

Trump Administration: Dysfunction, Chaos & Reality

John Kelly Quickly Moves to Impose Military Discipline on White House

GLENN THRUSH, MICHAEL D. SHEAR and EILEEN SULLIVAN, *The New York Times* Online Edition, August 3, 2017.

WASHINGTON — In his six months as Homeland Security secretary, John F. Kelly often described the White House as one of the most dysfunctional organizations he had ever seen, complained to colleagues and allies about its meddling, incompetence and recklessness, and was once so angry he briefly considered quitting.

Now as President Trump's chief of staff, he is doing something about it — with a suddenness and force that have upended the West Wing.

Mr. Kelly cuts off rambling advisers midsentence. He listens in on conversations between cabinet secretaries and the president. He has booted lingering staff members out of high-level meetings, and ordered the doors of the Oval Office closed to discourage strays. [He fired Anthony Scaramucci](#), the bombastic New Yorker who was briefly the communications director, and has demanded that even Mr. Trump's family, including his daughter Ivanka Trump and son-in-law, Jared Kushner, check with him if they want face time with the president.

On Wednesday, his third day on the job, he delivered a message about respecting chains of command, backing the decision of Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, the national security adviser, to [dismiss Ezra Cohen-Watnick](#), a Kushner ally and staff member on the National Security Council. It was a move Mr. Kushner and Stephen K. Bannon, the president's chief strategist, had long opposed, according to two administration officials.

Whether Mr. Kelly, a retired Marine general, will succeed in imposing military discipline on the faction-ridden White House remains in doubt; Mr. Trump has never been known to follow anybody's direction, in Trump Tower or the White House. But Mr. Trump has never encountered anyone quite like Mr. Kelly, a combat veteran whose forceful management style and volatile temper are a match for the president's.

“He'd basically look at me and say, ‘I think that proposal is four-letter-word nuts,’” said Leon E. Panetta, who as defense secretary made Mr. Kelly his chief military aide. “John is the kind of guy who will look you in the eye and tell you what the hell he is thinking. The real question is whether the president will give him the authority he needs to do the job.”

People close to Mr. Kelly said he resisted weeks of entreaties by the president, beginning in May, before finally agreeing to replace Reince Priebus out of a sense

of soldierly duty. That he understands the sobering realities of his new deployment could be seen in his unsmiling mien while sitting next to Mr. Trump for a photo opportunity this week.

Among Mr. Kelly's immediate challenges: brokering peace between warring factions in the West Wing; plugging leaks about internal activities; establishing a disciplined policy-making process; and walling off the Russia investigations.

Mr. Kelly, 67, has told his new employees that he was hired to manage the staff, not the president. He will not try to change Mr. Trump's Twitter or TV-watching habits. But he has also said he wants to closely monitor the information the president consumes, quickly counter dubious news stories with verified facts, and limit the posse of people urging Mr. Trump to tweet something they feel passionately about.

He has privately acknowledged that he cannot control the president and that his authority would be undermined if he tried and failed. Instead, he is intent on cosseting Mr. Trump with bureaucratic competence and forcing staff members to keep to their lanes, a challenge in an administration defined by tribal loyalties to power players like Mr. Kushner and Mr. Bannon.

"Several times I've been on phone conversations with the president over the last couple of days and General Kelly has been on those conversations as well," Mick Mulvaney, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, told reporters on Thursday when asked if Mr. Kelly was making a mark.

The Trump White House is a judge-a-book-by-its-cover workplace, and staff members have been struck by Mr. Kelly's bearing: tall, stern and commanding a respect Mr. Priebus never did. People close to Mr. Kelly said they expected him to methodically assess his new staff before making more drastic changes — and he has told people that he wants to improve morale before attacking the organizational chart.

Mr. Kelly has not been shy about letting Mr. Trump's staff members know when they screwed up, ripping into West Wing aides during the [chaos surrounding the president's original travel ban](#) when he was at the Department of Homeland Security. While he supported the broad policy goals, he was furious that he and his sprawling agency's staff were caught off guard by a directive that was conceived and carried out by inexperienced aides in the White House, according to several longtime Trump advisers.

People close to Mr. Kelly said he also bristled repeatedly at efforts by Mr. Bannon and Stephen Miller, the president's senior adviser, to install people they liked in his department. Mr. Kelly eventually won pitched battles over who would become director of Customs and Border Protection and head of the Secret Service, officials said. But Mr. Bannon has had a longstanding alliance with Mr. Kelly, supporting many of his other appointments.

In May, Mr. Kelly considered resigning after [Mr. Trump's firing of James B. Comey](#), the F.B.I. director, telling Mr. Comey in a phone call that he was thinking about doing so to protest the president's actions, according to a former law enforcement official familiar with the conversation.

A senior White House official briefed on the exchange by Mr. Kelly said he never threatened to quit, but confirmed that he called Mr. Comey.

Days later, Mr. Kelly objected strenuously to the decision by Thomas P. Bossert, Mr. Trump's Homeland Security adviser in the White House, to take control of the response to a global cyberattack — a role traditionally played by Mr. Kelly and his department's cybersecurity division.

On Capitol Hill, Mr. Kelly is viewed with a mix of admiration for his long military service and disappointment that he has been too willing to embrace and defend Mr. Trump's more controversial policies, especially on illegal immigration.

In closed-door meetings with House members in March, Democrats questioned Mr. Kelly about aggressive immigration sweeps at churches and hospitals. The frustration grew as Mr. Kelly disputed that such sweeps were happening, even in the face of enlarged photos showing a Homeland Security vehicle parked on the grounds of Christ Cathedral in Garden Grove, Calif.

“He'll push back hard,” said Representative Lou Correa, Democrat of California, who presented the photographic evidence to Mr. Kelly during the meeting.

The next month, Mr. Kelly offered a taste of his blunt approach, telling lawmakers they could “shut up” if they did not like the laws his department was charged with enforcing.

“He's never come to Capitol Hill and blown smoke to senators and congressmen,” said Senator Tom Cotton, an Arkansas Republican and former Army officer who is close to Mr. Kelly.

Dealing with Mr. Trump's family, especially Mr. Kushner, will not be so simple.

In an interview in May, Mr. Kelly came to the defense of the president's son-in-law, who has an office in the West Wing as a White House adviser, against charges that he had tried to set up an inappropriate communications channel with Russia. He called Mr. Kushner “a great guy, a decent guy.”

In discussions with Mr. Trump about moving to the White House, Mr. Kelly also insisted that Mr. Kushner and Ms. Trump, who is also a White House adviser, report to him. They both agreed, in part because they wanted to see Mr. Priebus ejected as quickly as possible, and in part because they recognized Mr. Trump's presidency needed to be professionalized.

A lingering personnel question gave Mr. Kelly a chance to assert his position at the top of the West Wing. Aides said the ouster of Mr. Cohen-Watnick was intended as a show of confidence from Mr. Kelly to Mr. McMaster. Mr. Kushner did not object to the decision, and had conceded that Mr. McMaster was going to fire his friend three weeks ago, according to a person close to the Trump family.

Robert M. Gates, the former defense secretary, who has known Mr. Kelly for two decades, said the fact that the president agreed to have family members report to the new chief of staff was “a really important first step.”

“The question is, does it last?” he added. “But it sends a powerful signal to the rest of the people in the White House.”

Mr. Gates, who was also Mr. Kelly’s boss as defense secretary, recalled the times he sat with Mr. Kelly at the Pentagon across a small conference table once used by Jefferson Davis when he was secretary of war. Mr. Gates would tell Mr. Kelly what he was planning to do and Mr. Kelly would say, “You could do it that way.”

What that really meant, Mr. Gates said, was “that’s the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard in my entire life.” Mr. Kelly would then offer another — often better — option, Mr. Gates said.

Mr. Panetta, who served as President Bill Clinton’s chief of staff before he went to the Pentagon, said he urged Mr. Kelly to buy a “big bottle of Scotch” when he agreed to take the job.

A White House spokeswoman did not know if he had gotten around to buying one yet, but said the new chief of staff preferred Irish whiskey.

Ron Nixon contributed reporting from Washington, and Maggie Haberman from New York.

A version of this article appears in print on August 4, 2017, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Former General Taking Control At White House.

New White House Chief of Staff Has an Enforcer

MAGGIE HABERMAN and GLENN THRUSH, *The New York Times* Online Edition, September 9, 2017.



John F. Kelly, President Trump's chief of staff, has been trying to impose order at the White House. Credit: Al Drago for The New York Times

Lost in the scramble to cope with Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, the response to North Korea's nuclear provocations and the shock at President Trump's [instant alliance with Democrats](#) was a little-noticed bureaucratic earthquake that shook the White House this week.

At a staff meeting on Wednesday, Mr. Trump's [new chief of staff, John F. Kelly](#), announced a number of seemingly quotidian internal moves, capped by the appointment of Kirstjen Nielsen — his brusque, no-nonsense longtime aide — as an assistant to the president and his principal deputy.

Few outside the White House marked the moment, but inside the building, this was a big deal. Mr. Kelly had just handed day-to-day operations to a forceful, empowered aide and some of her new colleagues are already comparing her to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the feared Vatican enforcer who eventually [became Pope Benedict XVI](#).

Perhaps the biggest problem Mr. Kelly, a retired Marine general, faces in taming his meandering, leaky, infighting-plagued West Wing staff is getting them used to the idea of functioning more or less the way previous White Houses have.

Call it the old normal.

Whether Mr. Kelly succeeds or fails will be a function of his tolerance for Mr. Trump's mercurial management style and Mr. Trump's willingness to tolerate military discipline, as well as Mr. Kelly's skill in winnowing, wooing and harnessing his own staff. Ms. Nielsen, as he made clear this week, will be a central part of his attempt to right the president's foundering administration.

In Mr. Trump's White House, the old normal passes for a revolution, and Mr. Kelly's enemies are seething as well as plotting and griping to sympathetic members of the news media. That is the picture described by eight current and former administration officials who requested anonymity.

In contrast to previous White Houses, the first seven-plus months under Mr. Trump have been something of a historical outlier — organized around an antiestablishment president contemptuous of precedent and comfortable with spaghetti lines of authority and the resulting chaos.

Photo



Kirstjen Nielsen, a longtime aide of Mr. Kelly's, joined the White House as principal deputy and assistant to the president. Credit: Andrew Harnik/Associated Press

And the first step in taming 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Mr. Kelly believes, is installing a No. 2 who is willing to be hated.

It is Ms. Nielsen who sends out the emails announcing internal policy and planning meetings that now contain a clipped addendum — “principals only” — with a stern warning that any subordinates who wander in will be immediately ejected.

She is also responsible for keeping Mr. Kelly's no-fly list of aides he deems to be unfit to attend serious meetings, the most prominent of whom is Omarosa Manigault, the former "Apprentice" star with an ill-defined job and a penchant for dropping into meetings where she was not invited.

Throughout the White House, the circle of decision-making is shrinking, leaving staff members accustomed to wandering in and out of meetings — and the Oval Office — in a sour mood. And the feelings are not confined by the gates of the executive compound. Outside Trump advisers, accustomed to getting their calls briskly returned, are complaining that their phones have gone silent since Mr. Kelly took over six weeks ago.

The president's first chief of staff, Reince Priebus, a former chairman of the Republican National Committee, made only a cursory study of the structure and history of the West Wing, much to the disgust of a half-dozen Obama administration officials who offered to coach him but were, for the most part, politely rebuffed.

But perhaps his biggest problem was that he was a fund-raiser by trade and schmoozer by temperament with very little knowledge, or interest, in policy and the inner workings of government. Mechanics who never lift the hood tend to lose their jobs. Mr. Trump, who attracts subordinates who flatter rather than challenge, also seemed to take special delight in humiliating him, often ignoring his advice and referring to him by the diminutive nickname "Reincey."

Ms. Nielsen's role is similar to the one that Katie Walsh, a longtime deputy, assumed for Mr. Priebus when he first joined the White House — gatekeeper to the gatekeeper. And, as has happened with Ms. Nielsen, some members of the White House have chafed at a woman asserting power — and made her a target for the anger that they cannot express at the chief of staff.

But there is a critical difference, people close to Mr. Kelly said. When Ms. Walsh came under attack, Mr. Priebus did little to protect her, and she left after only a few months. Mr. Kelly's experience in the military, by contrast, has led him to the conclusion that it is hard to survive a successful attack on a top subordinate without being weakened.

Still, people close to Ms. Nielsen, who was a homeland security official in George W. Bush's administration, have counseled her to lighten up and to pay more attention to the perfunctory niceties of a not-so-nice job.

Slowly and methodically, Mr. Kelly is replacing the bomb-throwing reality-TV types Mr. Trump feels most comfortable around with competent professionals capable of stabilizing the West Wing. So far, it has been addition by subtraction.

In his first few days on the job, he approved the firing of two far-right National Security Council staff members who were undermining Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, the national security adviser, then targeted Sebastian Gorka, a blustery nationalist. But his main objective from the start, people close to the situation said, was to [force out Stephen K. Bannon](#), the president's chief strategist and internal provocateur.

At Wednesday's staff meeting, Mr. Kelly also announced other significant moves, most temporary:

A longtime House aide, Johnny DeStefano, will head the Office of Public Liaison while a search is conducted for a permanent director.

Joseph Hagin, a deputy chief of staff with decades of White House experience, will oversee the president's schedule, a crucial role in any White House.

Rick Dearborn, a deputy chief of staff who worked for Attorney General Jeff Sessions when he was a senator from Alabama, is not one of Mr. Kelly's favorites, several officials said, and is being shifted to a less high-profile role. Mr. Kelly is also reviewing the role of Bill Stepien, the White House political director, who has done little to help Mr. Trump improve his standing, in Mr. Kelly's view.

Photo



Omarosa Manigault, a former “Apprentice” star, has an ill-defined West Wing job and a penchant for dropping into all kinds of meetings uninvited. Credit: Richard Drew/Associated Press

Mr. Kelly has also greatly empowered Rob Porter, the White House Staff secretary — a Harvard graduate and Rhodes Scholar — to rationalize the administration's tangled policy-making process.

During Mr. Trump's transition, the two Trump associates most attentive to history and structure were the two men most quickly shut out of administration jobs by rivals: Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey, who drew up a proposed West Wing organizational chart — complete with potential hires — based on presidential history and his own experience in Trenton. And Corey Lewandowski, Mr. Trump's former campaign manager, who carefully studied the painstaking work of the White House historian Martha Joynt Kumar, in part to help Mr. Trump figure out which positions were available to loyalists who toiled on his campaign.

Mr. Kelly has not had the time to make that kind of study, though he was intuitively attracted to the more controlled approach of his predecessor's predecessor, Denis R. McDonough, President Barack Obama's last chief of staff, who modeled his chain of command on that of the National Security Council.

But Mr. Kelly is not rebuilding the organization in a vacuum, and Mr. Trump's mood can have as much an effect as Mr. Kelly's methodical approach.

The new chief of staff has tried to shield Gary D. Cohn, the chairman of the National Economic Council, from Mr. Trump's continuing wrath since the former Goldman Sachs executive went public with his disgust at the president's response to the deadly violence [last month in Charlottesville, Va.](#)

Mr. Kelly made a point, one staff member said, of throwing his arm around Mr. Cohn in solidarity, in full view of the news media, as they exited Marine One last week on the South Lawn.

But he has not always been successful. Several aides said Mr. Trump is freezing out Mr. Cohn by employing a familiar tactic: refusing to make eye contact with Mr. Cohn when his adviser greets him.

At a meeting on Thursday on infrastructure at the White House with Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo of New York and members of Congress from New York and New Jersey, Mr. Kelly told participants that Mr. Cohn would lead the meeting. But Mr. Trump, whose most cutting insult is to pretend someone does not exist or that he barely knows them, virtually ignored him.

A version of this article appears in print on September 9, 2017, on Page A16 of the New York edition with the headline: Chief of Staff Installs a Longtime Aide as His Deputy, and Playing Nice Is Optional.

Bob Corker Says Trump’s Recklessness Threatens ‘World War III’

JONATHAN MARTIN and MARK LANDLER, *The New York Times* National Edition, October 9, 2017, A1, A14.



Senator Bob Corker, Republican of Tennessee, last week in Washington. Credit: Tom Brenner/The New York Times

WASHINGTON — Senator Bob Corker, the Republican chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, charged in an interview on Sunday that President Trump was treating his office like “a reality show,” with reckless threats toward other countries that could set the nation “on the path to World War III.”

In an extraordinary rebuke of a president of his own party, Mr. Corker said he was alarmed about a president who acts “like he’s doing ‘The Apprentice’ or something.”

“He concerns me,” Mr. Corker added. “He would have to concern anyone who cares about our nation.”

Mr. Corker’s comments capped a remarkable day of sulfurous insults between the president and the Tennessee senator — a powerful, if lame-duck, lawmaker, whose support will be critical to the president on tax reform and the fate of the Iran nuclear deal.

It began on Sunday morning when Mr. Trump, posting on Twitter, accused Mr. Corker of deciding not to run for re-election because he “didn’t have the guts.” [Mr. Corker shot](#)

[back](#) in his own tweet: “It’s a shame the White House has become an adult day care center. Someone obviously missed their shift this morning.”

The senator, Mr. Trump said, had “begged” for his endorsement. “I said ‘NO’ and he dropped out (said he could not win without my endorsement),” [the president wrote](#). He also said that Mr. Corker had asked to be secretary of state. “I said ‘NO THANKS,’” he wrote.

Mr. Corker flatly disputed that account, saying Mr. Trump had urged him to run again, and promised to endorse him if he did. But the exchange laid bare a deeper rift: The senator views Mr. Trump as given to irresponsible outbursts — a political novice who has failed to make the transition from show business.

Mr. Trump poses such an acute risk, the senator said, that a coterie of senior administration officials must protect him from his own instincts. “I know for a fact that every single day at the White House, it’s a situation of trying to contain him,” Mr. Corker said in a telephone interview.

The deeply personal back-and-forth will almost certainly rupture what had been a friendship with a fellow real estate developer turned elected official, one of the few genuine relationships Mr. Trump had developed on Capitol Hill. Still, even as he leveled his stinging accusations, Mr. Corker repeatedly said on Sunday that he liked Mr. Trump, until now an occasional golf partner, and wished him “no harm.”

The White House did not respond to a request for comment on Mr. Corker’s remarks.

Mr. Trump’s feud with Mr. Corker is particularly perilous given that the president has little margin for error as he tries to pass a landmark overhaul of the tax code — his best, and perhaps last, hope of producing a major legislative achievement this year.

If Senate Democrats end up unified in opposition to the promised tax bill, Mr. Trump could lose the support of only two of the Senate’s 52 Republicans to pass it. That is the same challenging math that Mr. Trump and Senate Republican leaders faced in their failed effort to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act.

Mr. Corker could also play a key role if Mr. Trump follows through on his threat to “decertify” the Iran nuclear deal, kicking to Congress the issue of whether to restore sanctions on Tehran and effectively scuttle the pact.

Republicans could hold off on sanctions but use the threat of them to force Iran back to the negotiating table — a strategy being advocated by Senator Tom Cotton, the Arkansas Republican. But that approach could leave the United States isolated, and it will be up to Mr. Corker to balance opposition to the deal with the wishes of those, including some of Mr. Trump’s own aides, who want to change the accord but not blow it up.

Beyond the Iran deal, Mr. Corker’s committee holds confirmation hearings on Mr. Trump’s ambassadorial appointments. If the president were to [oust Rex W. Tillerson as secretary of state](#), as some expect, Mr. Corker would lead the hearings on Mr. Trump’s nominee for the post.

In a 25-minute conversation, Mr. Corker, speaking carefully and purposefully, seemed to almost find cathartic satisfaction by portraying Mr. Trump in terms that most senior Republicans use only in private.

The senator, who is close to Mr. Tillerson, invoked comments that the president made on Twitter last weekend in which he appeared to undercut Mr. Tillerson's negotiations with North Korea.

"A lot of people think that there is some kind of 'good cop, bad cop' act underway, but that's just not true," Mr. Corker said.

Without offering specifics, he said Mr. Trump had repeatedly undermined diplomacy with his Twitter fingers. "I know he has hurt, in several instances, he's hurt us as it relates to negotiations that were underway by tweeting things out," Mr. Corker said.

All but inviting his colleagues to join him in speaking out about the president, Mr. Corker said his concerns about Mr. Trump were shared by nearly every Senate Republican.

"Look, except for a few people, the vast majority of our caucus understands what we're dealing with here," he said, adding that "of course they understand the volatility that we're dealing with and the tremendous amount of work that it takes by people around him to keep him in the middle of the road."

As for the tweets that set off the feud on Sunday morning, Mr. Corker expressed a measure of powerlessness.

"I don't know why the president tweets out things that are not true," he said. "You know he does it, everyone knows he does it, but he does."

The senator recalled four conversations this year, a mix of in-person meetings and phone calls, in which he said the president had encouraged him to run for re-election. Mr. Trump, he said, repeatedly indicated he wanted to come to Tennessee for an early rally on Mr. Corker's behalf and even telephoned him last Monday to try to get him to reconsider his decision to retire.

"When I told him that that just wasn't in the cards, he said, 'You know, if you run, I'll endorse you.' I said, 'Mr. President, it's just not in the cards; I've already made a decision.' So then we began talking about other candidates that were running."

One of the most prominent establishment-aligned Republicans to develop a relationship with Mr. Trump, the senator said he did not regret standing with him during the campaign last year.

"I would compliment him on things that he did well, and I'd criticize things that were inappropriate," he said. "So it's been really the same all the way through."

A former mayor of Chattanooga who became wealthy in construction, Mr. Corker, 65, has carved out a reputation over two terms in the Senate as a reliable, but not overly partisan, Republican.

While he opposed President Barack Obama's divisive nuclear deal with Iran, he did not prevent it from coming to a vote on the Senate floor, which exposed him to fierce fire from conservatives, who blamed him for its passage.

Mr. Trump picked up on that theme hours after his initial tweets, [writing](#) that “Bob Corker gave us the Iran Deal, & that’s about it. We need HealthCare, we need Tax Cuts/Reform, we need people that can get the job done!”

Mr. Corker was briefly a candidate to be Mr. Trump’s running mate in 2016, but he withdrew his name from consideration and later expressed ambivalence about Mr. Trump’s campaign, in part because he said he found it frustrating to discuss foreign policy with him.

To some extent, the rift between the two men had been building for months, as Mr. Corker repeatedly pointed out on Sunday to argue that his criticism was not merely that of a man liberated from facing the voters again.

After a report last week that Mr. Tillerson had once referred to Mr. Trump as a “moron,” Mr. Corker told reporters that Mr. Tillerson was one of three officials helping to “separate our country from chaos.” Those remarks were repeated on “Fox News Sunday,” which may have prompted Mr. Trump’s outburst.

In August, after [Mr. Trump’s equivocal response](#) to the [deadly clashes in Charlottesville, Va.](#), Mr. Corker told reporters that the president “has not yet been able to demonstrate the stability nor some of the competence that he needs to demonstrate in order to be successful.”

He said on Sunday that he had made all those comments deliberately, aiming them at “an audience of one, plus those people who are closely working around with him, what I would call the good guys.” He was referring to Mr. Tillerson, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and the White House chief of staff, John F. Kelly.

“As long as there are people like that around him who are able to talk him down when he gets spun up, you know, calm him down and continue to work with him before a decision gets made, I think we’ll be fine,” he said.

Mr. Corker would not directly answer when asked whether he thought Mr. Trump was fit for the presidency. But he did say that the commander in chief was not fully aware of the power of his office.

“I don’t think he appreciates that when the president of the United States speaks and says the things that he does, the impact that it has around the world, especially in the region that he’s addressing,” he said. “And so, yeah, it’s concerning to me.”

Maggie Haberman contributed reporting from New York, and Thomas Kaplan and Noah Weiland from Washington.

A version of this article appears in print on October 9, 2017, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: G.O.P. Senator Rebukes Trump Over ‘Reality Show’ Behavior.

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-cessless 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.

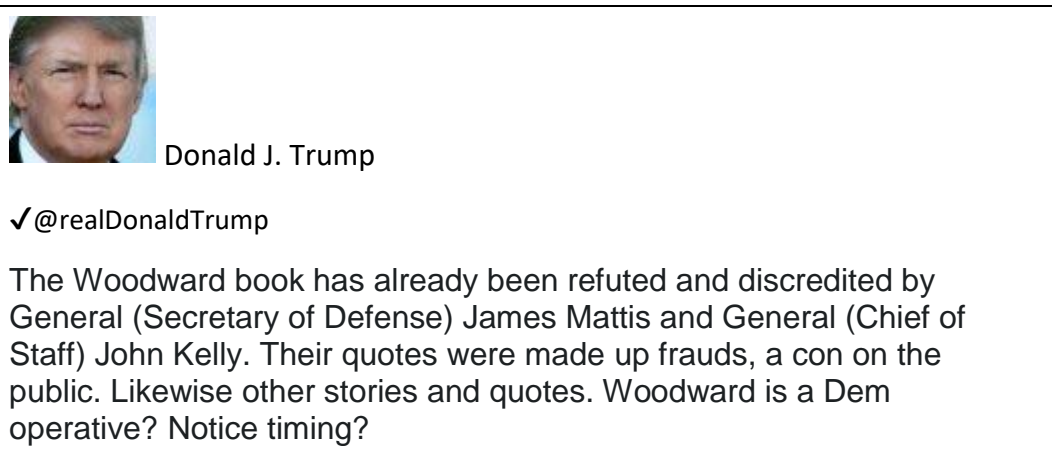
Kelly — hostage to the whims of an impulsive, ill-informed and undisciplined president.

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.



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.

A version of this article appears in print on September 4, 2018, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Woodward's Sprawling Exposé Depicts White House in Chaos

I helped write the manual for diagnosing mental illness. Donald Trump doesn't meet the criteria

ALLEN FRANCES, STAT ONLINE, SEPTEMBER 6, 2017.



NICHOLAS KAMM/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Diagnosing President Donald Trump’s alleged mental disorder has become a popular pastime, [not just among mental health professionals](#) but also among politicians, journalists, pundits, comedians, and ordinary people gathered at coffee breaks. Trump’s consistently bizarre sayings and doings have [triggered a bill](#) to establish a commission “on presidential capacity” and a suggestion that the president be removed from office [via the 25th Amendment](#) on the grounds that he is mentally unfit to be president. A [recent Time poll](#) indicates that many Americans think that Trump is unfit for office. I also believe we made a terrible mistake electing him. But Trump’s disagreeable traits in no way indicate that he is mentally ill. Instead, they reveal him to be the ruthless self-promoter he has always been, now poorly cloaked in fake populist clothing.

Before I go any further, you should know that I am a lifelong political inactivist, shamefully missing in action from the tumultuous political events of the last 50 years. It took the travesty of a Trump presidency to get me fully engaged.

Confusing Trump’s behavior with mental illness unfairly stigmatizes those who are truly mentally ill, underestimates his considerable cunning, and misdirects our efforts at future harm reduction. And the three most frequent armchair diagnoses made for Trump — narcissistic personality disorder, delusional disorder, and dementia — are all badly misinformed.

Trump is an undisputed poster boy for narcissism. He demonstrates in pure form every single symptom described in the [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders](#) (DSM) criteria for narcissistic personality disorder, which I wrote in 1978. But lots of successful people are extremely narcissistic without being mentally ill — think most celebrities, many politicians, and a fair percentage of writers, artists, lawyers, doctors, and professors. To qualify for narcissistic personality disorder, an individual’s selfish, unempathetic preening must be accompanied by significant distress or impairment. Trump certainly causes severe distress and impairment in others, but his narcissism doesn’t seem to affect him that way.

My long experience with psychiatric diagnosis has taught me a recurring and painful lesson: Anything that can be misused in the DSM will be misused, especially when there is an external, nonclinical reward for doing so. We decided to include narcissistic personality disorder in the DSM-III 40 years ago purely for clinical reasons. We never imagined it would be used as ammunition in today’s political warfare.

It’s also important to note that narcissistic personality disorder holds a fragile place in the diagnostic universe. It came quite close to being eliminated when the fifth edition of the DSM was published in 2013, and will be excluded from the forthcoming revision to the

International Classification of Diseases, a set of codes used by physicians and other health care providers to classify diagnoses, symptoms, and procedures.

Some presidential observers base their diagnosis of delusional disorder on Trump's being an avid consumer and creator of conspiracy theories. He learned his art from a master: [his mentor, Roy Cohn](#), who was the brains behind Sen. Joseph McCarthy's attempt to control our government through Communist witch hunts in the 1950s. Conspiracy theorists are a dime a dozen, while those with delusions are more rare. Up to [half of all Americans](#) believe in strange conspiracy theories. They are wrong, but not delusional. Having a delusion means being a minority of one.

Confusing Trump's behavior with mental illness unfairly stigmatizes those who are truly mentally ill, underestimates his considerable cunning, and misdirects our efforts at future harm reduction.

Also keep in mind that Trump's conspiracy theories have been, and continue to be, essential to his political success. His [long-standing claim](#) that President Obama was not born in the United States launched Trump's presidential run, his "crooked Hillary" claims helped win him the election, and "fake news" holds his base in his thrall. Trump is [crazy like a fox](#).

The dementia diagnosis is based on the supposed poverty and perseveration in [Trump's current speech patterns](#) compared to his earlier ones. I would attribute this to the number of stump speeches Trump has given. Abraham Lincoln could find creative ways of repeatedly saying the same thing, but Trump has never achieved Lincoln's eloquence. He uses the same words over and over again because they successfully work up the crowd.

Convincing proof that Trump is not demented is his undiminished creative and canny skills at blaming, bare-knuckle political fighting, and self serving.

Buried in the noisy debate about Trump's mental health is the misinformed and noxious assumption that mental illness somehow automatically disqualifies someone for high leadership position. If this were policy, Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill both would have been lost to history due to their battles with depression.

Assigning psychological disorders to Trump is not only wrong but futile. Vice President Pence, the Cabinet, and Congress would never [invoke the 25th Amendment](#) because it would amount to political suicide for everyone concerned and for the Republican Party. Any psychological fitness exam would also be inherently biased and unreliable. My guess is that Trump will eventually be removed from power, but via the appropriate investigative and political process, not a psychiatric evaluation.

I believe that Trump is a mirror of the American soul, a surface symptom of our deeper societal disease. He may not be crazy, but we certainly were for electing him. We mustn't waste this Trumpian dark age. If we don't learn from it, we will keep making the same mistakes.

Allen Frances, M.D., was chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Duke University and [he] also chaired the task force responsible for revising the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. He is the author of "Twilight of American Sanity: A Psychiatrist Analyzes the Age of Trump" (William Morrow, September 2017).

Opinion

The Real Donald Trump Is a Character on TV

Understand that, and you'll understand what he's doing in the White House.



By James Poniewozik

Mr. Poniewozik is the chief television critic of *The Times* and the author of *Audience of One: Donald Trump, Television and the Fracturing of America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).

The New York Times Online edition, September 6, 2019.

On Sept. 1, with a Category 5 hurricane off the Atlantic coast, an angry wind was issuing from the direction of President Trump's Twitter account. The apparent emergency: Debra Messing, the co-star of "Will & Grace," had tweeted that "the public has a right to know" who is attending a Beverly Hills fund-raiser for Mr. Trump's re-election.

"I have not forgotten that when it was announced that I was going to do *The Apprentice*, and when it then became a big hit, Helping NBC's failed lineup greatly, @DebraMessing came up to me at an Upfront & profusely thanked me, even calling me 'Sir,' " [wrote](#) the 45th president of the United States.

It was a classic Trumpian ragetweet: aggrieved over a minor slight, possibly prompted [by a Fox News segment](#), unverifiable — he has a long history of questionable tales involving [someone calling him "Sir"](#) — and nostalgic for his primetime-TV heyday. (By Thursday he was lashing Ms. Messing [again](#), as Hurricane Dorian was lashing the Carolinas.)

[James Poniewozik answered questions about this essay on Twitter: [part I](#), [part II](#)]

This sort of outburst, almost three years into his presidency, has kept people puzzling over who the "real" Mr. Trump is and how he actually thinks. Should we take him, to quote the famous [precept of Trumpology](#), literally or seriously? Are his attacks impulsive tantrums or strategic distractions from his other woes? Is he playing 3-D chess or Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots?

This is a futile effort. Try to understand Donald Trump as a person with psychology and strategy and motivation, and you will inevitably spiral into confusion and covfefe. The key is to remember that Donald Trump is not a person. He's a TV character.

I mean, O.K., there is an actual person named Donald John Trump, with a human body and a childhood and formative experiences that theoretically a biographer or therapist might usefully delve into someday. (We can only speculate about the latter; Mr. Trump has [boasted on Twitter](#) of never having seen a psychiatrist, preferring the therapeutic effects of “hit[ting] ‘sleazebags’ back.”)

But that Donald Trump is of limited significance to America and the world. The “Donald Trump” who got elected president, who has strutted and fretted across the small screen since the 1980s, is a decades-long media performance. To understand him, you need to approach him less like a psychologist and more like [a TV critic](#).

He was born in 1946, at the same time that American broadcast TV was being born. He grew up with it. His father, Fred, had one of the first color TV sets in Jamaica Estates. In “The Art of the Deal” Donald Trump recalls his mother, Mary Anne, spending a day in front of the tube, enraptured by the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953. (“For Christ’s sake, Mary,” he remembers his father saying, “Enough is enough, turn it off. They’re all a bunch of con artists.”)

TV was his soul mate. It was like him. It was packed with the razzle-dazzle and action and violence that captivated him. He dreamed of going to Hollywood, then he shelved those dreams in favor of his father’s business and vowed, according to the book “TrumpNation” by Timothy O’Brien, to “put show business into real estate.”

As TV evolved from the homogeneous three-network mass medium of the mid-20th century to the polarized zillion-channel era of cable-news fisticuffs and reality shocker-tainment, he evolved with it. In the 1980s, he built a media profile as an insouciant, high-living apex predator. In 1990, he [described](#) his yacht and gilded buildings to Playboy as “Props for the show ... The show is ‘Trump’ and it is sold-out performances everywhere.”

He syndicated that show to Oprah, Letterman, NBC, WrestleMania and Fox News. Everything he achieved, he achieved by using TV as a magnifying glass, to make himself appear bigger than he was.

He was able to do this because he thought like a TV camera. He knew what TV wanted, what stimulated its nerve endings. In his campaign rallies, he would tell The Washington Post, he knew just what to say “to keep the red light on”: that is, the light on a TV camera that showed that it was running, that you mattered. *Bomb the [redacted] out of them! I’d like to punch him in the face!* The red light radiated its approval. Cable news aired the rallies start to finish. For all practical purposes, he and the camera shared the same brain.

Even when he adopted social media, he used it like TV. First, he used it like a celebrity, to broadcast himself, his first tweet in 2009 promoting a “Late Show With David Letterman” appearance. Then he used it like an instigator, tweeting his birther conspiracies before he would talk about them on Fox News, road-testing his call for a border wall during the cable-news fueled [Ebola and border panics](#) of the 2014 midterms.

When he was a candidate, and especially when he was president, his tweets programmed TV and were amplified by it. On CNBC, a [“BREAKING NEWS: TRUMP TWEET”](#) graphic would spin out onscreen as soon as the words left his thumbs. He would watch Fox News, or Lou Dobbs, or CNN or “Morning Joe” or “Saturday Night

Live” ([“I don’t watch”](#)), and get mad, and tweet. Then the tweets would become TV, and he would watch it, and tweet again.

If you want to understand what President Trump will do in any situation, then, it’s more helpful to ask: What would TV do? What does TV want?

It wants conflict. It wants excitement. If there is something that can blow up, it should blow up. It wants a fight. It wants *more*. It is always eating and never full.

Some presidential figure-outers, trying to understand the celebrity president through a template that they were already familiar with, have compared him with Ronald Reagan: a “master showman” cannily playing a “role.”

The comparison is understandable, but it’s wrong. Presidents Reagan and Trump were both entertainers who applied their acts to politics. But there’s a crucial difference between what “playing a character” means in the movies and what it means on reality TV.

Ronald Reagan was an actor. Actors need to believe deeply in the authenticity and interiority of people besides themselves — so deeply that they can subordinate their personalities to “people” who are merely lines on a script. Acting, Reagan told his biographer Lou Cannon, had taught him “to understand the feelings and motivations of others.”

Being a reality star, on the other hand, as Donald Trump was on “The Apprentice,” is also a kind of performance, but one that’s antithetical to movie acting. Playing a character on reality TV means being yourself, but bigger and louder.

Reality TV, writ broadly, goes back to Allen Funt’s “Candid Camera,” the PBS documentary “An American Family,” and MTV’s “The Real World.” But the first mass-market reality TV star was Richard Hatch, the winner of the first season of “Survivor” — produced by Mark Burnett, the eventual impresario of “The Apprentice” — in the summer of 2000.

Mr. Hatch won that first season in much the way that Mr. Trump would run his 2016 campaign. He realized that the only rules were that there were no rules. He lied and backstabbed and took advantage of loopholes, and he argued — with a telegenic brashness — that this made him smart. This was a crooked game in a crooked world, he argued to a final jury of players he’d betrayed and deceived. But, hey: At least he was open about it!

While shooting that first season, the show’s crew was rooting for Rudy Boesch, a 72-year-old former Navy SEAL and model of hard work and fair play. “The only outcome nobody wanted was Richard Hatch winning,” the host, Jeff Probst, would say later. It “would be a disaster.” After all, decades of TV cop shows had taught executives the iron rule that the viewers needed the good guy to win.

But they didn’t. “Survivor” was addictively entertaining, and audiences loved-to-hate the wryly devious Richard the way they did Tony Soprano and, before him, J.R. Ewing. More than 50 million people watched the first-season finale, and “Survivor” has been on the air nearly two decades.

From Richard Hatch, we got a steady stream of Real Housewives, Kardashians, nasty judges, dating-show contestants who “didn’t come here to make friends” and, of course, Donald Trump.

Reality TV has often gotten a raw deal from critics. (Full disclosure: I still watch “Survivor.”) Its audiences, often dismissed as dupes, are just as capable of watching with a critical eye as the fans of prestige cable dramas. But when you apply its mind-set — the law of the TV jungle — to public life, things get ugly.

In reality TV — at least competition reality shows like “The Apprentice” — you do not attempt to understand other people, except as obstacles or objects. To try to imagine what it is like to be a person other than yourself (what, in ordinary, off-camera life, we call “empathy”) is a liability. It’s a distraction that you have to tune out in order to project your fullest you.

Reality TV instead encourages “getting real.” On MTV’s progressive, diverse “Real World,” the phrase implied that people in the show were more authentic than characters on scripted TV — or even than real people in your own life, who were socially conditioned to “be polite.” But “getting real” would also resonate with a rising conservative notion: that political correctness kept people from saying what was really on their minds.

Being real is not the same thing as being honest. To be real is to be the most entertaining, provocative form of yourself. It is to say what you want, without caring whether your words are kind or responsible — or true — but only whether you want to say them. It is to foreground the parts of your personality (aggression, cockiness, prejudice) that will focus the red light on you, and unleash them like weapons.



Credit/Illustration by Erik Carter; Photograph by Al Drago for The New York Times

Maybe the best definition of being real came from the former “Apprentice” contestant and White House aide Omarosa Manigault Newman in her memoir, “Unhinged.” Mr. Trump, she said, encouraged people in his entourage to “exaggerate the unique part of themselves.” When you’re being real, there is no difference between impulse and strategy, because the “strategy” is to do what feels good.

This is why it misses a key point to ask, as [Vanity Fair recently did](#) after Mr. Trump’s assault on Representative Elijah E. Cummings and the city of Baltimore in July, “Is the president a racist, or does he just play one on TV?” In reality TV, if you are a racist — and reality TV has had [many racists](#), like [Katie Hopkins](#), the far-right British “Apprentice” star the president [frequently retweets](#) — then you are a racist *and* you play one on TV.

So if you actually want a glimpse into the mind of Donald J. Trump, don’t look for a White House tell-all or some secret childhood heartbreak. Go to the streaming service Tubi, where his 14 seasons of “The Apprentice” recently became [accessible to the public](#).

You can fast-forward past the team challenges and the stagey visits to Trump-branded properties. They’re useful in their own way, as a picture of how Mr. Burnett buttressed the future president’s Potemkin-zillionaire image. But the unadulterated, 200-proof Donald Trump is found in the boardroom segments, at the end of each episode, in which he “fires” one contestant.

In theory, the boardroom is where the best performers in the week’s challenges are rewarded and the screw-ups punished. In reality, the boardroom is a new game, the real game, a free-for-all in which contestants compete to throw one another under the bus and beg Mr. Trump for mercy.

There is no morality in the boardroom. There is no fair and unfair in the boardroom. There is only the individual, trying to impress Mr. Trump, to flatter Mr. Trump, to commune with his mind and anticipate his whims and fits of pique. Candidates are fired for giving up advantages (stupid), for being too nice to their adversaries (weak), for giving credit to their teammates, for interrupting him. The host’s decisions were often so mercurial, [producers have said](#), that they would have to go back and edit the episodes to impose some appearance of logic on them.

What saves you in the boardroom? Fighting. Boardroom Trump loves to see people fight each other. He perks up at it like a cat hearing a can opener. He loves to watch people scrap for his favor (as they eventually would in his White House). He loves asking contestants to rat out their teammates and watching them squirm with conflict. The unity of the team gives way to disunity, which in the Trumpian worldview is the most productive state of being.

And America loved boardroom Trump — for a while. He delivered his catchphrase in TV cameos and slapped it on a reissue of his 1980s Monopoly knockoff Trump: The Game. (“I’m back and you’re fired!”) But after the first season, the ratings dropped; by season four they were nearly half what they were in season one.

He reacted to his declining numbers by ratcheting up what worked before: becoming a louder, more extreme, more abrasive version of himself. He gets more insulting in the

boardroom — “You hang out with losers and you become a loser”— and executes [double](#) and [quadruple](#) firings.

It’s a pattern that we see as he advances toward his re-election campaign, with an eye not on the Nielsen ratings but on the polls: The only solution for any given problem was a Trumpier Trump.

Did it work for “The Apprentice”? Yes and no. His show hung on to a loyal base through 14 seasons, including the increasingly farcical celebrity version. But it never dominated its competition again, losing out, [despite his denials](#), to the likes of the sitcom “Mike & Molly.”

Donald Trump’s “Apprentice” boardroom closed for business on Feb. 16, 2015, precisely four months before he announced his successful campaign for president. And also, it never closed. It expanded. It broke the fourth wall. We live inside it now.

Now, Mr. Trump re-creates the boardroom’s helter-skelter atmosphere every time he opens his mouth or his Twitter app. In place of the essentially dead White House press briefing, he walks out to the lawn in the morning and reporters gagle around him like “Apprentice” contestants awaiting the day’s task. He rails and complains and establishes the plot points for that day’s episode: Greenland! Jews! “I am the chosen one!”

Then cable news spends morning to midnight happily masticating the fresh batch of outrages before memory-wiping itself to prepare for tomorrow’s episode. Maybe this sounds like a TV critic’s overextended metaphor, but it’s also the president’s: As [The Times has reported](#), before taking office, he told aides to think of every day as “an episode in a television show in which he vanquishes rivals.”

Mr. Trump has been playing himself instinctually as a character since the 1980s; it’s allowed him to maintain a profile even through bankruptcies and humiliations. But it’s also why, on the rare occasions he’s had to publicly attempt a role contrary to his nature — calling for healing from a script after a mass shooting, for instance — he sounds as stagey and inauthentic as an unrehearsed amateur doing a sitcom cameo.

His character shorthand is “Donald Trump, Fighter Guy Who Wins.” Plop him in front of a camera with an infant orphaned in a mass murder, and he does not have it in his performer’s tool kit to do anything other than smile unnervingly and [give a fat thumbs-up](#).

This is what was lost on commentators who kept hoping wanly that this State of the Union or that tragedy would be the moment he finally became “presidential.” It was lost on journalists who felt obligated to act as though every modulated speech from a teleprompter might, this time, be sincere.

The institution of the office is not changing Donald Trump, because he is already in the sway of another institution. He is governed not by the truisms of past politics but by the imperative of reality TV: Never de-escalate and never turn the volume down.

This conveniently echoes the mantra he learned from his early mentor, Roy Cohn: Always attack and never apologize. He serves up one “most shocking episode ever” after another, mining uglier pieces of his core each time: progressing from [profanity about](#)

[Haiti and Africa](#) in private to publicly telling four minority American congresswomen, only one of whom was born outside the United States, to “[go back](#)” to the countries they came from.

The taunting. The insults. The dog whistles. The dog bullhorns. The “Lock her up” and “Send her back.” All of it follows reality-TV rules. Every season has to top the last. Every fight is necessary, be it against Ilhan Omar or Debra Messing. Every twist must be more shocking, every conflict more vicious, lest the red light grow bored and wink off. The only difference: Now there’s no Mark Burnett to impose retroactive logic on the chaos, only press secretaries, pundits and Mike Pence.

To ask whether any of this is “instinct” or “strategy” is a parlor game. If you think like a TV camera — if thinking in those reflexive microbursts of adrenaline and testosterone has served you your whole life — then the instinct is the strategy.

And to ask who the “real” Donald Trump is, is to ignore the obvious. You already know who Donald Trump is. All the evidence you need is right there on your screen. He’s half-man, half-TV, with a camera for an eye that is constantly focused on itself. The red light is pulsing, 24/7, and it does not appear to have an off switch.

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