



Trump Versus the Deep State: Let Them Fight?

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Donald Trump, whose fans love chanting “lock her up” at rallies, has long threatened to use the powers of the presidency to jail his political enemies. These political enemies include not just Democrats and Never Trump Republicans but also the people he calls “the Deep State”—recalcitrant members of the government whom the president has described as “traitors.”

On Thursday, it appeared that he might be coming closer to that goal—at least as far as his foes in the deep state are concerned. *The New York Times* is reporting that Attorney General William Barr has set up a criminal inquiry, headed by respected prosecutor John Durham, to look into the origins of the Russia investigation. The exact intent of the inquiry is murky, since reports don’t specify what alleged crimes are being looked at. But clearly the broader mission is to check out theories popular in Trump’s circle that intelligence agencies overstepped their bounds in order to entrap the 2016 Trump campaign in a Russian interference scandal. The *Times* connects the inquiry to Trump’s belief in “a vast conspiracy by the so-called deep state to stop him from winning the presidency.”

As Julian Sanchez of the Cato Institute speculates, the inquiry could just be a distraction to take attention away from the negative press that Trump is receiving as a result of the impeachment process. But Ukrainegate itself originates in Trump’s quarrel with the deep state, both in its deep roots (going back to the 2016 FBI investigation into Russian interference in the election) and more immediate causes (a CIA officer’s blowing the whistle on Trump’s use of the presidency to smear Joe Biden).

As *The New York Times* reported in a separate article, much of the current drama in Washington is a product of Trump’s fighting with the deep state. “Nameless, faceless and voiceless, the C.I.A. officer who first triggered the greatest threat to `President Trump’s tenure in office seemed to be practically the embodiment of the ‘deep state’ that the president has long accused of trying to take him down,” the newspaper observes. “But over the last three weeks, the deep state has emerged from the shadows in the form of real live government officials, past and present, who have defied a White House attempt to block cooperation with House impeachment investigators and provided evidence that largely backs up the still-anonymous whistle-blower.”

Some liberals have taken to openly celebrating the deep state. Michelle Cottle, a member of *The New York Times* editorial board, penned a paean to the anonymous bureaucrats she sees as leading a secret resistance to an autocratic president. “President Trump is right,” Cottle argued. “The deep state is alive and well. But it is not the sinister, antidemocratic cabal of his fever

dreams. It is, rather, a collection of patriotic public servants—career diplomats, scientists, intelligence officers and others—who, from within the bowels of this corrupt and corrupting administration, have somehow remembered that their duty is to protect the interests, not of a particular leader, but of the American people.”

This full-throttle enthusiasm for unelected government officials, including the spies at the CIA, should give us pause. Trump is a terrible president, but do we really want to leave major political events, including the impeachment of the president, in the hands of the intelligence community, with faith that they will be motivated only by patriotism?

There is a GIF from the 2014 movie *Godzilla* where Ken Watanabe sees two monsters in battle and says, “Let them fight.” A similar response is tempting in the struggle between Trump and the CIA.

In trying to sort out the dispute between Trump and his enemies inside the government, it useful to ditch the term deep state, with its overtones of conspiracies and origins in far less democratic societies like Turkey and Egypt. The deep state is more accurately described as the administrative state: all the people who make Washington function no matter what who is president. This administrative state is often successful in coopting even presidential cabinet members and parts of the White House staff, since they all receive institutional instruction from an army of nonappointed staffers.

Trump isn't the first president to clash with the administrative state. The permanent bureaucracy has a bias towards the status quo, so any ambitious agenda, especially in foreign policy, often meets resistance. Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger famously had to keep the Pentagon and National Security Council out of the loop as they created a back channel to the People's Republic of China. More recently, Barack Obama often felt hemmed in by the administrative state, believing it was trying to tie his hands in the Middle East with a bigger Syrian intervention than he wanted and also creating roadblocks to the Iran nuclear deal. As with Nixon, Obama found ways to work around the preferences of bureaucracy.

To outwit the administrative state, a president needs cunning and an awareness of how government works. That's exactly what Trump lacks. He's a blunderbuss who likes to give orders but has no understanding of how to follow through to make sure they get carried out.

While many of the consequences of Trump's presidency are tragic, the underlying story is also a farce, a comedy of misunderstanding with escalating outrages. Trump's only ever been the head of a private family business. So his idea of leadership is to bark commands. His personal business has also been borderline corrupt and he has no regard for the law or habit of obeying norms. When he became president, Trump thought he could run the government the same way he runs his real estate empire, not realizing that the administrative state was well-practiced in the art of hamstringing presidents.

As Bob Woodward records in *Fear*, his account of Trump's early days as president, members of Trump's staff shared the administrative state's skepticism of many of Trump's policies and went out of their way to sabotage them. On one occasion, Trump ordered a letter to be written withdrawing the United States from a trade agreement with South Korea. Trump's staff secretary Rob Porter and his economic adviser Gary Cohn kept stealing copies of the letter from Trump's

desk. According to Woodward, “It was no less than an administrative coup d’état, an undermining of the will of the president of the United States and his constitutional authority.”

As *The New York Times* notes, there have been other examples of the administrative state’s thwarting Trump’s will. “While many career employees have left, some of those who stayed have resisted some of Mr. Trump’s initiatives,” the newspaper points out. “After the president canceled large war games with South Korea, the military kept doing them—just at a smaller scale and without talking about them. Fearing that Mr. Trump would blow up a NATO summit, diplomats negotiated an agreement before the forum even began.”

Trump and the administrative state have been trapped in a cycle of conflict from day one. The more the administrative state thwarts Trump, the more he becomes paranoid and lashes out against them, which provokes more resistance.

Trump will leave a mess in the White House that goes beyond what he himself has done. His fecklessness has made the administrative state overweening and insolent. The challenge for the next Democratic president will be bringing the administrative state in line, which means having a reckoning with the breakdown of discipline. A President Warren or Sanders will need to call attention to how Trump’s lawlessness encouraged insubordination in government, which needs to end.

Whoever is president would do well at the very beginning of their term to call attention to the insubordination that has occurred, describe it as a failure due to Trump’s corruption—but underscore that it must never be repeated. There will have to be a truth and reconciliation process where the breakdown of government under Trump is publicized. Instead of the comforting narrative of patriotic public servants who resisted an autocrat, we’ll need the true story, which is of a general breakdown of norms. It’s one thing to disobey a lawbreaker like Trump, but the administrative state owes obedience to lawful presidents.