wore on and Trump's tally of electoral votes built toward 270. Some staff members stayed until dawn, went out for breakfast and came back for an all-staff meeting called by DeMint in the larger of Heritage's two auditoriums. "As you know, I'm kind of a serious guy, so it's rare that I feel giddy," he began. DeMint said that Heritage had taken a huge risk — "we were criticized by a lot of our friends in the movement for even going to meetings with Trump" — but that it had paid off. "Most of you are too young to remember the old 'Mission: Impossible' series on television, but after they had accomplished their impossible mission, they were all sitting around lighting cigarettes, and the commander would always say, 'I love it when a plan comes together!'" (He was most likely recalling another television program, "The A-Team.")

Corrigan had been in close contact with the Trump campaign for months. Now he told the assembled crowd of about 200 people what Heritage had been doing for the campaign and previewed the opportunities ahead. There were thousands of jobs to fill, and the priority was to fill them with "change agents," he said. "When it comes to personnel decisions, that is the most frequently asked question, even before 'Are they qualified?' 'Are they a change agent?'"

In the coming days, employees were encouraged to join the transition and were assured that as long as they were working as volunteers, Heritage could continue to pay their salaries and hold their jobs for them.



Credit Photo illustration by Sam Kaplan. Stylist: Johnny Machado.

The Trump transition offices quickly filled with Heritage staff members recruiting and vetting hires for the administration. The upheaval inside the transition caused by Christie's firing worked to DeMint's advantage: Pence was an old friend and conservative ally on Capitol Hill. Christie's departure also opened the way for Rick Dearborn to take control of the daily decision-making. Dearborn, the longtime chief of staff to Jeff Sessions, had already been a strong presence on the transition team. He went back years with Corrigan, who was the director of the Senate's conservative caucus for nearly a decade before joining Heritage with DeMint. Corrigan had been informally feeding Dearborn names for months.

Matthew Buckham, a project administrator in Heritage's communications department who joined the transition to vet ambassadors and diplomats, told me that he and the rest of Heritage's staff on the transition tried to put forward every Heritage employee who wanted to work for the administration, whether in policy, administration or management jobs. "Any list we touched we made sure had as many Heritage people as possible," he said. One of Heritage's labor economists, James Sherk, an advocate of rolling back labor rights, joined the White House domestic-policy council; another, David Kreutzer, who was a co-author of a Heritage policy paper arguing that "no consensus exists that man-made emissions are the primary driver of global warming," joined the Environmental Protection Agency. Roger Severino, the director of Heritage's DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society, who has

opposed extending civil rights protections to gay, lesbian and transgender people, joined the Department of Health and Human Services to run its Office for Civil Rights. Sean Doocey, a former Heritage employee who had worked at the think tank's Training and Recruitment Center, joined the Presidential Personnel Office — the little-known agency responsible for recruiting and vetting appointees for the executive branch — as its deputy director.

Heritage helped place countless others, from staff assistants to cabinet secretaries. In some cases, DeMint intervened directly, calling Pence to argue for Mick Mulvaney, a former congressman whose political career DeMint helped start years earlier in South Carolina. Mulvaney is now the director of the Office of Management and Budget, and as this article went to press, he was serving out the remaining time in a stint as the acting director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, a consumer-protection watchdog agency that he had voted to disband in Congress. (He recently fired all 25 members of the agency's advisory board.) "Not only were we not going to bash the president," Buckham told me. "We were going to help him *and* push our friends into positions of policy and influence."

In the spring of 2017, just a few months into his tenure, President Trump expressed his gratitude to both DeMint and Heritage in a speech at the National Rifle Association: "Those people have been fantastic; they've been real friends." And yet even in this moment of triumph, DeMint was losing the battle to keep his job. Emboldened by Trump's victory, he asked for a new contract on the eve of the inauguration. (He earned \$1.2 million the previous year.) Heritage's three-person leadership team — Barb Van Andel-Gaby, a member of one of the families that founded the multilevel-marketing company Amway; Thomas A. Saunders III, a private-equity executive; and Nersi Nazari, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur — were noncommittal. Soon after, they came to Washington for a few days to perform their own internal investigation of the personnel problems, interviewing various staff members about DeMint's leadership.

By the time the foundation's largest donors — \$10,000 or more a year — gathered in April 2017 for their annual retreat at the Fairmont Grand Del Mar in San Diego, Heritage's senior management, like that of the administration it was staffing, was consumed by chaos, confusion, resentments and infighting. DeMint, by now, was blaming Feulner as well as Needham; he was certain that Feulner still effectively controlled the board and was turning it against him. Shortly after DeMint and his management team returned to Washington, he was stripped of his power while his severance package was negotiated. Many of the people he had brought in, including Corrigan, James Wallner (a research executive), Wesley Denton (a communications executive) and Buckham, soon left, too. Rumors swirled that Stephen Bannon would be taking over. He was still at the White House at the time, but he was close to

Mercer, and it was no secret that Trump was turning on his power-hungry, attention-seeking chief strategist.

Amid the upheaval, Saunders, the board's chairman, issued a statement on the ouster. "Heritage is bigger than any one person," it read. In his first address to the staff, the think tank's new interim president, Ed Feulner, assured them that Heritage would continue to be "Donald Trump's favorite think tank."

Heritage's longer-term future was placed in the hands of an 11-person presidential search committee, made up of trustees. They spent months looking for a candidate who could provide continuity, building on the relationship with Trump that DeMint had established, but also signal a departure from the DeMint era. By last fall, they had assembled a short list that was leaked to The Washington Post. It included Marc Short, the White House legislative director and longtime aide to Mike Pence; Todd Ricketts, the Chicago Cubs co-owner and major Republican donor who had recently been nominated as deputy commerce secretary; and David Trulio, then the vice president for international government affairs at the defense contractor Lockheed Martin. None of them got the job. Just as Dick Cheney had once led George W. Bush's search for a vice president before securing the position for himself, the presidency of Heritage went to the chairwoman of the search committee, Kay Coles James.

James, who is 69, is an almost total anomaly in the political world: a black female Republican who supports Donald Trump. In her first address to the Heritage staff, she spoke about her difficult childhood in Richmond, Va., with an absentee father and a mother on welfare. The hiring of a black woman as its president seemed like a coup for an institution that has been widely accused of representing only the interests of white men. "She did not get the job because of her gender or race," Feulner told me. "She got it because she's such an extraordinary individual. My only regret is that she's not 10 years younger."

In many respects, James does have the perfect résumé for Heritage. She served under Reagan and George Bush and was the director of the office of personnel management for George W. Bush. Along the way, she worked for several conservative organizations, including Pat Robertson's Regent University, and served on the board of Focus on the Family, the evangelical group known for its opposition to abortion, premarital sex and gay and transgender rights. In 2005, she did a brief stint with a defense contracting firm whose founder, Mitchell Wade, pleaded guilty a year later to bribing a congressman with more than \$1 million in return for favors and earmarks.



Kay Coles James CreditJonno Rattman for The New York Times

James went on to start her own nonprofit, the Gloucester Institute, which describes itself as a leadership training center; it offers mentoring and networking programs to black and Latino undergraduate and graduate students. According to Gloucester's 990 tax form, she earned \$50,000 as president of the organization in 2016, the year before she became president of Heritage.

James worked on the Trump transition, overseeing the White House's budget and personnel management offices. In March, on a Politico podcast, she said that she had been eager to join the administration to work on the president's "urban agenda." She was blocked by Omarosa Manigault Newman, the former "Apprentice" villain and director of communications for the White House Office of the Public Liaison, who during the campaign was charged with African-American outreach. "The way it was described to me is she approached the whole thing like it was 'The Apprentice,'" James said on the

podcast. “So she looked around Washington and said, ‘O.K., who do I need to get rid of first?’ ” (Newman herself was pushed out last year.)

I met James, who has short, graying hair and favors colorful blazers, in May in her new Heritage office, which is enormous and looks out at the Capitol. After we settled onto a large, comfortable couch, she described her new job at Heritage as “the crown jewel” of her career in the conservative movement. I asked James how she thought Trump was doing. “People are focused up here on the trouble and all of the noise that you hear in Washington,” she said, gesturing at eye level. “But down here, the bass notes are strong and loud. There’s a lot of good that is going on, but we are in such a partisan, vitriolic atmosphere in this town right now that very often we overlook the bass notes.”

In recent months, James has applauded Trump’s tax cuts and deregulatory agenda; his crackdown on illegal immigration; his choice of the hard-liner John Bolton as national security adviser; his effort to rescind funding for a variety of federal programs, including the Children’s Health Insurance Program; and an executive order that will curtail the amount of time that federal union representatives can spend helping colleagues file claims for workplace grievances, including sexual harassment. Part of her task at Heritage, James told me, will be to expose a more diverse audience to the think tank’s ideology. “If you talk to anyone about shaping the future of this nation, they will tell you that there are certain demographics that must be touched — millennials, women and minorities,” she said. “And so I tell people that unless our ideas are reaching those demographics, then we are going to be looking at a shrinking minority view in this country.”

A few weeks later, on a rainy morning in Washington, Heritage held a party for the dedication of a new dormitory for its interns, a gift from the family of E.W. Richardson, a World War II bomber pilot who went on to become a successful Ford dealer. Donors ate finger food and drank mimosas under a tent on Heritage’s rooftop. Some wore name tags on their lapels and dresses identifying them by their level of giving; those who had added Heritage to their wills wore an extra ribbon: “Legacy Society.” James was the only person of color I saw in a crowd that easily exceeded 200 people.

Forty-five years after its founding, Heritage may finally be the establishment, but its self-image remains fixed in time. It is, as ever, the nation’s last line of defense against the advancing forces of progressivism, perpetually in need of financial reinforcements. Speaking to the gathered group of donors and Heritage staff members, James, standing beside an American flag and a large portrait of Richardson in his flight gear, described the new intern dorm as an expansion of the think tank’s “base of operations” against what she characterized as a “very determined and very well-resourced foe. They want to

change America into something she was never intended to be. And they might succeed if we don't fight every single day of our lives."

On the first anniversary of Trump's inauguration, Heritage marked the occasion with news releases and a booklet, "Blueprint for Impact," promoting how much of Heritage's agenda Trump had already embraced — 64 percent, according to the think tank's analysis. Heritage's director of congressional and executive branch relations, Thomas Binion, went on "Fox & Friends" to discuss the report, saying the think tank was "blown away" by Trump's performance. The president, apparently watching in the White House, promptly tweeted, inaccurately: "The Heritage Foundation has just stated that 64% of the Trump Agenda is already done, faster than even Ronald Reagan."

The president and his favorite think tank continue to draw closer. Administration officials speak regularly at Heritage and give frequent interviews to The Daily Signal. In April, Pruitt and Attorney General Jeff Sessions were both scheduled to speak at a Heritage donor conference in Palm Beach, Fla. (Sessions, under fire from the president because of the Russia investigation, dropped out.)

Even with DeMint gone, Feulner is enjoying unique access to the Trump administration. During one of our conversations, he told me he had recently accompanied the vice president on Air Force Two to Hillsdale College, a Christian stronghold of conservative thought in Michigan. And last year, he was the lone think-tank head invited to a White House dinner for the conservative movement's "grass-roots leaders." He was seated right beside the president. Feulner's dream had finally been fulfilled. I asked him if he believed the Trump presidency would be transformative for the country. "I think we're very, very optimistic," he said.

There is still a huge number of vacancies across the administration. At this point in their presidencies, Obama had filled 584 of his politically appointed, Senate-confirmed positions, and George W. Bush had filled 652; Trump has filled just 450. The Presidential Personnel Office was portrayed in a recent Washington Post article as a frat house, with widespread workplace vaping and happy-hour drinking games involving Smirnoff Ice.

The turnover rates have also been historic. In March, The New York Times reported that nine of the top 21 White House and cabinet positions have been emptied and refilled at least once; neither Obama nor Bush had lost a single cabinet member by that point in their administrations. Since taking office, Trump has replaced more than half of his 65 most influential advisers, according to a tracker created by the Brookings Institution. Christie recently laid the blame for the turnover on what he described as a "brutally unprofessional" transition, saying that proper vetting would have caught a lot

of Trump's most problematic appointees. A number of other senior advisers seem to be on shaky ground with the president, and an exodus is anticipated after the November midterm elections.

Churn is a central feature of this administration, even for its unofficial staffing agency. Paul Winfree, a Heritage economist who helped draft Trump's first budget, is back at the think tank. So are Stephen Moore, who worked on the Trump tax cuts; David Kreutzer, who played a key role in dissolving a White House working group that was studying the monetary costs associated with climate-warming carbon dioxide; and Hans von Spakovsky, who helped run the now-defunct voter-fraud commission, which was created to find evidence to support Trump's baseless claim that millions of people voted illegally for Hillary Clinton.

In a sense, the transition is still going, and as long as Trump remains in office it may never end. "I get calls from people every day who still want to go in," Dunlop told me. "Or I'll hear from the White House, or I'll run into someone at a reception or over coffee, and I'll say, 'I've got a name for you. I'll send it along.'"

Correction: June 19, 2018

An earlier version of this article did not fully identify two employees who left the Heritage Foundation soon after the departure of Jim DeMint, its president. They are James Wallner, who was a research executive, and Wesley Denton, who was a communications executive.

A version of this article appears in print on June 23, 2018, on Page 33 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: All the Right People

Opinion

I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration

I work for the president but like-minded colleagues and I have vowed to thwart parts of his agenda and his worst inclinations.

Anonymous, ~~The New York Times~~ Online Edition, September 5, 2018.

The Times is taking the rare step of publishing an anonymous Op-Ed essay. We have done so at the request of the author, a senior official in the Trump administration whose identity is known to us and whose job would be jeopardized by its disclosure. We believe publishing this essay anonymously is the only way to deliver an important perspective to our readers. We invite you to submit a question about the essay or our vetting process [here](#). [Update: Our answers to some of those questions are published [here](#).]

President Trump is facing a test to his presidency unlike any faced by a modern American leader.

It's not just that the special counsel looms large. Or that the country is bitterly divided over Mr. Trump's leadership. Or even that his party might well lose the House to an opposition hellbent on his downfall.

The dilemma — which he does not fully grasp — is that many of the senior officials in his own administration are working diligently from within to frustrate parts of his agenda and his worst inclinations.

I would know. I am one of them.

To be clear, ours is not the popular “resistance” of the left. We want the administration to succeed and think that many of its policies have already made America safer and more prosperous.

But we believe our first duty is to this country, and the president continues to act in a manner that is detrimental to the health of our republic.

That is why many Trump appointees have [vowed to do what we can](#) to preserve our democratic institutions while thwarting Mr. Trump's more misguided impulses until he is out of office.

The root of the problem is the president's amorality. Anyone who works with him knows he is not moored to any discernible first principles that guide his decision making.

Although he was elected as a Republican, the president shows little affinity for ideals long espoused by conservatives: free minds, free markets and free people. At best, he has invoked these ideals in scripted settings. At worst, he has attacked them outright.

In addition to his mass-marketing of the notion that the press is the "enemy of the people," President Trump's impulses are generally anti-trade and anti-democratic.

Don't get me wrong. There are bright spots that the near-ceaseless negative coverage of the administration fails to capture: effective deregulation, historic tax reform, a more robust military and more.

But these successes have come despite — not because of — the president's leadership style, which is impetuous, adversarial, petty and ineffective.

From the White House to executive branch departments and agencies, senior officials will privately admit their daily disbelief at the commander in chief's comments and actions. Most are working to insulate their operations from his whims.

Meetings with him veer off topic and off the rails, he engages in repetitive rants, and his impulsiveness results in half-baked, ill-informed and occasionally reckless decisions that have to be walked back.

"There is literally no telling whether he might change his mind from one minute to the next," a top official complained to me recently, exasperated by an Oval Office meeting at which the president flip-flopped on a major policy decision he'd made only a week earlier.

The erratic behavior would be more concerning if it weren't for unsung heroes in and around the White House. Some of his aides have been cast as villains by the media. But in private, they have gone to great lengths to keep bad decisions contained to the West Wing, though they are clearly not always successful.

It may be cold comfort in this chaotic era, but Americans should know that there are adults in the room. We fully recognize what is happening. And we are trying to do what's right even when Donald Trump won't.

The result is a two-track presidency.

Take foreign policy: In public and in private, President Trump shows a preference for autocrats and dictators, such as President Vladimir Putin of Russia and North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, and displays little genuine appreciation for the ties that bind us to allied, like-minded nations.

Astute observers have noted, though, that the rest of the administration is operating on another track, one where countries like Russia are called out for meddling and punished accordingly, and where allies around the world are engaged as peers rather than ridiculed as rivals.

On Russia, for instance, the president was reluctant [to expel](#) so many of Mr. Putin's spies as punishment for the poisoning of a former Russian spy in Britain. He complained for weeks about senior staff members letting him get boxed into further confrontation with Russia, and he expressed frustration that the United States continued to impose sanctions on the country for its malign behavior. But his national security team knew better — such actions had to be taken, to hold Moscow accountable.

This isn't the work of the so-called deep state. It's the work of the steady state.

Given the instability many witnessed, there were early whispers within the cabinet of invoking the 25th Amendment, which would start a complex process for removing the president. But no one wanted to precipitate a constitutional crisis. So we will do what we can to steer the administration in the right direction until — one way or another — it's over.

The bigger concern is not what Mr. Trump has done to the presidency but rather what we as a nation have allowed him to do to us. We have sunk low with him and allowed our discourse to be stripped of civility. Senator John McCain put it best in his [farewell letter](#). All Americans should heed his words and break free of the tribalism trap, with the high aim of uniting through our shared values and love of this great nation.

REACTIONS TO THIS OP-ED

[Trump Lashes Out After Reports of 'Quiet Resistance' by Staff](#)
Sept. 5, 2018

[Anonymous Op-Ed in New York Times Causes a Stir Online and in the White House](#)
Sept. 5, 2018

[It Wasn't Me: Pence, Pompeo and a Parade of Administration Officials Deny Writing Op-Ed](#) Sept. 6, 2018

[Opinion: ‘Anonymous’ vs. Trump: Resistance From Within](#)
Sept. 6, 2018

[How the Anonymous Op-Ed Came to Be](#)
Sept. 8, 2018

[Opinion: A Top Republican Fires Back at ‘Anonymous’](#)
Sept. 7, 2018

We may no longer have Senator McCain. But we will always have his example — a lodestar for restoring honor to public life and our national dialogue. Mr. Trump may fear such honorable men, but we should revere them.

There is a quiet resistance within the administration of people choosing to put country first. But the real difference will be made by everyday citizens rising above politics, reaching across the aisle and resolving to shed the labels in favor of a single one: Americans.

The writer is a senior official in the Trump administration.

The story behind the unsigned Op-Ed.

[The Anonymous Senior Administration Official](#)
Sept. 6, 2018

A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 5, 2018, on Page A23 of the New York edition with the headline: The Quiet Resistance Inside the Trump Administration.

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Anonymous Op-Ed in New York Times Causes a Stir Online and in the White House

Image



President Trump greeting sheriffs from across the country on Wednesday, when The New York Times published an anonymous Op-Ed by a senior administration official who described a “quiet resistance” against the president. Credit: Doug Mills/The New York Times

Michael M. Grynbaum, *The New York Times* Online Edition, September 5, 2018.

In a highly unusual move that reverberated inside the West Wing and across the media spectrum, The New York Times on Wednesday published [an Op-Ed article by an unnamed administration official](#) that called President Trump “erratic” and described a “quiet resistance” of cabinet members who had whispered about taking steps to remove him from office.

It is exceedingly rare for The Times to grant anonymity to a writer on its Op-Ed pages, and the paper could cite only a handful of previous cases. But James Dao, the paper’s Op-Ed editor, said in an interview that the material in the essay was important enough to the public interest to merit an exception.

“This was a very strongly, clearly written piece by someone who was staking out what we felt was a very principled position that deserved an airing,” Mr. Dao said.

It took less than 90 minutes from the column's publication — which prompted news channels to cut in with special reports and set off a frenzy among White House aides — for the president himself to go on live television and denounce the essay, its author and the news organization that published it.

“We have somebody in what I call the failing New York Times talking about he's part of the resistance within the Trump administration — this is what we have to deal with,” Mr. Trump said in the East Room of the White House, where reporters had gathered for a previously scheduled photo-op.

Mr. Trump called the essay “gutless” and said its anonymous author was “probably here for all the wrong reasons” — evoking, perhaps inadvertently, a popular phrase from the reality television show “The Bachelor.” The White House press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, later issued a statement deeming the Op-Ed piece “pathetic, reckless and selfish,” adding: “This coward should do the right thing and resign.”

Eileen Murphy, a Times spokeswoman, responded: “We are incredibly proud to have published this piece, which adds significant value to the public's understanding of what is going on in the Trump administration from someone who is in a position to know.”

The Op-Ed article was submitted to Times opinion editors last week through an intermediary, Mr. Dao said. “It was clear early on that the writer wanted anonymity, but we didn't grant anything until we read it and we were confident that they were who they said they were,” he said.

Mr. Dao declined to elaborate on the Op-Ed editors' internal discussions, citing the need to protect the author's identity. But news outlets and online forums were abuzz with speculation.

CNN cut into coverage of the Supreme Court confirmation hearings of Brett Kavanaugh to analyze the Op-Ed article. Rachel Maddow called into MSNBC, hours before her prime-time slot, to say, “This feels like the end of something, and I don't know what happens next.”

The Fox News website declared “Trump Wants a Name.” Media pundits questioned whether The Times had been right to grant anonymity. “This one is a P.R. stunt,” wrote Erik Wemple of The Washington Post.

And reporters and online commenters alike began dissecting the article's language for clues about the identity of its author. Dan Bloom, a producer for the podcast company Panoply, noted on Twitter that the word “lodestar,” which appears toward the end, had popped up in speeches by Vice President Mike Pence. Hundreds of Twitter users retweeted his theory.

Other reporters recalled the 1990s-era efforts to unmask the author of “Primary Colors,” a roman à clef about Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign. The author was [eventually revealed](#) to be the journalist Joe Klein, after The Washington Post commissioned a handwriting analysis of notes in the margins of a manuscript.

Not every critic of Mr. Trump welcomed the piece’s publication.

David Jolly, a former Republican representative from Florida, [said on MSNBC](#) that if the author “wants to do something in service to the nation, you have to come forward and sign your name for this.” David Frum, the conservative writer whose latest book is “Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic,” [mocked the writer’s motivations](#): “See, we only look complicit! Actually, we’re the real heroes of the story.”

The Times said it had published only a handful of anonymously written Op-Ed pieces, several of them by authors whose safety could be endangered if they were publicly identified.

One anonymous piece, published in June, was written by [an undocumented immigrant](#) facing deportation and gang-related threats. An Op-Ed article in 2009 was written by [a student in Iran](#) who, for reasons of safety, asked to be identified only by his first name.

The Times Op-Ed page operates independently of the paper’s newsroom and Washington bureau. The use of anonymous sources in the paper’s news articles is discouraged, allowed when newsworthy information cannot be otherwise confirmed.

By the evening, those who fretted that the Op-Ed article would inflame Mr. Trump had some evidence to support their theory. At 6:15 p.m., he posted a one-word tweet: “TREASON?” Shortly before 8 p.m., the president asked on Twitter if the author of the piece was merely “another phony source,” and he called on The Times to “turn him/her over to government at once!”

A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 5, 2018, on Page A14 of the New York edition with the headline: Riotous Response to Insider’s Story of ‘Quiet Resistance’.

Jim Mattis Compared Trump to ‘Fifth or Sixth Grader,’ Bob Woodward Says in Book



President Trump and his administration have been unsettled by Bob Woodward's book "Fear," which will be published next Tuesday. Credit: Doug Mills/The New York Times

Mark Landler and Maggie Haberman, *The New York Times* Online, September 4, 2018.

WASHINGTON — President Trump so alarmed his defense secretary, Jim Mattis, during a discussion last January of the nuclear standoff with North Korea that an exasperated Mr. Mattis told colleagues “the president acted like — and had the understanding of — a ‘fifth or sixth grader.’”

At another moment, Mr. Trump's aides became so worried about his judgment that Gary D. Cohn, then the chief economic adviser, took a letter from the president's Oval Office desk authorizing the withdrawal of the United States from a trade agreement with South Korea. Mr. Trump, who had planned to sign the letter, never realized it was missing.

These anecdotes are in a sprawling, highly anticipated book by Bob Woodward that depicts the Trump White House as a byzantine, treacherous, often out-of-control operation — “crazytown,” in the words of the chief of staff, John F.

Kelly — hostage to the whims of an impulsive, ill-informed and undisciplined president.

The New York Times obtained a copy of the book, “Fear,” which will be published next Tuesday by Simon & Schuster.

Mr. Woodward, a longtime Washington Post reporter and editor, has turned the internal dramas of several previous White Houses into best-sellers. In taking on Mr. Trump, he faced the challenge of an unusually leaky administration, which has already provided grist for countless news articles and one mega-bestseller, “[Fire and Fury](#)” by Michael Wolff.

But Mr. Woodward’s book has unsettled the administration and the president, in part because it is clear that the author has spoken with so many current and former officials, though all on the condition that they not be cited as sources for the information.

Mr. Trump, after initially brushing it aside as “just another bad book,” accused Mr. Woodward of making up quotes from Mr. Mattis and Mr. Kelly, and perpetuating a “con on the public.” In a tweet, he suggested that the author was a Democratic operative who had timed the publication to hurt the president politically before the midterm elections.



Donald J. Trump

✓@realDonaldTrump

The Woodward book has already been refuted and discredited by General (Secretary of Defense) James Mattis and General (Chief of Staff) John Kelly. Their quotes were made up frauds, a con on the public. Likewise other stories and quotes. Woodward is a Dem operative? Notice timing?

The White House, in a statement, dismissed “Fear” as “nothing more than fabricated stories, many by former disgruntled employees, told to make the president look bad.” After hours of saturation news coverage on cable networks, “Fear” rocketed to No. 1 on Amazon.

Some of the freshest details in the book involve Mr. Mattis, a retired Marine Corps general who has been viewed as an anchor in Mr. Trump’s cabinet. Mr. Woodward portrays Mr. Mattis as frequently derisive of the commander in chief, rattled by his judgment, and willing to slow-walk orders from him that he viewed as reckless.

In the North Korea meeting, during a period of high tension with the country's leader, Kim Jong-un, Mr. Trump questioned Mr. Mattis about why the United States keeps a military presence on the Korean Peninsula. "We're doing this in order to prevent World War III," Mr. Mattis responded, according to Mr. Woodward.

In April 2017, after President Bashar al-Assad of Syria launched a chemical attack on his own people, Mr. Trump called Mr. Mattis and told him that he wanted the United States to assassinate Mr. Assad. "Let's go in," the president said, adding a string of expletives.

The defense secretary hung up and told one of his aides: "We're not going to do any of that. We're going to be much more measured." At his direction, the Pentagon prepared options for an airstrike on Syrian military positions, which Mr. Trump later ordered.

Mr. Mattis issued his own statement denying he ever used the "contemptuous words" that Mr. Woodward attributed to him. "While I generally enjoy reading fiction," he said, "this is a uniquely Washington brand of literature, and his anonymous sources do not lend credibility."

Mr. Woodward's reporting adds another layer to a recurring theme in the Trump White House: frustrated aides who sometimes resort to extraordinary measures to thwart the president's decisions — a phenomenon the author describes as "an administrative coup d'état." In addition to Mr. Mattis and Mr. Cohn, he recounts the tribulations of Mr. Kelly and his predecessor, Reince Priebus, whose tensions with Mr. Trump have been reported elsewhere.

Mr. Cohn, Mr. Woodward said, told a colleague he had removed the letter about the Korea free trade agreement to protect national security. Later, when the president ordered a similar letter authorizing the departure of the United States from the North American Free Trade Agreement, Mr. Cohn and other aides plotted how to prevent him from going ahead with a move they feared would be deeply destabilizing.

"I can stop this," Mr. Cohn said to the staff secretary, Rob Porter, according to the book. "I'll just take the paper off his desk."

Mr. Woodward reported new details about Mr. Cohn's well-documented clash with the president over his equivocal response to the white nationalist violence in Charlottesville, Va., in August 2017. Mr. Cohn, who threatened to resign over the episode, was particularly shaken after one of his daughters discovered a swastika in her college dorm.

Mr. Trump's dealings with foreign leaders were similarly fraught. During a phone call to negotiate the release of an Egyptian-American detained in Cairo,

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi said, “Donald, I’m worried about this investigation,” referring to the Russia inquiry. “Are you going to be around?”

In July 2017, Mr. Woodward said, Mr. Trump told Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull of Australia that he would exempt his country from steel tariffs, only to claim, nearly eight months later, that he had never made that promise. Pressed on it by Mr. Turnbull, Mr. Trump said, “Oh yeah, I guess I remember that.”

Mr. Cohn, Mr. Woodward said, concluded that Mr. Trump was a “professional liar.”

He found a sympathetic ear in Mr. Kelly, another retired Marine general, who frequently vented his frustration to colleagues about the president, whom he labeled “unhinged,” an “idiot” and “off the rails.” Mr. Kelly’s reference to Mr. Trump as an “idiot” has been reported before.

“We’re in crazytown,” Mr. Kelly said in one meeting, according to Mr. Woodward. “I don’t even know why any of us are here. This is the worst job I’ve ever had.”

Mr. Kelly also issued a denial on Tuesday, saying that “the idea I ever called the president an idiot is not true” and repeating his earlier insistence that he and Mr. Trump had “an incredibly candid and strong relationship.”

In Mr. Woodward’s account, Mr. Trump rarely returns the loyalty of his subordinates. He derided Attorney General Jeff Sessions, one of his earliest political supporters, as “mentally retarded” and a “dumb Southerner,” mimicking his accent and making fun of his halting answers during his Senate confirmation hearing.

(Mr. Trump denied that characterization late Tuesday, [saying on Twitter](#) that he had “never used those terms on anyone, including Jeff, and being a southerner is a GREAT thing.”)

Mr. Trump referred to Mr. Priebus as a “little rat” who just “scurries around.” For his part, Mr. Priebus described the White House as a Hobbesian world, in which officials delight in sticking knives into one another, according to the book.

“When you put a snake and rat and falcon and a rabbit and a shark and a seal into a zoo without walls, things started getting nasty and bloody,” said Mr. Priebus, whom Mr. Trump eventually ousted and abandoned on a rain-slicked tarmac at Andrews Air Force Base.

Mr. Woodward, who began speaking to Mr. Trump's aides even before the inauguration, also documented the misgivings of the president's former lawyer, John Dowd, about whether the president should submit to questions from the special counsel in the Russia investigation, Robert S. Mueller III.

"Don't testify," Mr. Dowd told the president. "It's either that or an orange jump suit."

Mr. Dowd denied on Tuesday that he ever said that.

Last January, Mr. Woodward writes, Mr. Dowd staged a practice session in the White House residence to dramatize the pressures Mr. Trump would face in a session with Mr. Mueller. The president stumbled repeatedly, contradicting himself and lying, before he exploded in anger.

"This thing's a goddamn hoax," Mr. Trump declared. "I don't really want to testify."

Mr. Woodward said he tried to get access to the president but did not interview him. After he had completed the manuscript, Mr. Trump called Mr. Woodward to express regret for not talking to him, blaming it on aides who he said had failed to inform him of interest. In [a transcript and a tape of the call](#) published Tuesday by the The Post, Mr. Woodward told Mr. Trump he interviewed many White House officials outside their offices, and gathered extensive documentation. "It's a tough look at the world and the administration and you," he told Mr. Trump.

"Right," the president replied. "Well, I assume that means it's going to be a negative book."

Mark Landler reported from Washington, and Maggie Haberman from New York. Reporting was contributed by Peter Baker, Helene Cooper, Michael S. Schmidt and Michael Shear from Washington.

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