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President Trump isn't a fan of dissent - inside or outside the government

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The early days of Donald Trump's presidency have been marked by an aggressive and unapologetic effort to banish dissent.

Less than two weeks in, there are a growing number of examples of a give-no-quarter approach: Trump's blistering language in firing the acting attorney general who refused to defend his controversial immigration order; his press secretary's declaration that career diplomats "either get with the program or they can go;" his chief strategist's labeling of news media as an "opposition party" that should "keep its mouth shut."

The pattern — and particularly efforts to shut down discordant voices within the government — is raising alarms.

"The whole thing is scary," said David Boaz, executive vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute. "They have no appreciation for the Constitution, much less the unwritten norms of liberal democracy."

To some degree, the posture reflects the management philosophy of Trump, who once described effective leadership as being "a one-man army. . . . You must plan and execute your plan alone."

White House press secretary Sean Spicer, however, said that is precisely what Trump was elected to do.

"The president was very clear during the campaign, whether it's economic security or national security, that he has an agenda that he articulated very, very clearly to the American people," Spicer said during a press briefing Tuesday, adding that the job of top administration officials is "to fulfill that, and if they don't like it, then they shouldn't take the job."

[Resistance from within: Federal workers push back against Trump]

The same view holds true for career government employees, whom many in Trump's circle see as potential impediments to his efforts.

"What you have is a government filled with left-wingers who are deeply opposed to Trump, who froth at the mouth," said former House speaker Newt Gingrich, an informal adviser to the president. "This will be a real fight, because Trump is different. He was elected to be different,

and if they don't want to be different, and if they don't want to serve in government with someone who is different, they should quit.”

If there is to be a fight, the other side is preparing as well. Faiz Shakir, national political director of the American Civil Liberties Union, said the group plans to dedicate significant new resources — including much of the more than \$24 million in online donations that poured in over the weekend after Trump's immigration order — to protecting dissenters and whistleblowers.

“Hopefully people know that, so they can reach out to us,” Shakir said.

Recent decades have seen a raft of reforms designed to encourage freer and more open airing of nonconformist views. Many were implemented as an antidote to the kind of tunnel vision that led the nation into the Vietnam War or as a reaction to the abuses of executive power by President Richard M. Nixon's administration.

The State Department, for instance, established the “dissent channel” upon which officials have been airing their disagreement with Trump's executive order suspending immigration from seven majority-Muslim countries. A memo signed by hundreds of diplomats argues that the order “stands in opposition to the core American and constitutional values that we, as federal employees, took an oath to uphold.”

When the memo became public on Monday, Spicer said that those who signed it should consider resigning from their posts.

[Canadian scientists were followed, threatened and censored. They warn Trump could do the same.]

More decisive was the administration's response to acting attorney general Sally Q. Yates, an Obama administration holdover, after she questioned whether Trump's immigration order was “wise or just” and told Justice Department attorneys not to defend it against court challenges.

In announcing Yates's firing, the White House issued a statement notable for its scathing language. It called her “weak on borders and very weak on illegal immigration” and accused her of having “betrayed the Department of Justice by refusing to enforce a legal order designed to protect the citizens of the United States.”

“People have a right to express their mind, but I think there's a difference between expressing dissent and concern and not implementing a lawful order as the acting attorney general did the other night,” Spicer said Wednesday.

Gary J. Schmitt, a former official in the Reagan administration who is a scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, argued on the think tank's blog that Yates overstepped in her refusal to implement an order that Justice's Office of Legal Counsel had deemed to be legal and properly drafted.

But he also faulted the administration for issuing the order without consultation.

“One begins to wonder if there is anyone in the White House who has actually spent anytime reading Article II of the Constitution, outlining the president’s ‘powers and duties,’ and thought through what it means for the president to ‘take care that the laws be faithfully executed,’ ” Schmitt wrote. “Conjuring up an executive order of this significance without seeking [as apparently was the case] the advice of any of the Cabinet members and departments they represent — Homeland Security, Defense or State — and whose job it would be to implement and deal with its manifestly complex implications is irresponsible behavior on the part of the chief executive.”

[Spicer: Diplomats opposed to immigration ban should ‘either get with the program or they can go’]

Meanwhile, top White House officials have also begun escalating their ongoing war with the media — challenging not only the coverage they have received, but calling for it to be stifled and reporters to be fired.

“The media should be embarrassed and humiliated and keep its mouth shut and just listen for a while,” chief strategist Stephen K. Bannon said in an interview last week with the New York Times.

In an appearance on Fox News Sunday, presidential counselor Kellyanne Conway said television networks should be “cleaning house” of “these people who said things that just weren’t true.”

“Not one network person has been let go. Not one silly political analyst and pundit who talked smack all day long about Donald Trump has been let go,” Conway said. “I’m too polite to mention their names, but they know who they are, and they are all wondering who will be the first to go. The election was three months ago. None of them have been let go.”

Trump and his aides are far from the first presidential administration to fume about what they perceive as unfair media coverage.

However, “most of them learn to bite their tongue. They rant about it in private. This guy and the people around him don’t seem to feel the need to stifle what they think,” said Cato’s Boaz.

Trump “doesn’t seem to have an impulse against projecting an image of authoritarianism, which is new,” added Michael Macleod-Ball, chief of staff for the ACLU’s Washington legislative office. “He seems to want to appear to be authoritarian.”