



## Nepotism looms over presidency

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The high-profile presence of Donald Trump's family in the transition team has drawn more than a few negative comments in the media. The President-elect's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, reportedly even played a key role in undermining the prospects of New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie. The alleged motive, moreover, was Christie's earlier prosecution of Kushner's father for fraudulent dealings.

But the concern rose another notch when daughter Ivanka Trump (along with Kushner) reportedly attended a meeting between her father and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Such an incident did not seem to be just another clumsy manifestation of garden-variety nepotism, as bad as that aspect might be. Ivanka is poised to head the vast Trump business empire. Her participation in the meeting with the leader of one of America's most important trading and investment partners constituted a flagrant conflict of interest for the President-elect.

Nepotism is nothing new in the history of the US presidency, although the Trump administration looks as though it may be especially susceptible. Perhaps the most blatant case was President John F. Kennedy's appointment of his brother Robert to the post of attorney general. That decision so rankled the political establishment that Congress eventually passed a statute that in the future barred members of the President's family from holding appointed posts in his or her administration. Kushner appears to be trying to find a way around that prohibition.

Excluding relatives from official posts, though, hardly solves the nepotism problem; even when relatives do not occupy policymaking positions, they can still have a considerable impact on policy. Informal advisers can, and throughout America's history have, influenced occupants of the Oval Office. And those advisers often are friends or relatives.

Perhaps the toughest problem to address is the role of the presidential spouse. The post of first lady (or first gentleman, in the event of a female president) is supposed to be primarily ceremonial or dealing with noncontroversial matters. That's an important point, because there is no provision for formal accountability, whether congressional oversight or some other mechanism, for policy initiatives undertaken by a person in that post. Yet some first ladies have exercised a substantial amount of influence over policy. Indeed, historians generally believe that

Woodrow Wilson's wife, Edith, virtually ran the presidency for the final 18 months after his debilitating stroke in October 1919.

In our own era, first lady Hillary Clinton played extremely important roles in both her husband's domestic and foreign policy initiatives. She was so deeply involved in the design of the administration's (ultimately unsuccessful) health care plan that wags at one Washington think tank privately derided it as "HillBilly Health Care."

Her greatest impact, though, may have come on policy in the Balkans -- in her discussions on Serbia with Bill Clinton, she later admitted, "I urged him to bomb." The alleged episode is described by Gail Sheehy in her book "Hillary's Choice":

"On March 21, 1999, Hillary expressed her views by phone to the President: 'I urged him to bomb.' The Clintons argued the issue over the next few days. [The President expressed] what-ifs: What if bombing promoted more executions? What if it took apart the NATO alliance? Hillary responded: 'You cannot let this go on at the end of a century that has seen the major holocaust of our time. What do we have NATO for if not to defend our way of life?' The next day the President declared that force was necessary."

If accurate, this would be a case of a presidential family member having not just some influence, but a decisive impact on policy. And such advice would have been offered without Clinton having had to undergo scrutiny from anyone else in a position of responsibility. Unfortunately, that type of influence is something that is extraordinarily difficult to guard against. There is no way to pass a law against presidential pillow talk, or one that bars the President from talking about a policy issue with his or her spouse or children over dinner.

The reality is that nepotism is an ever-present temptation. One would hope that both the President-elect and his family members would exercise restraint. But that would require President-elect Trump to acknowledge that the American people have elected him, not his entire family. And it would require his children and in-laws to resist the enormous temptation that comes from intimate access to the presidency and its powers.

History does not provide much confidence, though, that either the President or his family will resist the lure of nepotism. And so far, the Trump family's conduct during the transition process inspires even less confidence.

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