



These scholars are trying to stop Kirstjen Nielsen from getting a soft landing

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A challenge to America's culture of elite impunity.

Kirstjen Nielsen is out of a job. Now some scholars want to make sure she doesn't get a new one — at least, not anywhere near them.

A handful of scholars and media figures have signed [a petition](#), written on Monday by George Washington University political scientist Henry Farrell, vowing not to “associate myself in any way” with any think tank or university department that employs the homeland security secretary, who resigned on Sunday.

It's pretty typical for former administration officials to take jobs in the American intelligentsia: Two former Trump allies have landed at Harvard alone. But Farrell and his allies think Nielsen shouldn't get this kind of soft landing in the intellectual class. The harsh immigration policies she instituted — most infamously the “zero tolerance” policy that led to thousands of family separations at the border — are, in their view, morally intolerable.

“It's frustrating watching people who do evil with official sanction welcomed back into polite society, as though the infliction of suffering is just another fascinating life experience, and the defense of pointless cruelty one more interesting perspective to engage,” Julian Sanchez, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute who signed the letter, tells me. “If someone caged children as a hobby, they'd rightly be treated like a goddamn pariah by everyone. If you make it a vocation, you can look forward to a [Harvard] Kennedy School chair. It's diseased, and I don't want to play along.”

The petition is unlikely to have a material effect on Nielsen's employability; the signatory list, as of right now, is too small to seriously threaten the rich and powerful institutions that might think of hiring her. But its very existence highlights the fundamental crisis of accountability in American elite society, a situation where the powerful get away with massive wrongdoing with few personal consequences, and indicates what a backlash to this might look like if and when it comes.

Kirstjen Nielsen and the culture of elite impunity

One of many undeniable truths about the American elite is that once you're in it, you can get away with nearly anything providing you have the right friends.

Only one top banker was arrested for the financial crisis. No architects of Bush's torture policy faced legal punishment, nor did the people responsible for cooking the books on the intelligence about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Former President Richard Nixon received

a presidential pardon after the Watergate scandal, as did Reagan Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger for lying to Congress during Iran-Contra.

Henry Kissinger, who served as secretary of state in the Nixon and Ford administrations, remains revered in Washington for his diplomatic prowess — the Obama administration gave him an award in 2016, and President Donald Trump has bought him to the White House repeatedly. But Kissinger's actual policy record is full of black marks that we'd almost certainly call war crimes if perpetrated by a Russian or Iranian leader. Kissinger's crimes range from masterminding the carpet-bombing of Cambodia to actively supporting Pakistan's genocide in Bangladesh; one "back of the envelope" calculation by a historian attributes 3 or 4 million deaths to Kissinger's policies.

This impunity allows American leaders to commit atrocities and epic political blunders without paying a personal price, giving carte blanche to those with power to do more or less whatever they'd like. Sometimes, the very same people are put in a position to go back to their old ways.

We're already starting to see this play out with respect to the Trump administration. Both former Trump administration press secretary Sean Spicer, who lied as easily as he breathed, and former campaign manager Corey Lewandowski, who manhandled reporter Michelle Fields, have been given plum jobs at Harvard's Institute of Politics (IOP). Farrell and his co-signers are using the true grotesquerie of Nielsen's tenure — child separations! — to challenge this broader culture.

"I'm wary of pledges like this, but I'm also sick of the willingness of think tanks and universities ... to provide berths for people whose only claim to prominence is for doing objectively bad things because they are players in the broader game of power," says Farrell.

Taking the pledge does not commit one to a wholesale boycott of the school. If Nielsen were to join Spicer and Lewandowski at Harvard's IOP, signatories would only be obligated to boycott IOP events and forgo working there (or possibly at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, which houses IOP). But they would not be obligated to abandon associations with any other subdivision of Harvard. The idea is to pressure the specific people in charge of hiring at various university and think tank subdivisions to shy away from considering Nielsen.

Of course, this pledge won't make a major dent in the broader political culture in Washington on its own. Even if it grows to encompass a much broader range of academics, think tankers, and media figures than it already does, it still won't deter lobby or consulting firms from hiring the former head of DHS — other frequent places where the rich and powerful land after government.

But Farrell doesn't really think he can blackball Nielsen from the entire political world, and neither he nor the other signatories think that's the point. The point is to try to call attention to the fact that something is wrong here, not just when it comes to Nielsen but with the very nature of America's elite establishment.

"You can make a long list of moral ghouls padding out their post-government lives with cushy sinecures, of course," says Sanchez. "But if Nielsen's where people stop treating that as normal and healthy, I'll take it."