"No Place for Amateurs": Trump as Decider and Administrator-in-Chief

Abstract This chapter examines Trump as Chief Executive, placing his style in the context of other models of presidential organization. His relations with staff, the Cabinet, and the bureaucracy is contrasted with views of scholars, including Richard Neustadt. It notes Trump is a governing if not political novice, wasn’t was a real CEO as a businessman, and has little understanding of how to manage the executive branch. The large staff turnover, scandals and corruption within his administration, infighting and decision/policy reversals, etc., along with generally ineffective implementation are linked to his personality, background, and failure to comprehend the job. At the same time, as one of his goals was to “deconstruct the administrative state,” his lack of attention, incompetence, and regulatory and budget cuts have hampered the efficacy of the executive branch—yet, also, arguably his own authority.

Keywords Trump, Donald · Chief Executive · White House staffing · Administrative presidency

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Introduction

The previous two chapters applied Richard Neustadt’s (1960, 1990) model of presidential power and influence to explain major political and policy difficulties of the early-to-mid Trump presidency. Essentially, they argue that Trump’s weak power position—in terms of both elite relations and popular support—coupled with poor strategic and tactical decisions in some important cases (health care, the 2019 budget and government shutdown, over “his” border wall, and diplomatic relations with North Korea) can be understood in part through Neustadt’s and related presidency research.

This chapter turns to the question of the president as Chief Executive, at least in certain important respects. It first examines why the administrative, executive, and organizational role of the president is important for decision-making and power, and what the literature on such matters says about how to create effective presidential modus operandi. It then discusses Neustadt’s perspective on these questions, before turning to the administrative history and practice of President Donald Trump. It finds that Trump has adopted a “competitive” approach to advising, staffing, etc., akin to Neustadt’s recommendation, but that his own political inexperience, personal temperament and misguided priorities (i.e., loyalty over competence) have undermined even the few virtues of the Neustadt/Franklin Roosevelt model, the closest to Trump’s in practice. On the other hand, he has had some success in hampering the administrative state below him, one of his main goals, though ironically that in some ways may limit his own power.

The Chief Executive Role: The President and the Presidency

The president’s role as chief executive, while perhaps the most obvious part of the job, is nonetheless multifaceted and has become more complex as the government of the United States has grown. In addition, the structure and political contexts of the executive branch give presidents limited control over their “own” turf (e.g., see Howell 2017, pp. 241–246).

Voters also don’t select candidates for the office primarily based on their managerial skills. In Trump’s case, some may have been drawn to his claims of business acumen, and his career as head of his own company. But
in other respects, he clearly is the least-experienced—in terms of supervising any government organization—person to hold the job, and was far less so than his 2016 opponent, Hillary Clinton.

Managing the executive branch also isn’t the most glamorous side of being president, and many presidents seem to prefer focusing on other aspects, such as public relations or foreign policy. Having said that, if presidents do not pay close attention to their administrative duties or the implementation of policy—especially in their appointments of others to oversee such tasks—it can create headaches for them later on. Notably, scandals (e.g., Harding’s Teapot Dome) or bureaucratic failures (e.g., Obama’s rollout of the Obamacare website) derail priorities and can undermine other parts of the presidential job.

**Politicization Versus Competence**

The modern administrative state reflects a built-in tension between political responsiveness and technical expertise. The US federal government addresses this dilemma through empowering presidents to appoint top-layer administrative and White House staff positions, with unelected, merit-based civil servants filling out the rest. Presidents, especially newly elected ones, must navigate this inherent conflict. On the one hand, they want—or should want—competent people in the leadership of various executive organizations, but they also want control over subordinates and people who agree with them, and are under pressure to reward their supporters with jobs. Most presidents attempt to balance these competing issues by using the personnel system to recruit people who are both competent, and loyal to them personally (Pfiffner 2011, p. 118).

Still, presidents who focus too much on politicizing the executive branch can run the risk that their underlings and advisors will recommend, or even carry out policies or actions, that are unwise, if not illegal or unethical. The Watergate scandal in the Nixon Administration is an extreme example.

**Organizational Design for Advice and Decision-Making**

In addition to having “one President” solely vested with executive power under the Constitution, presidents must also be “deciders” (as George W. Bush put it), and thus need quality input and help to be effective. If they are not given a broad range of advice, or are separated from different
points of view, they may make ill-informed or poorly-thought-out decisions. Having an adequate support apparatus is thus key to their success. “If the greatest threat to presidential decision-making is isolation, or not receiving the advice necessary, then organizing the White House staff as well as managing the flow of information becomes a critical task” (Han and Heith 2018, p. 272; see also Buchanan 1991).

Since Franklin Roosevelt created the modern institutional presidency, presidents have generally chosen three types of executive staffing and advisory systems, with some variations: the competitive, the hierarchical, and the collegial models (e.g., Han and Heith 2018, pp. 273–276).

In the competitive model, advisors and staff generally do not have set roles; the president assigns them tasks, often secretly overlapping ones, and sets them to work against each other. Solely utilized by Franklin Roosevelt—and discussed in more detail below—this model gives the president multiple sources of potentially useful information. But it also takes great initiative and skill on the part of the president, as well as requires great energy and time that could be spent on the deliberation of decisions themselves (Buchanan 1991, pp. 84–85). If not managed properly, it also grates on the staff or advisers involved, and may be inefficient in terms of having multiple people doing the same tasks. Perhaps for this reason, all subsequent presidents up through Obama have avoided it.

The hierarchical model, though not always perfectly “pyramidal” in form, is more structured with clear lines of authority and portfolios, responsibilities, etc., for personnel. First employed by Eisenhower, given his military background, and adopted by a number of others (usually Republicans) such as Nixon and the two Bushes—it relies on a strong chief of staff who sets agendas, controls access to the president, and is seen as the president’s right hand. The upside to this model is its efficiency: strong organization, division of labor, and controlled flow of information to the president. The downside is that the president may be insulated from alternative perspectives, especially those that either disagree with (or are assumed by gatekeepers to be against) presidential inclinations, or are intentionally prevented from being brought to the president’s attention for political or other reasons. The president may in turn be given bad advice, or worse yet have simple “yes men and women” who tell the president what they want to hear, or do not critically analyze alternatives, which can lead to poor or even illegal decisions.
Lastly, the collegial model—selected by Democratic presidents such as Kennedy, Carter, and Clinton—is a more open, flexible model schematically akin to a wheel, with the president as the hub (or center) and key advisors as the spokes. The Chief of Staff generally is weaker, and a cadre of top aides—though they may include Cabinet secretaries or others outside the White House—are generally co-equals with access, status, and cooperative input to the president. This has the advantages of preventing presidential isolation, and giving the president a wide range of views, etc., but its disadvantages are that it may take too much time, overly involve the president in disputes or matters best left to subordinates, and is not as clearly organized in terms of duties.

The conventional wisdom among scholars who study White House organization and presidential advisory systems is that some modified form of the strong-chief-of-staff model is preferable to all the others. That is, with one important caveat: provided the chief is an “honest broker” and allows different views and some kind of access to the president to be heard, as opposed to blocking off or “deciding for” the president (see Pfiffner 2011, pp. 92–93). As we will see, Trump’s administration has not followed such recommendations.

**NEUSTADT’S VIEW OF STAFFING AND PRESIDENTIAL-EXECUTIVE RELATIONS**

The administrative side of the presidency does not play a central part in Neustadt’s discussion of presidential effectiveness. His focus on presidential persuasion through bargaining did recognize the need for political and power-handling skills with the president’s own branch (cabinet, staff, larger federal bureaucracy), much like other actors in the Washington community. The president’s limited ability to issue orders to or expect cooperation even with his supposed subordinates, and the ways his minions or associates in the administration could intentionally or unintentionally undermine the president’s goals, was discussed, but more within the framework of his larger picture of power relations.

He himself admitted later in subsequent editions that in retrospect originally he spent too little space on the question of staffing, and because the “President’s associates can so contribute to his own personal destruction” the topic should be discussed on its own (1990, p. 218). Nevertheless, he does provide nuggets of wisdom here and there, as well
as observations about how a president should act in this realm that in turn shed light on the Trump presidency.

Two points from his book seem most applicable to Trump: the general importance of the incumbent’s experience and expertise, and the central role of the president in astutely running the institutional presidency. First, as Neustadt thundered in his original edition, “the presidency is no place for amateurs” (1990, p. 151). Though he meant this in terms of presidential skills in seeking and using power—namely, that those without relevant prior governing experience would be unlikely to possess them—this point also applies to overseeing the executive branch and the operation of presidential staffing and advisory systems.

It is true that after witnessing the problematic experiences of Johnson and Nixon—two of the more formally experienced persons to serve in recent memory—he did retract the statement a bit. He reflected that perhaps it was the kind of previous experiences, and what an individual learned from them, more than the amount of previous experience, that mattered (1990, pp. 203–209). Ronald Reagan, an outsider who nonetheless showed an ability to play the Washington game effectively is a case in point, although he had his own challenges in his second term. Nevertheless, even Neustadt would likely be taken aback by Trump, not just for his complete lack of political and government experience, but also that unlike other outsiders—Carter, Reagan, and Clinton—he appears to refuse to listen to advice. Nor does he learn from some of the more experienced members of his team, like General James Mattis, his one-time Defense Secretary, or Reince Priebus, his one-time chief of staff, preferring to “go with his gut” as he once claimed in Art of the Deal (1987, p. 28).

Second, Neustadt focused on the “chief administrator” role primarily in terms of the president as executive ringleader, shrewd intelligence-gatherer, and paramount decision-maker. In this sense, the White House apparatus was there to “help the President” in both the administrative side of the job, as well as the political and end-seeking parts of it.

It is thus useful to delineate Neustadt’s view of the president as chief executive. For him, no amount of organizational structure or strategy was a replacement for a president’s personal skills, social intellect, and “will and thrill” to power. As Bert Rockman, an insightful student of the administrative presidency, noted: while the growth of the presidency in the post-Depression era required organization and effective
internal governance, for Neustadt, “the presidency was fundamentally about leadership, not management” (Rockman 2000, p. 159).

Along those lines, Neustadt did not think highly of the strong-chief-of-staff, or hierarchical, corporate board model. He believed the president needed to be actively involved in managing his choices, information, and power. These were duties the president alone should perform, and that “systems of management are for business school curricula and not for political leaders” (Rockman 2000, p. 162).

Neustadt in fact admired the Roosevelt approach discussed above, much as he admired FDR as a political leader and tactician in general. He saw in Roosevelt a man who was not only intensely curious, and a sociable yet manipulative master of human relations, but also a sly protector of power and prerogative.

He also quoted admirably about his competitive style from biographers like Arthur Schlesinger. This led him to believe that the Roosevelt system allowed the president both inside information as well as time to make proper choices: “Not only did he keep his organizations overlapping and divide authority among them, but he also tended to put men of clashing temperaments, outlooks, and ideas, in charge of them. …. Administrative competition gave him two rewards. He got the choices and the due notice, both. …He also got that treasure for a President, time to defer a decision” (Neustadt 1990, p. 132).

Neustadt saw the president as the driver of the presidential car. Therefore, staff and administration were necessary to serve the president’s political as well as governing needs, and only individual presidents could determine what would work best for them. “In the end, Neustadt presumes a president of intense curiosity, angling to know what his options are—not as they appear immediately, but as they constrain future choices and political resources. …But such a (largely hypothetical) president must not only have a well-honed taste for power, but must also be extraordinarily (perhaps impossibly) wise” (Rockman 2000, pp. 162–163).

**Trump in Practice: FDR in Form, Not FDR in Function**

First, it is obvious to any observer that Trump is foremost a salesman, and not a CEO. Indeed, despite his “Apprentice” image, he is not manager,
with his companies largely run informally through cronies and connections to him, and sold on his name as the brand. Unlike his first Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson of Exxon, Trump has never been head of a large corporation. As one biographer noted, “Trump’s operation was small (20,000 employees) in comparison to large companies; it was highly segmented, and depended entirely on the man at the top. It was no accident that the main business strategies Donald Trump adopted had to do with managing his own persona and building his own celebrity” (Slater 2005, p. 14). As he put it in *Art of the Deal*: “…we [The Trump Organization] are not a bureaucracy... in our organization, anyone with a question could bring it directly to me, and get an answer immediately. That’s precisely why I’ve been able to act faster than my competitors on so many deals” (1987, p. 209).

Kruse (2016) noted that Trump’s role in his business organization was quite unlike a normal corporate executive because the Trump Organization is a family-owned limited liability company that doesn’t have to abide by many of the corporate transparency or other laws, where managers are subject to a degree of oversight, such as with a Board of Directors. Furthermore, his managerial style was characterized by “impulsiveness, his affinity for broad brush thinking over nitty-gritty policies, his preference for small staff, his taste for internal competition, and a kind of creative chaos, his reflexive reliance on blind loyalists instead of more disciplined surrogates, [and] his reluctance to cede control” (Da Vinha 2019; Kruse 2016).

Trump echoed an old Republican line that “government should be run like a business.” However, being CEO of the United States is different, and indeed government does not and cannot run like a business. This reality and his Republican affiliation would lead one to think that he would adopt the strong chief-of-staff model.

However, with the exception of a scheduler, Trump is otherwise “micromanager-in-chief.” Since rebuilding and rebranding his business in the 1990s, Trump has maintained a hands-on approach, rarely leaving the office, yet at the same time, he encouraged his hundreds of acquaintances, associates and contacts to “drop by any time” (Slater 2005, p. 20). As Trump himself noted in *The Art of the Deal*, “I leave my door open. You can’t be too entrepreneurial if you’ve got too much structure” (Trump 1987, p. 1).

Trump appears to have continued that more open, free-wheeling organization, with multiple centers of power and access, in the White House. In his first year, Reince Priebus officially had the Chief of Staff title,
but political director Steve Bannon and Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner jockeyed for the president’s ear and influence, with specific duties apparently less defined. Prior to John Kelly’s tenure as Chief of Staff, it was reputed that more than ten people had “walk in” privileges to the Oval Office (Pfiffner 2018). Similarly, it was reported that Trump remarkably had over half of his day—up to 9 hours, by some accounts—devoted to “unstructured” executive time, mostly watching TV, tweeting, or calling people (Johnson and Lippman 2018).

On the surface at least, it does appear Trump follows the competitive model of Roosevelt. He has a preference for an unstructured White House operation, and favors subordinates who compete for his attention and assignment of tasks (Lewis et al. 2018).

However, there are some key differences that not only make Trump’s style problematic in general, but also show he lacks certain qualities of FDR and his presidency. Notably, Roosevelt was also a master of human relations and subtle manipulation, coupling it with his witty personality and sunny disposition to ensure staff morale. Furthermore, he’d honed his skills as Secretary of the Navy and Governor of New York prior to winning the White House. These are key distinctions, as such a style is both demanding of the president, and his aides and other administration members. Namely:

As an outsider, President Trump does not have the political expertise of Roosevelt and so far he has not demonstrated a desire to acquire it. As a novice to government, President Trump does not know where administrative power lies and, apparently, many on his staff do not either. The president values a particular kind of competence—talent that mirrors his own, including the ability to be successful in the private sector and be a forceful presence on television or social media. President Trump’s impatience with Gary Cohn and H. R. McMaster and selection of television personalities John Bolton and Lawrence Kudlow are illustrations of this preference. (Lewis et al. 2018, p. 494).

Trump not only doesn’t have FDR’s governing skills and experience, he is that type-A personality executive who screams at his staff and blames others, and apparently thinks competition is an end in itself, making the winners stronger. Two “insider” publications (Anonymous 2018; Rucker and Leonnig 2020) paint a picture of a White House struggling to keep things running, under internal stress and conflict, and trying to prevent
their tempestuous, ill-informed, and vainglorious boss from acting rashly and foolishly.

For example, Trump berated his communications team for inconsistencies in their public statements about his controversial firing of FBI Director James Comey, but these were mainly due to his own shifting claims (Pfiffner 2018). In a more extreme case, Trump was reportedly “verbally and emotionally abusive” toward his Secretary of Homeland Security, Kirstjen Nielsen, who resigned in April 2019 (Sheth and Relman 2020), despite the fact she attempted to carry out some of his more controversial policies toward immigration.

Early academic assessments of Trump’s White House and job as chief administrator concluded there was a lack of discipline, process, and policy focus. His competitive style led to staff infighting and disappointment, sapping energy, and leading to inefficiency (see Pfiffner 2018; Lewis et al. 2018).

Likewise, one scholarly appraisal of his foreign policy decision-making in his first year concluded, “despite some similarities in appearance and rhetoric, Trump’s management style has differed significantly from Roosevelt’s ‘competitive adhocracy,’ …Aloof to the details and complexities of the policy-making process, Trump’s mercurial personality and instinctual behavior have hindered the development of a thoughtful and structured policy process” (Da Vinha 2019, p. 300).

It is also obvious that Trump values loyalty and political allegiance over policy expertise. Appointees who praise him in public, and don’t resist his often changing moods and positions, are celebrated in Tweets; others who don’t, such as Rex Tillerson, his first Secretary of State, are subject to public scorn. One of the reasons it appears he relies on family members and gives them significant portfolios—such as son-in-law Jared Kushner, who was the administration point person on Middle East and criminal justice issues, and daughter Ivanka Trump, on women’s and family issues—is that he can rely on them.

As an inexperienced outsider, he also does not understand that the government does not work directly for him. This misunderstanding was most vividly displayed in his dismay over his first Attorney General, Jeff Sessions who not only recused himself from the Russia “meddling” investigation, but favored the independent counsel work surrounding it (possibly understanding that it would be more credible and help Trump in the long run). The danger for Trump, as with any president, is that misplaced loyalty can lead to disastrous oversights if not tunnel vision.
Attempts to “rein” Trump in or make the White House more structured have had little success. Trump appears to have learned few lessons on the job and continues his notable lack of self-reflection (Stewart 2018). His second Chief of Staff, retired general John Kelly (July 31, 2017–January 2, 2019) honestly tried to bring some structure, organization, and discipline to the White House. While Kelly appeared to have some early successes, nevertheless, in this regard Trump continued to undercut or blindside major decisions or actors, especially through public comments, Twitter rants, and the like.

After Kelly’s departure, one report noted, “In any White House, the chief of staff is arguably the most punishing position. But in this White House—a den of disorder ruled by an impulsive president—it has proved to be an especially thankless job. The two people to hold the job were left with their reputations diminished after failing to constrain the president, who often prefers to function as his own chief of staff” (Rucker et al. 2018).

In the third era of the Trump White House, under acting Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney, notably also continuing in his job as Director of the Office of Management and Budget, it appeared Trump had won, maintaining his competitive, open, is-his-own-man style. Mulvaney did not try to “manage” Trump and played less of a broker.²

As one retrospective report on Kelly’s dissatisfaction with the job, after his departure from the White House put it: “Kelly represented a faction of the administration that maintained at least some independence from Trump, however small. That cadre is mostly gone, forced out and replaced by what seems to be evermore sycophantic Trump devotees. That Kelly is publicly breaking with the president after the fact may bolster his image as a one-time moderating influence on Trump, albeit one that, like so many others, ultimately proved unsuccessful” (Lutz 2019).

**Appointments, Staffing, and Executive Team—“The Apprentice” Comes to Washington**

In his executive branch appointments, he has not just favored loyalty over competence, he has actively sought people that either have no experience, and/or are directly at odds, with the agencies they are to lead (see Pfiffner 2018). He also likes to keep nominees, staffers, and the media in suspense, as if they are in a reality television show.

Again, Trump was notable in deviating from past presidential practice. Yes, some presidents like Reagan appointed heads unsympathetic to
their organizations’ goals, or others like Nixon and W. Bush used subcabinet posts to place loyalist allies to control them. Trump is even more extreme, appointing heads who supported cutting the budgets of many of the departments and agencies they oversaw.

Examples of this practice abound. Scott Pruitt, appointed to head the Environmental Protection Agency once was Attorney General of Oklahoma and actively fought with, and sued, the agency. Tom Price, Secretary of Health and Human Services, had been a staunch opponent of Obamacare and Social Security as a congressman. Rick Perry, former Governor of Texas, was put in at the Department of Energy, an agency he famously forgot the name of as one he wanted to eliminate when he ran for president. Betsy DeVos appointed as Secretary of Education, was linked to the multilevel marketing company Amway, and was a proponent of school choice and privatization. Ben Carson, a physician-turned-presidential candidate, with no prior management or other relevant experience, was tapped as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

In addition, the instability, demand for loyalty under ever-changing conditions, and so on, has indeed taken a toll on Trump’s team. Much like his televised persona on The Apprentice, President Trump likes to fire people, if they don’t quit in frustration first.

Not surprisingly, his administration has been marked by massive turnover, well over that experienced by other recent presidencies. According to a Brookings Institution study continuously monitoring such activity, turnover in Trump’s “A” team (major officials in the Executive Office of the President) was a staggering 80 percent as of January 2020 (Tenpas 2020). A different study, counting all major staff, cabinet, undersecretary, etc., positions, found that by May 2019, at the time it was published, a total of 430 people who’d left since the inauguration (in 850 days), making for an average of roughly one every two days. Of these, 45 percent were those who left after being hired by Trump (Cobb 2019).

Such a measure also shows the degree to which experienced staff or agency officials agree to stay on to work with the new administration. Based on those statistics, Trump had well over two times the turnover of the Obama and W. Bush Administrations in a comparable period of time. Also, Trump had lost 14 of his 21 cabinet secretaries in two years. As the latter report noted, “the record high turnover of the Trump Administration is indicative of the chaotic and destructive nature of his presidency” (Cobb 2019).
However, the “staffing gap” of Trump’s presidency didn’t just start with an inhospitable work environment, it was also due contextual factors, some of which Trump’s people should have foreseen. The consensus of observers is that Trump’s transition team was unprepared to facilitate hiring and also didn’t anticipate normal first-year patterns of Senate politics, such delaying tactics by opposition Democrats and patronage desires by Republicans. According to one estimate, Trump’s nominees took twice as long for confirmation as Reagan’s three decades earlier, and as of the third year, only 515 of the 715 jobs requiring Senate confirmation were filled with permanent occupants, leaving 170 with no nominee, a record (Cook 2020).

A result of this poor organization has been that Trump has also set a record for the number of “acting heads” who are appointed to fill vacancies but haven’t been yet confirmed by the Senate, due to recess or other temporary appointments. In fact, Trump appears to “like it that way,” commenting in a press conference that it gives him flexibility (Naylor 2019). However, an alternative characterization by a set of public administration scholars concluded, “[h]aving agencies run by a succession of acting officials is neither good for management nor a winning strategy for accomplishing the president’s administrative goals. …Managing the administrative state with acting officials is a little like running a school with a team of substitute teachers” (Lewis et al. 2018, p. 488).

**Effects: Lack of Deliberation, Lack of Focus, Lack of Ethics**

Trump’s organizational and operation style do impact his actual policy and decision-making. Pfifflner (2018) notes a number of cases just in the first year of his administration where a lack of a clear policy development and decision-making process led to unnecessary challenges in areas as disparate as firing FBI Director James Comey, Obamacare repeal, and the Paris climate agreement withdrawal to name a few. One scholar noted years ago that “organizational efficiency” is one power resource, beyond personal ones, that presidents actually can control. “Not only need he [sic] concern himself with the ability to persuade effectively those with different institutional vantage points and different political responsibilities, he must rein in a cumbersome White House organization to maximize his ability to do so” (Kerbel 1991, p. 160).
In particular, the rollout and implementation of Trump’s “travel ban” on certain Muslim-majority countries and halting refugee admittance through executive order in the first days of his presidency reflects a quickly crafted, undeliberated, and secretive process of loyalists rather than experts (Pfiffner 2018, p. 156). Drafted within the White House by special assistants to the president Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller, few congressional members were consulted about it (and they had nondisclosure agreements). The document also did not go through the normal interagency or even White House process for legal and policy clearance for such orders. Consequently, when it was attacked as religiously discriminative, White House spokesman Sean Spicer and DHS Secretary (later Chief of Staff) John Kelly denied it was aimed at Muslims, yet they were undermined by President Trump himself, who Tweeted that was its purpose. Furthermore, the White House was unprepared when the action was later challenged in court, causing delays and controversy, though ultimately the Supreme Court did allow parts of it to be implemented. Still, though it reflected one of Trump’s campaign promises, it could have been vetted and better-designed before being announced.

Another illustrative if more obscure case was an imposed ban on abortions for undocumented migrant minors (Rayasam 2018). It revealed how an ad hoc, no chain-of-command, and almost random policy was being set by low-level officials of the administration. A lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union brought to light that the policy was designed by a single Trump appointee within the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Department of Homeland Security, and was communicated via emails, memos, and conversations to staff. This was not the ordained or legal protocol for such matters, according to a former Obama official from ORR. In this case, “the new guidelines created confusion for shelters caught between concerns about violating state law and fears of losing their HHS contract to house unaccompanied minors” (Rayasam 2018).

After examining three major cases—withdrawal from the Paris climate accords, decertifying the Iran nuclear agreement, and recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s legitimate capital—one scholar concluded, “…during the administration’s first year in office, deliberation was not the norm in formulating US foreign policy... More precisely, in seeking to gain Trump’s approval and influence policy, aides are tempted to exceed their mandate and assume risky moves that can potentially create problems for the president” (Da Vinha 2019, p. 302).
Trump also claimed he would pick “the best people” for his administration. But his lack of an organized transition team, combined with general weak personnel management have created two other pathologies of his administration beyond loyalty and inexperience mentioned above: poor vetting of nominees and related ethical transgressions and shortcomings.

First, the Trump administration has demonstrated, not just early on in the transition from President Obama—and with whom, on this score, notable contrasts can be made—a lack of proper screening of its nominees, who in turn end up having ethical or other problems (see Lu 2019). Notably, three Trump selections for cabinet secretary posts—Andrew Puzder (Labor), Dr. Ronny Jackson (Veterans Affairs), and Patrick Shanahan (Defense)—withdrew after serious charges came to light. In Puzder’s and Shanahan’s cases, it was accusations of domestic violence against their family and spouses; Jackson, as noted in Chapter 3, withdrew under a slew of allegations, from being drunk on the job, to being too lenient in passing out medications.

Next, the administration also has been plagued by unethical if not illegal actions by a number of officials. These are almost too great to list in their entirety (see Longman, 2019). David Price, Secretary of Health and Human Services, and David Shulkin, Secretary of Veterans Affairs, ran up huge bills with private jets and family-related travel; Price also had dubious ties to lobbyists. Ryan Zinke, Secretary of the Interior, also was charged with running up private-jet costs and for spending department money on personal matters. Scott Pruitt, EPA Director, engaged in a variety of illegal actions including first-class travel, gifts from lobbyists, and installing a $43,000 sound-proof phone booth in his office. Ben Carson, Secretary of Housing, as noted above, was cited in an inspector general’s report for spending over $30,000 of government money redecorating his office. Alex Acosta, Secretary of Labor, was found to have given notorious accused pedophile Jeffrey Epstein a “sweetheart” plea deal when he was a US Attorney in Florida. Pruitt, Zinke, and Acosta all resigned in disgrace. These examples do not even include Trump’s own family and other forms of corruption (see Leonhardt and Ian 2018).

Admittedly all administrations suffer from some degree of discord, scandals, or error, and staff continuity like that of the first W. Bush Administration (due to 9/11) is rare. Nevertheless, by any standard, the dysfunction of the Trump Administration does seem extreme—possibly the most maladroit and corrupt since Ulysses S. Grant.
Similarly, while not all of these features of Trump-as-executive tie directly into Neustadt’s model or prescriptions, they do relate to his notions of the importance of elite reputation, and avoiding bad choices that can hurt presidents’ power down the line. The scandals and controversies at a minimum create bad press and detract from the president’s agenda; they also portray an image of incompetence, even as some in the DC political community hate to admit it in public. While this motif does have the advantage of distraction from some of the effects of his actions, it leaves Trump open to be blamed if and when an “administrative disaster” like Hurricane Katrina under George W. Bush strikes. Trump may think it creates an exciting reality show of drama and intrigue, but his chaos, disorganization, and lack of a unified structure negatively impacts real policy implementation.3

“Deconstructing the Administrative State”—Success Through Neglect?

Neustadt, like many liberals of the mid-twentieth century if not insiders of all political persuasions, naturally believed government was a necessary, potentially positive force that needed to be effectively managed to work. However, for some extreme conservatives today, or even some populist followers of Trump, government is instead an evil that needs to be stopped, shrunk, or at least handicapped. From this perspective, then, Trump’s chaotic administrative style and direct attack on the executive apparatus of government is a good thing, and serves an alternative purpose.

First, as noted above, Trump has appointed top officials with little experience and even outward hostility toward the agencies they lead. But Trump has gone farther, by realizing that while he cannot fire most low-level agency bureaucrats (due to civil service and union protections), he can make them leave voluntarily. Whether through budget cuts, or simply government reorganization that makes their job less palatable, it has the same effect. For example, Mick Mulvaney, OMB Director and Chief of Staff, noted that US Department of Agriculture eliminated two-thirds of officials from its Economic Research Service and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture by forcing them to relocate from Washington, DC to Kansas City, as officials chose to resign rather than move. Perhaps not coincidentally, the ERS publishes studies about how climate change
and Trump’s tariffs will affect the farm industry, information the administration doesn’t want out (LeTourneau 2019). The “swamp” Trump is draining is not lobbyists or corrupt officials, but neutral, expert “brains.”

Second, through budget cuts and simple attrition via not filling positions, he has shrunk the executive branch in some respects. Trump has the largest number of vacancies in recent memory. Even Republican Senators became concerned that Trump had too many unfilled, if not acting, officials.

Taken together, such actions undermine morale and work efficacy from the top down. Probably the most extreme if not telling example is the US State Department. Through a combination of sluggishness in subcabinet appointments, coupled with weak if not hostile leaders like Rex Tillerson and Mike Pompeo, Tillerson’s successor as Secretary, as well as by an obvious down-grading of diplomacy, Trump has not only weakened liberal internationalism, he has undermined the department’s bureaucratic esprit de corps itself (Drezner 2019). Ironically, this erosion in turn has hampered his ability to, for example, make progress in key realms like policy toward North Korea (addressed in Chapter 4) (see Fisher 2018).

Trump has also used executive orders and other presidential prerogatives to cut back on regulations and even question the basic authority of certain agencies, like the Consumer Protection Bureau. One order demanded each agency reduce the costs of two rules for every new one enacted, and as of late 2018, the administration claimed agencies had far exceeded its rule-busting goals (see Hill 2018).

Trump also has another weapon: going public, via media attention and Twitter (Elder 2019). Bureaucrats, as well as their political bosses, fear bad publicity, and Trump’s thumbs can deliver it at a moment’s notice. For example, the State Department apparently recalled Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch from Ukraine back to DC early to avoid her “being fired by Tweet,” by the president.

Lastly, when these factors are combined with Trump’s own neglect of detail and poor administrative apparatus, the result is that in many respects the government simply does not govern effectively. Thus, whether by default or design, to use his phraseology, Trump may be “winning” in his aim to hamper the administrative state.
CONCLUSION: TRUMP
THE EXECUTIVE—A VERY MIXED BAG

In many ways, Trump appears to follow the administrative style of FDR that Neustadt admired. But clearly, he does not possess the requisite political or experiential skills. His past practices and peculiar business background are not relevant to the job, and he himself appears unable to take advice from anyone except maybe some of his family members. The massive turnover, lack of vetting or at least, lack of concern about skill and competence of those he appoints to major jobs, likewise show him to be an ineffective manager if not, recruiter- and administrator-in-chief. One early analysis—which could easily have been penned at the end of his third year—concluded, “The president claims expertise as a manager, but during his first year his approach had few of the visible hallmarks of successful executives in business or government” (Lewis et al. 2018, p. 498).

Trump’s ineptitude and simple failure to perform due diligence in most aspects of the executive side of the job, combined with staff attrition and his emphasis on loyalty over competence, demonstrate that whatever he may gain in initiative and agenda-setting via his unpredictable style, he loses in efficiency and deliberation. Granted, bureaucratic cuts and neglect, along with his ability to undercut careerists with going public strategies, have given him some success at reining in if not reducing the executive establishment. Nevertheless, such a governing and advisory style also opens the door to disaster, as we have seen with other presidencies, ala Nixon with Watergate and W. Bush with Katrina. The fact Trump has avoided such glaring debacles is probably more due to sheer luck than design.4

This paradoxical, or “mixed bag” aspect of Trump’s presidency also sets the stage for what follows. The next chapter examines areas and aspects where Trump has been successful, or at least has failed to perform as badly as one might expect, given Neustadt’s prescriptions.

NOTES

1. This was true through his 1990 edition, apparently. Eventually, Neustadt did change his mind, and agreed that a chief of staff was useful, provided the chief wasn’t a powerful presidential surrogate like Sherman Adams
(Eisenhower) or J. R. Haldeman (Nixon), akin to the conventional wisdom above (see Neustadt 1991).

2. Mnuchin’s tenure also soon proved to be short-lived. On March 6, 2020, Trump announced in dramatic fashion (and on a Friday night) the appointment of Rep. Mark Meadows, an early official Trump endorser, to be his fourth chief of staff in just three years (Bresnahan et al. 2020). Meadows not only was a Trump supporter, he pushed Trump to initiate the disastrous government shutdown over the border wall, discussed in Chapter 4.

3. This chapter was completed prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and crisis, which arguably demonstrates Trump’s lack of “organizational efficiency” (Kerbel 1991, pp. 22–23) and functional decision-making apparatus in the face of an unusual but not unheard of policy challenge, which has literally cost American lives.

4. As with note 3, it appears that with the Covid-19 pandemic, Trump’s luck may have run out.

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