

In Trump's final days, a 30-year-old aide purges officials seen as insufficiently loyal

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November 13, 2020

Over the past week, President Trump has axed his defense secretary and other top Pentagon aides, his second-in-command at the U.S. Agency for International Development, two top Homeland Security officials, a senior climate scientist and the leader of the agency that safeguards nuclear weapons.

Engineering much of the post-election purge is Johnny McEntee, a former college quarterback who was hustled out of the White House two years ago after a security clearance check turned up a prolific habit for online gambling.

A staunch Trump loyalist, McEntee, 30, was welcomed back into the fold in February and installed as head of personnel for the Trump White House. Since the race was called for President-elect Joe Biden, McEntee has been distributing pink slips, warning federal workers not to cooperate with the Biden transition and threatening to oust people who show disloyalty by job hunting while Trump is still refusing to acknowledge defeat, according to six administration officials.

More firings are expected, White House and agency officials said, including a top cybersecurity official whose agency on Thursday disputed Trump's unfounded claims of election fraud. While the motives are not always clear — is the White House pursuing last-minute policy goals or simply punishing disloyalty? — critics say the dismissals threaten to destabilize broad swaths of the federal bureaucracy in the fragile period during the handover to the next administration.

Trump fires Defense Secretary Esper via tweet

President Trump fired Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper in a Nov. 9 tweet, marking the fourth Pentagon chief the president has let go during his administration. (Reuters)

McEntee is not just firing people. The Pentagon general counsel this week hired former Republican operative and political appointee Michael Ellis as general counsel of the National Security Agency, making him a civilian member of the senior executive service. That gives Ellis civil service protections that will make it hard for Biden's team to push him out. Several officials said McEntee also wants to help campaign allies secure jobs in the White House.

Some officials said they worry the new hires could destroy briefing documents prepared for the incoming Biden administration. Others criticized McEntee's choices for key government roles.

"Johnny is loyal to a fault to the president, but doesn't have the basic understanding of how departments operate and what skills are required to hold certain Cabinet-level positions," said one senior administration official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal

matters. “It’s actually hampered the president by putting unqualified people throughout senior roles.”

McEntee declined to comment through a White House spokesman. In a statement, White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows said: “John McEntee has supported the President’s initiative from day one and does an outstanding job working to help make sure our administration implements the Trump agenda. He’s a valuable asset to our team and no doubt the unfair criticisms being directed his way are from individuals who don’t know the facts.”

Some Trump allies applauded McEntee’s performance.

“Conservatives believe that the president was not well served by the original people staffing [the White House Personnel Office]. They systematically excluded strong Trump supporters,” said Cleta Mitchell, a partner at the law firm Foley & Lardner and a prominent conservative activist.

Of McEntee, she said: “I wish he had been there in the beginning.”

The post-election firings are the culmination of a months-long crusade by McEntee, who reports directly to the president and sits just outside the Oval Office. Obsessed with leaks and mistrustful of veteran government officials who have served multiple administrations, Trump has complained that he finds it more difficult to deal with the federal bureaucracy than with foreign leaders.

“I’ve fired some. I say, some, just get rid of them,” Trump told donors last month in Nashville. “We have some pretty deep-seated people, and we got rid of a lot of them.”

The president has long relied on McEntee, who worked for Trump at his organization in New York and on his presidential campaign. After the 2016 election, according to a tell-all book by Stephanie Winston Wolkoff, a former aide to the first lady, McEntee happened to be delivering a turkey sandwich when Winston Wolkoff informed Trump that his inaugural committee was a “s-- show.”

“Donald grabbed the [sandwich] bag and told the kid to sit down. ‘You’re in charge of the inauguration now,’ he said.”

McEntee soon became the president’s trusted personal aide, accompanying him on the golf course, watching TV off the Oval Office and carrying his large box of papers on Air Force One. Officials described him as jovial and omnipresent, but not particularly influential.

In 2018, McEntee was ousted by then-Chief of Staff John Kelly, who discovered his gambling habit. Kelly had McEntee immediately escorted out of the West Wing, a move that enraged many Trump loyalists.

“The president values him as a very trusted, very loyal man,” said Chris Ruddy, a close Trump friend.

Trump rehired McEntee in the weeks after the impeachment process, when Trump had been frustrated to see federal officials testify against him, and granted McEntee wide latitude to make personnel changes. McEntee quickly made aggressive moves, replacing longtime staff in the personnel office with a coterie of aides in their 20s and purging officials viewed as insufficiently loyal.

“I’m only here for the president,” McEntee said, according to one official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to share a private conversation. And, he said, “I’m not afraid to fire people.”

Other senior aides say McEntee has offered to fire people they wanted gone. The moves created a toxic culture across the government, officials said, and several Cabinet members have complained to Trump about McEntee.

McEntee’s office soon launched an interview process to suss out disloyalty, asking: “Who on your team is good? Who on your team is bad? Who is not working to serve the president’s agenda? Who brought you into the administration? What do you think of a particular policy?” said one administration official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to describe the internal questioning.

People familiar with the interviews said Trump appointees wanted names of people perceived as disloyal. One Environmental Protection Agency employee was asked his opinion on pulling troops out of Afghanistan. “I work at the EPA,” the official said, startled.

Another official said she was asked her opinion about the president’s proclamation on transgender troops. And one senior government appointee was asked by McEntee where he gets his news. (He said his answer — Fox News — seemed to meet with McEntee’s satisfaction.)

“These were some really heavy-handed interviews,” one administration official said.

Since the election, the pace of removals seems to have accelerated. Some of the removals appear to create opportunities for policy gains in the waning days of the Trump administration.

For example, the White House on Nov. 6 abruptly removed Michael Kuperberg, the career climate scientist who has for five years overseen the National Climate Assessment, one of the most important federal documents in the battle against climate change. In his place, the White House is detailing David Legates, a meteorologist who claims that excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is good for plants and that global warming is harmless. Legates was appointed in September to a top post at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

How Trump repeatedly disparages climate science

Throughout his first term, President Trump has often cast doubt on the gravity of and science behind climate change. (Monica Akhtar/The Washington Post)

The White House is also assigning Ryan Maue, a meteorologist who had worked for the libertarian Cato Institute and questioned whether climate change impacts would be as catastrophic as many scientists have projected, to help oversee the report.

According to people familiar with the matter, the moves would fulfill a promise by White House officials to take steps to install like-minded staffers at NOAA and the U.S. Global Change Research Program.

Myron Ebell, a climate change contrarian at the Competitive Enterprise Institute who is close to the administration, called McEntee “a very strong supporter of the Trump agenda, and so he moved to get Trump people into political positions. It took him a while to get to NOAA, because it’s probably not at the top of their list. They’re going to get the National Climate Assessment started in the right direction.”

“Better late than never is a good way to describe it,” said James Taylor, president of the conservative Heartland Institute.

At the Department of Homeland Security, McEntee’s office is determined to get all disloyal employees removed in upcoming days, three people familiar with the matter said. Trump has long chafed at the agency.

At the Pentagon, recently fired Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper mostly stayed quiet as a series of mid-level political appointees were ushered out by the White House over the past year. But other more senior officials, including Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence Joe Kernan and acting undersecretary of defense for policy James Anderson, continued to stay on — until Esper was fired this week and the relative top cover that he had provided disappeared.

And at USAID, a top official, Bonnie Glick, was removed abruptly to make way for a Trump loyalist after she had been supportive of transition planning, including the preparation of a 440-page manual for the next administration.

In some cases, the rush to oust political appointees has been confoundingly haphazard. Neil Chatterjee, who was demoted Nov. 5 from his post chairing the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, said in an interview Friday that it is unclear whether the White House actually took the necessary steps to remove him from his post.

“Here’s the crazy thing: I don’t actually know that I’ve been demoted,” said Chatterjee, who was appointed by Trump to a five-year term on the independent commission in 2017 and remains a member of the five-person panel.

The president must sign a legal designation for a new FERC chair, he said, and typically the White House makes a public announcement. Instead, he said, three officials from McEntee’s office sent “a one-sentence email” to the commission’s executive director and human resources chief saying that another Republican commissioner, James Danly, would replace Chatterjee in the top spot.

“We still have no record evidence that the designation was signed. But what’s stranger is there’s been no public announcement from the White House,” said Chatterjee, who only learned about his ouster when Danly called him the evening of Nov. 5.

It is unclear why the White House moved to oust Chatterjee, a former top aide to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) and a longtime supporter of fossil fuels. However, he has taken steps to allow regional power administrators to put a price on carbon dioxide emissions linked to climate change and pushed back against a recent White House ban on diversity training for federal employees.

“No one from the White House has actually spoken to me about this,” Chatterjee said. “So I can only speculate as to why I was demoted.”

Nick Miroff, Greg Miller and Dan Lamothe contributed to this report.

Correction: *An earlier version of this story misstated the day the White House removed a top climate scientist, Michael Kuperberg. He was ousted on Nov. 6, not Nov. 13.*