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The Federal Toll of Trump's Failure to Lead

Biden will restore stability and protections to civil service workers, but some damage will be long-lasting

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“Fired by tweet” has become a hallmark of the Trump administration. Photographer: Tasos Katopodis/Getty Images

When the final chapter is written on the impact Donald Trump's presidency has had on government, it will tell the story of an administration that has undermined its capabilities in ways that are both well-known and under the radar. At best, this administration has sabotaged its own success. At worst, it's weakened the nation's ability to respond to the deadly coronavirus pandemic, the economic crisis and a host of national security issues.

Trump has ousted his own appointees at the Pentagon and elsewhere in a manner that has become the president's signature — by tweet. Dismissing Defense Secretary Mark Esper and, more recently, Christopher Krebs, the director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, and

replacing them with acolytes fits the long-standing pattern of an administration that has seen four White House chiefs of staff, four national security advisers and unusually high Cabinet turnover.

The latest purge is unsurprising because we've seen it before in Trump's relentless drumbeat of workforce upheaval and instability. But beyond the high-profile changes in [key leadership positions](#), alarming examples of turmoil have occurred outside of public scrutiny, including the loss of significant numbers of career employees and their expertise at multiple agencies.

The Department of Education, for example, which has championed many controversial policies, lost more than 14% of its career workforce, while employment at

the Department of Agriculture fell by almost 8%, in part because of a decision to relocate two major research offices from Washington to Kansas City. The move resulted in a huge exodus of talent.

Non-foreign-service employment at the State Department fell by nearly 9% from December 2016 to December 2019, a period that saw nine senior positions turn over at least once. Currently, more than one-third of the assistant secretary or undersecretary positions are vacant or filled by acting officials, leaving career diplomats and civil-service staff without direction and many initiatives adrift.

Data from the [Best Places to Work in the Federal Government](#) rankings show another troubling trend: low levels of employee engagement and job satisfaction at a number of organizations, including the Justice Department, Social Security Administration, State Department and Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. Better results come from higher engagement, so there's reason to worry when employees are disempowered, without leadership or lacking the resources needed to do their jobs.

Two recent executive orders from Trump are compounding fear within the professional ranks, including one issued in October that would create a new job classification for "career employees in confidential, policy-determining, policy-making and policy-advocating positions." The order would strip these individuals of long-standing civil-service protections and allow politically appointed leaders to fire them at will.

While the order could be reversed by the new administration — and is being challenged in the courts — some agencies might act before President-elect Joe Biden's Jan. 20 inauguration, removing career employees with deep expertise in such fields as public health, the environment, regulatory affairs and national security, while embedding Trump loyalists in those jobs.

The move undermines the merit-based, nonpartisan career civil service and represents an attempted return to the corrupt spoils system of the 19th century that ignored competence and used public offices to reward members of the victorious political party.

The president also issued an executive order in September that placed troubling limitations on the racial-discrimination training federal employees can receive. Diversity, equity and inclusion education is critical to developing effective leadership and building a workforce with equitable opportunities to contribute, succeed and grow. A legal challenge is pending.

Michael Chertoff, secretary of the Department of Homeland Security under President George W. Bush, recently said that the story of the Trump administration has been "a disdain for the workings of government."

"It's almost as if it's a determination that they want to wreck government and make it as hard as possible for government to do its job," Chertoff said.

The nation's future and the health of our democracy are tied to a well-functioning government. The president-elect has promised to restore stability and will no doubt reverse some of the damage. He'll also need to reinvigorate and strengthen the professional, nonpartisan civil service to better serve the public and protect our economy, health and national security.

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