



Trump's hostility to intelligence community enters the spotlight

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Donald Trump's hostile approach to the critically important relationship between the White House and the U.S. intelligence community is unnerving officials and national security scholars.

The president-elect has signaled that he intends to treat intelligence with little attention to precedent.

For weeks following the election, he declined to receive many of the daily intelligence briefings that are customarily given to the president-elect, arguing that he was "a smart person" who didn't "need to hear the same thing every day."

He has reportedly weighed doing away with the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, a controversial agency created on the recommendation of the 9/11 Commission to streamline information sharing among the 16 agencies that make up the intelligence community.

And in the last week, he horrified career professionals when he attacked the CIA over its assessment that Russian hacks on Democratic political targets were intended to help him attain the White House.

"These are the same people that said Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction," Trump's transition team said in a weekend statement.

Former officials are concerned that the agencies on which Trump will rely to give him a decisionmaking advantage simply won't trust the president-elect — with dire consequences.

"Intelligence officials are always worried about whether the president will have their back, particularly when the world they operate in is dangerous," said Amy Zegart, a co-director of the

Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University who studies the intelligence community.

“This president is now knifing them from the front.”

The problem with a distrust between the president and the intelligence community, Zegart and others say, is that agencies could hold back information on threats for fear of running into a disagreement with the White House.

“When you don’t have the trust of the president, the natural inclination is to say, I’m not going to take that risk to say something I know the president may not agree with, or propose something I know the president won’t like,” Zegart said.

Some onlookers are also concerned that Trump’s dismissal of career professionals suggests that his White House will attempt to circumvent these agencies by demanding that raw intelligence reports come directly to it so it can issue its own assessments.

This allegedly happened in the lead-up to the Iraq War, according to a 2007 report from the Pentagon’s inspector general.

It found that a senior official in Bush’s administration had “developed, produced, and then disseminated alternative intelligence assessments on the Iraq and al Qaeda relationship, which included some conclusions that were inconsistent with the consensus of the Intelligence Community, to senior decision-makers.”

Critics accused the administration of manipulating intelligence to support the now widely condemned war in Iraq.

“We have to be on the lookout for whether or not Trump tries to have folks set up inside [the Department of Defense] or elsewhere — what I would describe as ex parte intelligence operations,” said Patrick Eddington, a homeland security analyst at the Cato Institute and former CIA analyst.

The fear, Eddington said, is that such an official would “take a bunch of raw data, cherry-pick what they want to support their position and then [go] out to try to sell that to the public and the Hill.”

Trump’s insistence that he only needs to be updated with daily intelligence briefings if there are major developments has also alarmed career professionals who see the world in more nuanced strokes.

President Obama personally hit back on the claim during a Monday evening appearance on “The Daily Show.”

“It doesn’t matter how smart you are,” Obama said, making a rare public criticism of Trump since Election Day. “You have to have the best information possible to make the best decisions possible.

“If you’re not getting their perspective — their detailed perspective — then you are flying blind.”

The relationship between the president and the intelligence community varies from president to president — but as former CIA Director Mike Morrell noted in a recent interview, it’s up to the intelligence briefer to figure out how to present information to the new president in an effective way.

“You’ve got to adjust to them, and that’s something that the intelligence community has always struggled with during transitions,” Morrell told The Cipher Brief. “The briefer has to figure that out.”

Trump’s pick to run the CIA — Republican Kansas Rep. Mike Pompeo — has been notably silent throughout the brouhaha, but his appointment has reportedly been received warmly in Langley. He is widely seen as a conscientious professional who has tempered some of the fears that Trump will fill his Cabinet with conspiracy theorists and marginal figures.

“His future workforce will be looking for clues about his willingness to defend them against charges of incompetence and politicization simply for saying what their craft tells them to be true,” Michael Hayden, a former director of both the CIA and the National Security Agency, wrote in a recent op-ed.

Trump’s public derisiveness of the intelligence community is also hardly without precedent.

Bill Clinton famously was not close with his CIA director, James Woosley. In 1994, when a man crashed a Cessna onto the White House lawn, a joke circulated in Washington that it was Woosley trying to get a meeting with the president.

Jimmy Carter, who entered the White House the year after the Church Committee exposed alleged abuses by intelligence agencies, expressed deep ambivalence about the CIA’s methods. His CIA head, Adm. Stansfield Turner, presided over what became known as “the Halloween massacre” — cuts of around 20 percent of the CIA’s clandestine operatives.

Richard Nixon outright refused to read the daily briefings prepared for him as president-elect.

Obama also came into office at odds with some corners of the CIA, which practiced brutal interrogation techniques he derided as torture and outlawed as one of his first acts in the White House.

The president also won his office in part because of his fierce opposition to the Iraq War, which was founded on the promise that Baghdad was developing weapons of mass destruction.

But Obama's distrust of the intelligence community was nowhere near as vocal as Trump's.

George Little, a former CIA and Pentagon spokesman, has called Trump's attitude "unprecedented."

"His sustained disrespect for the CIA and the wider intelligence community is nothing short of shameful," he wrote on Facebook this week.

The shape and style of the nation's intelligence agencies has changed dramatically throughout the country's history. If he so chose, Trump could easily remake them in his image.

"These mechanisms have been in place for decades in terms of how this show is run, so it's going to be up to him to decide whether he wants to go along with existing protocols or whether he wants to change them," Eddington said.