

Why the Trump Administration Still Has Personnel Troubles

Jim Geraghty

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Yes, the security clearance process takes a while, but... it's mid-February in the second year of the Trump administration. Shouldn't at least the folks who arrived with Trump have completed background checks by now? Today the New York Times calculates that the White House has had a 34 percent turnover rate – way higher than any previous administration, and a sign that there are probably new folks in jobs who are still awaiting their background checks to be completed.

Jared Kushner, now a senior White House adviser with a broad foreign policy portfolio that requires access to some of the intelligence community's most closely guarded secrets, still has not succeeded in securing a permanent security clearance. The delay has left him operating on an interim status that allows him access to classified material while the F.B.I. continues working on his full background investigation...

Officials with previous administrations said it is not uncommon for the full background checks to take as long as eight months or a year, in part because of a long backlog in vetting the backgrounds of people needing clearance across the federal government.

Last week, CNN reported that “30 to 40 White House officials and administration political appointees are still operating without full security clearances.” The point of the background check process is to primarily to protect national security but it also helps avoid embarrassments like the one surrounding Rob Porter and his dismissal. The president is being ill-served by this sluggish process.

If you live in Washington long enough, eventually your friends and neighbors start listing you as possible references and contacts in their security clearance renewal process. You get a call and some nice person from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's National Background Investigations Bureau shows up at your door, and asks you a bunch of reasonable questions (“Have you ever seen or heard any indication this person has a drinking problem?” “Anything that you think might make this person vulnerable to blackmail?”) and a few somewhat silly ones (“Have you ever seen or heard anything to suggest this person might want to overthrow the

government?” “Is there any reason to think this person has loyalty to a foreign power or terrorist group?”). If you have no criminal record and no glaring red flags like gambling debts, the process should move pretty smoothly.

Most presidents come to Washington with a “kitchen cabinet,” a thick Rolodex of people interested in working for the federal government and a slew of loyal staffers who have worked in the federal government before, and who probably already went through initial background checks for previous jobs. Trump is an outsider; it’s worth remembering that of his initial close advisors – Reince Priebus, Steve Bannon, Ivanka Trump, Jared Kushner, Gary Cohn, Kellyanne Conway, Hope Hicks – none of them had worked in any civilian government job before, never mind the federal government. In the cabinet, Rex Tillerson, Steven Mnuchin, Ben Carson, Betsy DeVos and Wilbur Ross are in their first government jobs.

There are advantages to being an outsider, but disadvantages as well. A traditional Republican presidency has a slew of potential high-level staffers, a government in-waiting, in conservative think tanks: the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, Hudson Institute, Competitive Enterprise Institute, perhaps the Cato Institute – places full of policy wonks who eat, sleep, and breathe conservative ideas and policies and how to enact them. Trump has selected a few folks from those places, but there really isn’t a large, well-regarded, high profile populist think tank aiming to transform the “Trumpist” philosophy into policy. “Personnel is policy,” as they said in the Reagan administration, and this may be one more reason why Trump’s policies are turning out more traditionally conservative-libertarian than populist.

Some Trump fans might prefer the thought of successful businessmen staffing up the Trump administration, but successful businessmen generally don’t like the thought of leaving their businesses to be undersecretaries for a few years and make a government salary. There is still a slew of high-level appointed positions still awaiting a nominee in Trump’s second year: 59 positions at the State Department with no nominee (including lots of ambassadorships), seven at the Department of Defense, ten at the Department of Energy, four at Homeland Security, 16 at the Department of Justice, ten at the Department of Transportation, and 15 at the Department of the Treasury. There’s no nominee to be Director of the Counter-Terrorism Center in the office of the DNI and we’re short an FCC Commissioner, two FEC commissioners, a White House Director of Drug Control Policy, a White House Director of Science and Technology Policy, and two governors of the Federal Reserve.

Some might argue a president shouldn’t need a small army of policy wonks to enact his agenda, but if you want to change how government operates, overcome the permanent bureaucracy, and are wary about a “deep state,” you had better get your own people in place. When the history of this administration is written, it is likely that one conclusion will be that they unnecessarily impeded themselves with their own disorganization.