



## 4 New Year's resolutions for the Trump administration

David Boaz

January 3, 2017

It's a new year again, which I always consider a time for making resolutions. Of course, it's much more satisfying to make resolutions for other people. Now that Sen. Rand Paul has aired his annual Festivus grievances about his colleagues in Washington, I thought I'd offer them some suggestions for self-improvement.

President-elect Trump doesn't seem like the sort to feel the need for self-improvement and resolutions, but maybe the prospect of becoming president of the United States would prompt reflection and resolve in anyone. So here are four unsolicited resolutions for Trump and his team, plus a bonus resolution for the rest of us.

### 1) **Bring back growth.**

People are worried that our economy is not strong and that our kids won't have it as good as we do. And they have a point. From 2000 to 2015, annual growth in real GDP has averaged only 1 percent. The recovery from the 2007 recession has been the slowest and weakest since World War II.

Here's a simple relationship to keep in mind: presidential approval ratings depend heavily on economic growth. If you care about your poll ratings, re-election, or legacy, you'd be well advised to keep the economy growing.

So how do you increase anemic growth rates? First, look at what government has done to drag down the economy. Taxes, government debt, and regulations are a burden on investment and economic activity. Higher taxes make investments less profitable and create a "wedge" between what the employer pays and what the employee receives, which reduces the number of jobs created.

Regulations also add to the cost of doing business. The Obama administration's Department of Labor has been on a veritable crusade to reduce U.S. employment. Its 2010

“guidance” discourages companies from offering unpaid internships, which are often the first work experience for students. The new overtime regulations, currently put on hold by a court decision, impose huge costs on management and reduce opportunities for workers. And still the regulations keep coming. Cut back on regulation, and you can expect stronger growth.

One place to look for regulatory reform — where you could find some left-right agreement — is in cutting back on what Brink Lindsey calls “regressive regulation”: barriers to entry and competition that redistribute income and wealth up the socioeconomic scale. From doctors and lawyers to taxis and Big Sugar, many incumbent businesses are protected from free competition. Opening those markets to the little guys will be good for consumers, innovation, and growth.

And remember, you don’t want to bring back the jobs of 1953, as George Will put it, but to help create the jobs of today and tomorrow.

Along those lines:

## **2) Don’t make a fetish out of campaign promises.**

Presidential candidates say a lot of things on the stump that aren’t actually good policy. You promised to bring back jobs that have been lost. But what you really *meant* was that you wanted more people to have better jobs. (This is what it means to say that voters took you “seriously but not literally.”)

You shouldn’t try to recreate the jobs of 1953 or 1973 or even 2003. After all, in a typical year before the Great Recession, some 33 million American jobs were created, while over 30 million were lost. The point is not to try to “save” or “bring back” those 30 million but to create a growing economy where more people can find work and wages rise.

It’s also been common for presidential candidates to promise to “get tough” with China or “renegotiate” international trade deals. Then they get elected and come to appreciate the downside of wrecking the world’s most important economic relationship and creating new international tensions. You want a growing economy and a more peaceful world. Focus on that, not on keeping campaign promises.

## **3) Play more golf.**

Partisan critics always snipe at presidents for playing golf and taking vacations. But presidents do a lot less damage on the golf course than in the Oval Office. Hit those links. Let the country run itself with less direction from Washington. And while you’re at it, don’t worry about spending time in New York, Palm Beach, and Bedminster, New Jersey. Washington doesn’t need to be the center of the country’s attention.

And speaking of downsizing Washington:

## **4) Push for term limits — on Congress *and* the bureaucracy.**

You struck a chord when you talked about term-limiting Congress. Seventy-four percent of Americans agree, and only 13 percent oppose term limits. You’ll need a new Supreme Court justice or two to make this happen, but start the effort now.

Meanwhile, federal employees stay in office even longer than members of Congress. “Few die, none resign” goes the pithy paraphrase of Thomas Jefferson’s complaint in 1801. Now we might say “few resign, none are fired.” A new book finds a vast gulf between how Americans think, and what federal administrators think of them. How about a little turnover there?

The bigger problem here is the rise of the administrative state, in which legislative, executive, and judicial powers are concentrated in the executive branch, and even in single federal agencies. Take it on. Restore the separation of powers. Tell the permanent bureaucracy that they don’t make the laws, Congress does.

That brings me to my final resolution, for the rest of us. Throughout the Bush and Obama administrations — but going back much further, at least to Franklin Roosevelt — we have seen a steady drift of power from the states to the federal government and from Congress to the executive branch, and more specifically to the president. A lot of people have worried recently about the powerful presidency that Barack Obama is turning over to Donald Trump. Some of us have been worrying about executive power and the potential for abuse for a long time.

Now would be a good time for libertarians, liberals, and conservatives to resolve to **rein in executive power**. Recent presidents have blithely exceeded the powers granted to them under the Constitution. Congress bears a significant part of the blame for presidential excesses, and so do all of us who approved of presidential power grabs — as long as we liked the president or the particular exercise of power.

Now would be a good time for libertarians, liberals, and conservatives to resolve to rein in executive power.

Now we should demand that Congress assert its authority under Article I of the Constitution — “All legislative powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States” — and stop delegating vast and vague authority to executive agencies. We should insist that presidents no longer take the country to war without congressional authorization, use “a pen and a phone” to usurp legislative authority, or use the power of the White House to intimidate private individuals and businesses.

If the administration and the rest of us do these things, there’ll be a lot fewer grievances to air next Festivus.

*David Boaz is the executive vice president of the Cato Institute and the author of The Libertarian Mind (Simon & Schuster, 2015).*