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Organizing the Trump Presidency
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President Trump differed significantly from all other recent presidents in his management of the White House staff, his domestic cabinet appointments, and in his relations with his national security team. This article traces the roots of White House dysfunction, particularly the lack of a strong chief of staff, the absence of a regular policy process, and the factions that fought for control of policy. It then examines President Trump's unusual approach of appointing domestic cabinet secretaries hostile to the traditional missions of their departments. Finally, it analyzes the fractious relations between President Trump and his national security cabinet secretaries.

Trump's White House

After he was elected, Donald Trump's instinct was to continue the approach to management that had been so successful in his real-estate empire. Trump had never had to deal with a boss (other than his father) and had not managed a large bureaucracy. Thus his professional experience did not prepare him well for being president, which entails managing a vast number of organizations, delegating authority to subordinates, and coping with a fractured Congress and an often hostile press. Trump's style of management during his career in real estate was personal and informal, he told tech company executives early in his transition, "You can call my people, call me—it makes no difference—we have no formal chain of command around here" (Balakrishnan, Anita. 2016). He put a high premium on personal loyalty.

His disinclination toward formal organization was reflected in his early White House, in which up to ten staffers had "walk in" privileges to the Oval Office. Experience over the past half century, however, has shown that, although several close advisers must have regular access to the president, someone short of the president must make the trains run on time, guard access to the president, and manage the policy process. That person is the chief of staff to the president (Pfiffner 1993, 2010; Walcott and Hult 2005). Trump wrote in *The Art of the Deal*, "I leave my door open. You can't be imaginative or entrepreneurial if you've got too much structure. I prefer to work each day and just see what develops (Palmer 2017). Presidential experience has demonstrated that this is not an effective way to run the White House.

Reince Priebus, Trump's chief of staff, was not able to exercise the authority of a traditional chief of staff. Empowering a chief of staff does not mean that the president should have only one source of information or advice, in fact, just the opposite. The chief of staff should ensure that the president is exposed to opposing voices on all important policy issues, and particularly to those at odds with the apparent consensus. Priebus's lack of authority undermined his ability to rein in the ideological and personality fissures in the staff and precluded the creation of a regular policy process. At the end of July 2017, Trump tweeted "No WH chaos!" but his actions spoke louder than his words. He fired Priebus and replaced him with former General John Kelly, who had been Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (Nelson 2017).

Priebus's six months as chief of staff were marked by a chaotic White House atmosphere, the lack of a regular policy process, factious fighting among the staff, and continual leaks to the press about White House infighting. All White Houses have conflicts among staffers, but the disarray during Trump's first six months was much more public and intense than in any other recent presidency.

White House Factions

In addition to Trump's lack of support for Priebus, powerful competing factions did not agree on the main directions of the Trump presidency. The main fissures divided the Trump loyalist, populist, nationalist tribe from conservative congressional Republicans and the international realists (Cook and Restuccia 2017).

Trump chief strategist Steve Bannon led the populist/nationalist core that represented Trump's base. They were protectionist on trade and urged Trump to abandon the Transpacific Partnership, renounce NAFTA, and withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord. They were pro-Russia, and as nationalists, they were skeptical of foreign entanglements, critical of NATO, and against the US nuclear agreement with Iran. They were hostile to immigration, in favor of the wall with Mexico, and in favor of Trump's travel ban against Muslim majority countries. In domestic policy, Bannon promised that the Trump administration would undertake the "deconstruction of the administrative state." They saw traditional Republican conservatives in Washington as part of the "swamp" that Trump had promised to drain.

The realist internationalists accepted that world trade was globalized and argued that the US should adjust to it rather than fight it. They were skeptical of Russia and they included traditional conservative Republicans who favored free trade policies, international agreements, and accommodations with US allies. They were led by National Economic Council chair Gary Cohn and his policy staff. The top national security advisers to Trump, such as McMaster, Mattis and Tillerson were generally in the internationalist camp; they favored US leadership of NATO, and more accommodation rather than belligerence toward allies and adversaries. In contrast to President Trump, they were all skeptical of Vladimir Putin and believed that Russia had interfered with the 2016 elections.

Since President Trump did not have a fixed ideological or policy perspective, and many of his campaign statements were not realistic, shifting factions within the White House and cabinet competed with each other for the ear of the president. The lack of a clear policy process added to confusion about who spoke for the president. As of the fall of 2017, the nationalists prevailed in convincing Trump to abandon the Trans Pacific Partnership and the Paris climate agreement, and reinforced Trump's skepticism of the nuclear deal with Iran. But they were thwarted in their attempts to get the president to renounce completely the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Aside from ideological and partisan factions, Trump's son in law, Jared Kushner, and his daughter Ivanka were major players in the White House, each having offices in the West Wing. Kushner's remit was substantial; he was a leader of administration policy on the Middle East, relations with Mexico and China, reforming criminal justice, the government-wide reorganization initiative, and the project on the opioid epidemic. Someone with that breadth of policy responsibility in the White House can obscure who is actually in charge of the administration's policy and breed resentment in the cabinet. Kushner had sufficient influence with the president to override decisions by Priebus.

Despite the 36-year-old Kushner's influence with the president and his claim that, "Everything runs through me," he could not substitute for a chief of staff (Baker, et al. 2017a) Kushner's broad portfolio reflected Trump's dependence on those with complete loyalty to himself, his inexperience in managing large organizations, and the lack of a regular policy process.

Although presidential family members have always carried significant sway with presidents, Kushner seemed to have more clout and was closer to the president than any family member (excluding spouses) since Bobby Kennedy, who was Attorney General and close adviser to his brother, John. Family members as presidential advisers have the advantages of the absolute trust of the president and being able to express disagreement without fear of banishment. The down side is that they are not easy to dismiss, and their views may stifle dissenting opinions from cabinet members or White House staffers who should be heard. Few staffers are willing to risk disfavor by opposing a position that a family member has staked out.

In February 2016 Trump said that his White House was running like a "fine tuned machine" (Struyk 2017). In July, shortly before replacing Priebus, he proclaimed, "The mood in the White House is fantastic. . . . We have done more in five months than practically any president in history. . . . There's not a thing that we're not doing well in. The White House is functioning beautifully, despite the hoax made up by the Democrats" (Savransky, 2017). Neither statement reflected the reality of Donald Trump's White House. More accurately, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham quipped, "I don't believe Trump colluded with the Russians, because I don't believe he colludes with his own staff" (Phillip and Johnson 2017).

Policy Process and Consultation

The lack of a regular policy process in the White House led to a number of policy challenges that can be illustrated with several examples of failed communication and uncertain decision making: the travel ban, the firing of FBI Director Comey, and the changes in the White House position on repeal and replacement of the ACA.

Travel ban and Sessions

During the campaign, candidate Trump proposed banning all Muslims from entering the United States, and on January 27, he issued Executive Order 13769 banning refugees and prohibiting immigration from seven mostly Muslim countries. Stephen Miller and Steve Bannon secretly developed the executive order in the White House. Some congressional staff were consulted, but they had to sign non-disclosure agreements, and congressional leaders were not consulted. The ban did not go through the regular policy process for executive orders in which OMB would have sent drafts to the relevant agencies, in this case State, DHS, and Justice (though OLC did have some input) (Soffen and Cameron 2017). Cabinet Secretaries Kelly, Mattis, and nominee Tillerson complained about the lack of full consultation and a regular policy process that included the cabinet secretaries who would have to implement the order (Rogin 2017).

White House spokesman Sean Spicer and DHS Secretary John Kelly argued that the executive order was not intended to ban Muslims from entering the country. Secretary Kelly said: "This is not, I repeat, not, a ban on Muslims" (Rogin 2017). But President Trump undercut them when he tweeted, "People, the lawyers and the courts can call it whatever they want, but I am calling it what we need and what it is, a TRAVEL BAN!" (Phillip and Johnson 2017). Trump criticized Attorney

General Sessions and the Justice Department, saying it “should have stayed with the original Travel Ban, not the watered down, politically correct version” (Liptak and Baker 2017; Zapposky 2017). Of course, the president issued the order himself and could have had it written any way he wanted. The absence of consultation on the executive orders illustrated the lack of a coherent policy process. Later, the Supreme Court allowed parts of the travel ban to be implemented.

Trump fires Comey

In the spring of 2017 President Trump was becoming increasingly frustrated by intelligence reports that Russia had attempted to influence the 2016 elections. As FBI Director Comey continued to pursue the allegations, Trump declared that the FBI investigation was merely a “taxpayer funded charade” (Baker and Shear 2017). On May 8, Trump met with Attorney General Sessions and his deputy Rosenstein about Comey; then Rosenstein wrote a memorandum that criticized Comey’s handling of the investigation of Hillary Clinton’s emails, asserted that the FBI was in disarray, and recommended that he be fired. On May 9 President Trump fired Mr. Comey, saying that he accepted the recommendations of Sessions and Rosenstein. Vice President Pence and Sean Spicer explained that Trump had made the decision based on the Rosenstein letter.

The next day, however, in an Oval Office meeting with the Russian ambassador and defense minister, President Trump told them “I just fired the head of the FBI. He was crazy, a real nut job. I faced great pressure because of Russia. That’s taken off” (Thompson, et al. 2017). On May 11 President Trump said that he had made his decision to fire Comey well before receiving the memo from Rosenstein, “I was going to fire regardless of recommendation” (Baker and Shear 2017).

The way that the Comey firing was handled by the White House illustrates the failure of the president to fully inform his staff about important policy decisions and support them when they presented public accounts to the press. He chastised his communications team for inconsistencies in their public statements (which were actually due to his own inconsistencies) and told them “to get on the same page” (Greenwood 2017). Trump’s statement was embarrassing to Deputy Attorney General Rosenstein, since it implied that his memo was merely a post hoc justification for a decision already made rather than a self initiated recommendation to the president.

Obamacare and White House Policy Process

The lack of a coherent policy process was also evident in the administration’s attempt to repeal and/or replace the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), with mixed signals coming from the president. In the campaign, Trump promised to immediately repeal Obamacare and replace it with “something great.” that would “take care of everybody.” “We’re going to get the premiums down. We’re going to get the deductibles way down. We are going to take care of every single need you’re going to want to have taken care of. But it’s not going to cost that kind of money. We’re going to bring it down” (Weigel 2017).

The problem, of course, was that those promises were mutually incompatible, indicating that Trump did not have a firm grasp on the fundamentals of health care policy. You can’t cover more people with better coverage with less money. The incoherence of administration health care policy began with the president and confused Republicans in Congress, who had to write the legislation. In February Trump admitted that healthcare is “an unbelievably complex subject. Nobody knew health care could be so complicated” (Liptak 2017).

Trump and the Republican Congress seemed to agree that Obamacare needed to be repealed, but there was no consensus what to replace it with. Several different plans were introduced in the House and Senate, but none was able to get a majority vote in both Houses. Finally on July 18 Trump gave up on either repealing or replacing the ACA and decided to “let Obamacare fail” (neither repeal nor replace). “We’re not going to own it. I’m not going to own it. I can tell you the Republicans are not going to own it. We’ll let Obamacare fail” (Kaplan 2017). In yet another twist, on July 19 Trump was back to repeal and replace and insisted that the Senate stay in session and pass a bill to repeal Obama care and replace it with a better program. “I intend to keep my promise, and I know you [Congress] will, too” (Davis, et al. 2017). On August 10 Trump implied that if Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell did not “get repeal and replace done,” that he should step down from his Senate Leadership position (Flegenheimer 2017).

In summary, Trump changed his position on healthcare financing at least five times (Pfiffner 2017); he backed a last ditch effort to repeal at the end of September, but the Republicans still were not able to muster a simple majority in the Senate. Aside from promising to repeal Obamacare and replacing it with “something great,” Trump’s White House did not lay out any clear health care policy positions that would have provided Congress with a coherent alternative to it. Nor did Trump make broad public appeals for a specific alternative policy. He may have been counting on his vaunted reputation for making deals, but he did not provide the political or policy leadership necessary to shepherd the administration’s signature legislation through Congress.

Paris Climate Agreement Withdrawal

In contrast to the above examples of lack of consultation and coordination, Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Paris climate accord seemed to be informed by a broad range of input and disagreement among his staff and cabinet. Despite his campaign promises, a range of advocates urged him not to withdraw, including silicone valley CEOs, CEA head Gary Cohn, his daughter Ivanka, and European diplomats. In his confirmation hearing, Secretary of State Tillerson said “the risk of climate change does exist” and that he thought that the US should not withdraw from the climate change agreement (Filkins 2017). Secretary of Defense Mattis went so far as to declare that climate change was real and a serious problem for national security (Revkin 2017).

Trump reportedly engaged in several months of heated debate within his administration, with Bannon, Pruitt, McGahn, and Kushner viewing the accords as an aspect of globalism that was a threat to the United States. Trump finally decided to side with the climate skeptics and withdrew the United States from the agreement. However the process was conducted, Trump seemed to solicit input from all sides, and after careful consideration, made his decision.

The problems created by the travel ban, the firing of Comey, and the Obamacare repeal attempt were due in part to the lack of a chief of staff with sufficient authority to impose order on the White House. Priebus failed because Trump was unwilling to delegate sufficient authority to his chief of staff and the White House staff was split into competing factions.

In short, the first six months of the Trump White House were characterized by:

The lack of discipline and clear policy goals

The lack of an authoritative chief of staff

The lack of a coherent policy process
Competing ideological factions
Inconsistent leadership by the president

When John Kelly took over as chief of staff, he made immediate changes that reflected the lack of White House discipline under Reince Priebus. He took steps to control informal access to the president, even insisting that Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump check with him before advising the president. He monitored communications between cabinet secretaries and the president and required a specific policy purpose before allowing staffers to enter the Oval Office (Thrush, et al. 2017). But if Kelly was to succeed, he would have to limit the president's tweets, require a formal policy process, keep him from undercutting his top appointees, and make peace among the warring factions. Changing the behavior of President would be a daunting task, even for a former general and combat veteran.

The Trump Domestic Cabinet

When President Trump chose his domestic cabinet secretaries, he departed from the approach of previous presidents in significant ways. The populist nationalist strain in the White House was reflected in domestic policy cabinet secretaries willing to cut back on their departments' resources and hostile to their departments' traditional missions.

Conventional wisdom in Washington is reflected in "Miles' Law," which predicts "where you stand (on policy) depends on where you sit (your institutional position). This truism characterizes most cabinet appointments of all recent presidents. Most presidents appoint cabinet secretaries with expertise in the policies within the jurisdictions of their departments and who have the support of the interest groups concerned with the departments they will head. Most cabinet secretaries, in order to lead their departments effectively, become champions of their workforces, with the understanding that low morale will not help the implementation of an administration's agenda. Consequently, secretaries become advocates for the departments they lead and who therefore seek more resources to carry out the missions of their departments in order to create a strong record for themselves and their president.

In contrast to his predecessors, President Trump appointed to most domestic departments cabinet secretaries who were opposed to their departments' traditional missions. This might be expected from the only president who had no government or military experience and who promised to "drain the swamp" of established institutions. According Steve Bannon, "If you look at these Cabinet appointees, they were selected for a reason and that is deconstruction" of the administrative state (Rucker and Costa 2017). Below are several illustrations of the unusual nature of Trump's domestic cabinet appointments. He proposed steep budgets cut for each of these cabinet departments and agencies, and the cuts were endorsed by their secretaries. (All budget numbers in parentheses below are from Trump's proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2018 (Soffen and Lu 2017).

Scott Pruitt at EPA (proposed budget cut: 31%)¹

¹ Though EPA is not a cabinet agency, its role in domestic policy is comparable to several cabinet departments. In the Reagan administration Interior Secretary James Watt and EPA Director Anne Gorsuch were chosen to cut environmental regulations deeply. Neither survived Reagan's first term.

One of the clearest examples of agency leaders opposing the traditional missions of their agencies was Trump's choice of Scott Pruitt to be director of the Environmental Protection Agency. As Attorney General of Oklahoma, Pruitt, had sued the EPA multiple times to challenge environmental regulations. Arguing that they hindered private sector companies and undermined economic growth, Pruitt moved quickly to roll back regulations intended to protect the environment, particularly those initiated during the Obama administration.

Tom Price at HHS (proposed budget cut: 18%)

Trump appointed former Representative from Georgia, Tom Price, to be secretary of Health and Human Services. As a former member of the Tea Party caucus, he strongly opposed the Affordable Care Act, with its expansion of Medicaid, and he introduced a number of bills in the House to repeal it. After taking over HHS, he was active in working with the White House and Congress in the failed effort to repeal Obamacare. In late September, Price resigned under pressure after the cost of his trips on private and military aircraft were revealed.

Andrew Puzder's nomination as Secretary of Labor (proposed budget cut: 21%)

The Department of Labor implements laws relating to safety in the workforce, federal minimum wage requirements, and unemployment compensation. Trump's first nomination for Secretary of Labor was Andrew Puzder. He had been CEO of a fast food chain, was critical of minimum wage and minimum hour regulations, and was hostile toward unions (Rappeport 2017b). After Puzder's withdrawal, Trump nominated and the Senate confirmed Alex Acosta, a former US attorney.

Betsy DeVos at Education (proposed budget cut: 14%)

President Trump appointed Betsy DeVos, a billionaire contributor to the Trump campaign, to be Secretary of Education (with a tie-breaking vote from VP Pence). With virtually no experience in public education, DeVos had been a strong supporter of private and charter schools who referred to public education as "government schools" and a "dead end" (Strauss 2017). Critics were concerned that she would push for increased public support for private and religious schools at the expense of public education.

Rick Perry at Energy (proposed budget cut: 6%)

Secretary of Energy Rick Perry, former governor of Texas and presidential candidate, famously forgot that the Department of Energy was one of the three cabinet departments that he had promised to eliminate if he was elected. He had thought that the Energy Department was primarily concerned with U.S. oil and gas industries, though two thirds of the Department's budget is used to safeguard the US nuclear arsenal and develop nuclear energy production. Perry sought to promote more coal production and reverse the Obama administration's focus on renewal energy sources.

Ben Carson at HUD (proposed budget cut: 13%)

Ben Carson was a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 2016, though he dropped out of the race, after being ridiculed by Donald Trump. Carson was an acclaimed surgeon who had no professional background in housing or executive management. He was a critic of federal programs that promoted desegregation and welfare assistance, though much of the mission of HUD is to help ensure that those in poverty have the opportunity to rent or own homes. He said that poverty is "really more of a choice than anything else" (Flegenheimer and Alcindor 2017).

Ryan Zinke at Interior (proposed budget cut: 12%)

Trump appointed former Congressman Ryan Zinke to run the Department of the Interior, which is in charge of managing 500 million acres of land, much of it in the western states. President Trump's budget proposal entailed cutting 4,000 jobs (Fears 2017). Among Zinke's first initiatives was the opening of federal lands for coal mining, logging, and oil and gas exploration.

Rex Tillerson at State (proposed budget cut: 33%)

Although the State Department is not a domestic agency, Rex Tillerson acted in ways similar to his domestic counterparts. He systematically accelerated the decline of the State Department's capacity to perform its traditional role representing the United States to foreign nations. In October 2017, 21 of 23 assistant secretary positions had not been filled, and 48 ambassadors had not been confirmed (Filkins 2017). Tillerson cancelled an incoming class of Foreign Service Officers; he isolated himself from the department's career professionals; he cancelled the career development Presidential Management Intern program; and he refused to allow career employees to be seconded to the National Security Council staff (Rosenberger and Schulman 2017; Bergman 2017). As part of his plans for reorganization, he defended Trump's proposed budget cut of 33%, with potential cuts to the workforce of 9 percent, (2,300 positions) (Gearan, et al., 2017; Wadhams 2017). Even defense secretary Mattis criticized the planned State Department cuts, "If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately" (Lamothe, Dan. 2017). President Trump's proposed *increase* for the Defense budget was \$52 billion, \$10 billion more than the *total* State Department and foreign operations request.

Although other presidents had come to office promising to cut back on domestic policy (e.g. Reagan promised to abolish the departments of Energy and Education), they most often ended up appointing secretaries who were champions of their departments. Thus Trump's choice of so many domestic cabinet secretaries hostile to the missions of their departments was quite unusual. After six months, these appointees seemed to be making progress in slowing or stopping Obama administration initiatives, particular in environmental policy, and in cutting back their departments.

Trump's National Security Team

Despite his earlier assertions that the US military was in a shambles and that NATO was obsolete, Trump appointed two experienced former generals to head DOD and DHS, as well as establishment National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster (after the firing of Michael Flynn). These national security appointments mirrored the establishment internationalists in the White House and were at odds with the populist nationalists. On issues involving national security, Trump often openly clashed with his cabinet appointees.

There is always tension between the White house and cabinet secretaries. But Trump's conflicts with his national security team were different because of their extent and very public nature. That cabinet members were not consulted or informed about important policies indicates the lack of an established policy process. That they often publicly disagreed with the president or had to backtrack or explain his changes of mind, indicates a lack of communication. That Trump changed his mind on important issues so frequently indicates a lack of discipline, preparation, and competence on his part.

Tension between Trump and the national security establishment was evident early in transition preparation when he was openly skeptical of the national security briefings he was given as candidate and president elect. He cast doubt on the consensus among the CIA, NSA, and FBI that Russians had interfered with the 2016 elections, calling the reports a “hoax.” And he likened the disclosure of stories about his possible links with Russia as similar to Nazi Germany. “That’s something that Nazi Germany would have done” (Landler 2017).

NATO

During the campaign, Trump emphasized “America First” and was critical of NATO, suggesting that it was obsolete. After the election, Vice President Pence and Defense Secretary Mattis traveled to Europe to assure US allies that the US still took the NATO treaty very seriously (Parker 2017a). Trump’s visit to Brussels for a NATO meeting on May 25 illustrated the lack of consultation and coordination with his national security team. James Mattis, Rex Tillerson, and national security adviser H.R. McMaster worked hard to ensure that Trump’s speech include language affirming the US commitment to NATO’s allies in Article 5 of the treaty. The language was in the text of the speech in the morning of May 25, but it was deleted between then and Trump’s delivery. Neither Tillerson, Mattis, nor McMaster was warned about the decision to delete the language. After Trump’s talk they had to try to assure NATO allies that the US would honor its NATO obligations (Glasser 2017).

Trump Reveals Intelligence to Russians

The day after he fired FBI Director James Comey, Trump met in the Oval office with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. In addition to telling them that he fired James Comey because of “the Russian thing,” he revealed highly classified intelligence reports that the US knew about ISIS plans to hide explosives in laptop computers in order to bring down airplanes. He told the Russians “I have people brief me on great intel every day” (Miller and Jaffe 2017). When Trump was criticized for revealing intelligence that was so sensitive and might have done serious damage to Israeli operations, both National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and his deputy, Dina Powell, told the press that the reports of Trump’s discussions were “false” (2017b). But President Trump undercut his aides’ explanations of his revelations when he tweeted “As President I wanted to share with Russia (at an openly scheduled W.H. meeting) which I have the absolute right to do, facts pertaining to terrorism and airline flight safety” (Blake 2017).

In defense of the president, McMaster said, “The president wasn’t even aware where this information came from. He wasn’t briefed on the source or method of the information either” (Thrush and Haberman 2017). Explaining Trump’s revelations as either a lack of understanding of the sensitivity of the intelligence or as a conscious decision to disclose secret information from a US ally to the Russians was not reassuring to the national security community.

Trump’s Denigration of the Justice Department

In addition to his conflict with the Justice Department about the ban on Muslims and the firing of FBI Director James Comey, Trump had prickly relationships with his top Justice Department appointees. In his confirmation testimony, Attorney General Sessions said, “I did not have communications with the Russians” (Entous et al. 2017). But when evidence of his conversation with the Russian ambassador came out, he had to admit that he had. Since Sessions was potentially

involved with any collusion, in March he was legally bound to recuse himself from overseeing the investigation, delegating that authority to his Deputy, Rod Rosenstein.²

As the investigation of possible collusion continued in the summer of 2017, Trump expressed frustration with Attorney General Sessions for recusing himself from overseeing the FBI investigation. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Trump said, “Sessions should have never recused himself, and if he was going to recuse himself, he should have told me before he took the job and I would have picked somebody else. . . , which frankly I think is very unfair to the president” (Baker, et al. 2017b). Referring to Sessions as “beleaguered,” Trump tweeted, “I am disappointed in the Attorney general” (Conway 2017). It was an extraordinarily unusual situation to have a president fire the FBI director for lack of loyalty, then publicly rebuke and impugn the integrity of his appointed leadership of the Department of Justice.

North Korea Nuclear Crisis

On August 8 Trump threatened North Korea, saying than any threats, “will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen.” The language had not been discussed with his top national security team, McMaster, Trump, Tillerson, or with John Kelly. After Trump’s remarks, Tillerson tried to blunt Trump’s threat, saying that Americans should “have no concerns about this particular rhetoric of the last few days” (Baker and Harris 2017). The next day, Trump said that his previous rhetoric “wasn’t tough enough” (Baker 2017b), and in a speech to the United Nations, he threatened to “totally destroy North Korea.”

On September 30, when Rex Tillerson was in Beijing negotiating with the Chinese to gain their help with North Korea, he told reporters, “We have lines of communication to Pyongyang.” But the next day Trump tweeted that Tillerson “was wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man. Save your energy Rex, we’ll do what has to be done” (Miller and Sokolsky, 2017). The president had just undercut the credibility of his secretary of state in a public and humiliating way. When asked about the president’s comment, Secretary Mattis contradicted the president, saying “We’re never out of diplomatic solutions” (Bat 2017).

Nuclear Deal with Iran

During the campaign, Trump called the nuclear deal with Iran “one of the dumbest deals ever,” but DOD nominee Mattis said, “When American gives her word, we have to live up to it and work with our allies” (Steinhauer 2017). Mattis, Tillerson, and McMaster did not want to abandon the Iran nuclear deal, but in July Trump became angry with Tillerson for not providing him with a justification for decertifying the agreement and appointed a White House working group to provide him with the option to decertify (Winter, et al. 2017). The law required the president to certify to Congress that Iran was complying with the provisions of the agreement, which the other parties to the agreement admitted it was. But President Trump decided not to send the certification to Congress, which would then have to decide whether to again impose sanctions on Iran. When asked during a Senate hearing if he thought the agreement was in the interest of the United States, Mattis answered, “Yes, senator, I do” (Gibbons and Sanger 2017).

² The Code of Federal Regulations for the Department of Justice (28 CFR 45), which implements the law covering DOJ (28 USC 528), provides that “no employee shall participate in a criminal investigation or prosecution if he has a personal or political relationship” with anyone involved in the conduct under investigation. Sessions himself was potentially involved.

Conflict between national security cabinet secretaries and the president was much more visible in the Trump administration than in any other recent administration. Trump's mercurial nature and abrupt policy changes without sufficient consultation exacerbated the normal friction between all White Houses and cabinet secretaries.

Conclusion

President Trump's first nine months in office were markedly different from other recent presidents in degree and kind. His approach to his White House and Cabinet differed significantly from his predecessors. Despite his protestations, his White House was characterized by the lack of a coherent policy process, in-fighting among factions of his staff, and conflict between Trump and his national security cabinet. Although he appointed Reince Priebus to be his chief of staff, Priebus was never able to impose discipline on the White House. It was not entirely Priebus's fault; Trump was not willing to delegate sufficient authority to him, and contentious White House factions would not yield to his authority. The result was often policy chaos.

In most domestic cabinet departments Trump departed from previous presidents' usual practice of appointing cabinet secretaries who were sympathetic to their traditional missions. Most of Trump's appointees backed significant cuts to their agencies' budgets and strove to reverse previous departmental policies, particularly those associated with the Obama administration. His national security appointees were often publicly at odds with Trump's policy pronouncements, creating uncertainty among US allies and adversaries.

Trump allies hoped that the replacement of chief of staff Reince Priebus with former General John Kelly would create discipline in the White House, stanch leaks, and lead to greater coordination of policy between the White House and cabinet secretaries. Kelly's effectiveness would depend on the willingness of the president to change his approach to the presidency. Changing the behavior of President Trump would be a daunting task, even for a former general and combat veteran.

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