The Failure of Foreign Policy Entrepreneurs in the Trump Administration

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One of the most important decisions a president will make after an election is what kind of relationship he/she will have with cabinet secretaries and agency heads. Will the president be controlling or autonomy giving? George H. W. Bush created a contractor presidency, one that subcontracted management to important officials, giving them considerable freedom, making them policy entrepreneurs. Yet, when it came time to support initiatives, Bush did not back his policy entrepreneurs, which ultimately led to policy failure. Bush’s approach to government is informative because of its similarities with Donald J. Trump’s strategy, who also created a contractor presidency. But Trump prevented those same executives from building their own teams and gave equivocal, or even contradictory, responses to their policy initiatives. Just as Bush’s unsupportive relationship with his policy entrepreneurs led to policy defeat, Trump’s contradicting connection with his policy entrepreneurs also resulted in policy failure.

Keywords: Donald J. Trump Presidency, American Foreign Policy, Contractor Presidency, Policy Entrepreneurs, Administrative Presidency, Transatlantic Relations, NATO, Russia, General James N. Mattis, General H. R. McMaster, General John Kelly.

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El fracaso de los empresarios de la política exterior en la administración Trump

Una de las decisiones más importantes que tomará un presidente después de una elección es qué tipo de relación tendrá con los secretarios del gabinete y los jefes de agencias. ¿El presidente estará controlando o dando autonomía? George H. W. Bush creó una presidencia de contratistas, una que subcontrataba la administración a funcionarios importantes, dándoles una libertad considerable, convirtiéndolos en empresarios políticos. Sin embargo, cuando llegó el momento de apoyar iniciativas, Bush no respaldó a sus empresarios políticos, lo que finalmente condujo al fracaso de las políticas. El enfoque de Bush hacia el gobierno es informativo debido a sus similitudes con la estrategia de Donald J. Trump, quien también creó una presidencia contratista. Pero Trump impidió que esos mismos ejecutivos crearan sus propios equipos y dio respuestas equivocadas o incluso contradictorias a sus iniciativas políticas. Así como la relación de falta de apoyo de Bush con sus empresarios políticos llevó a la derrota de las políticas, la conexión contradictoria de Trump con sus empresarios políticos también resultó en el fracaso de las políticas.

Palabras Clave: Presidencia de Donald J. Trump, Política Exterior Estadounidense, Presidencia de contratistas, Empresarios políticos, Presidencia administrativa, Relaciones Transatlánticas, OTAN, Rusia, General James N. Mattis, General H. R. McMaster, General John Kelly.

特朗普政府中外交政策企业家的失败

一名总统在选举后要作的最重要的决策之一是，他/她将和内阁部长及政府机构负责人形成什么样的关系。总统将采取集权还是放权？乔治·H·W·布什总统创造了一个合约式总统职位（contractor presidency），它将管理分包给重要官员，赋予其大量自由，让其成为政策企业家。然而，在应支持倡议计划时，布什并未支持其政策企业家，这最终导致政策失败。布什对待政府的方法能提供有用信息，因为其与唐纳德·J·特朗普的战略相似，后者也创造了一个合约式总统职位。不过，特朗普阻止了同样的行政官员建立各自团队，并对政策倡议计划给出模糊甚至是矛盾的回应。布什与政策企业家之间的不支持关系导致了政策失败，与此相同的是，特朗普与政策企业家之间的矛盾关系也导致了政策失败。

关键词: 唐纳德·J·特朗普政府, 美国外交政策, 合约式总统职位（contractor presidency），政策企业家，行政总统（administrative presidency），跨大西洋关系，北约，俄罗斯，上将James N. Mattis, 中将H. R. McMaster, 上将John Kelly.

One of the most important decisions a president makes soon after the election is what kind of relationship he or she will have with the heads of departments
and agencies in his or her administration. Will he/she control cabinet officials or will the president give them autonomy? For example, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama implemented a strategy of central oversight while both Bush presidents afforded their top officials greater policy latitude, allowing them, for instance, to select their subordinates. In particular, the strategy that George H. W. Bush adopted with some of his key officials is described as a *contractor presidency* (Laffin 1996)—one that mandated policy innovation and management to top executives, giving them considerable freedom (Warshaw 1996). Public policy scholar Martin Laffin found that Bush specifically appointed three policy activists or *entrepreneurs* to two cabinet positions and one agency head. Through their activism, Bush’s entrepreneurs certainly improved the morale in their departments and agency. Their strong activist reputations further enhanced the expectations of good policy outcomes.

However, when it came to policy success, the opposite was true. Thus, Laffin (1996) designed his research, where he used a variety of documentary sources, to find out why policy developed by entrepreneurs in the Bush Administration was much less satisfactory than Bush had anticipated when he adopted the approach. Laffin discovered that, in the end, the level of innovation and the entrepreneurial spirit of the appointees did not matter because, without presidential activism—without Bush spending his own political capital in backing his entrepreneurs—policy ultimately failed.

Perhaps Bush’s contractor strategy was doomed to fail from the start due to the underlying reasons why Bush gave the individual policy entrepreneurs broad autonomy over their departments and agency. All three top political executives were appointed to departments dealing with domestic policy; namely, Education, Housing and Urban Development, and the Environmental Protection Agency. From an experiential perspective, George H. W. Bush did not have an affinity with domestic policy; nor did he have strong policy commitments. As Laffin (1996, 550) writes, Bush “recognized the necessity of acquiring some domestic policy achievements to improve his chances of re-election, yet he saw little need to have a well-defined domestic policy agenda.” As a president with limited and vague domestic policy goals, it made sense to Bush to delegate authority to certain politically known individuals who had more expertise than he did in specific policy domains. Still, this did not lead Bush to support the autonomous executives that he appointed.

Laffin’s (1996) analysis of what went wrong with these three policy entrepreneurs is informative as a comparison since Donald J. Trump also created a contractor presidency, which failed for similar reasons. When he became president, Trump had few strong policy commitments, no well-defined policy agenda in both foreign or domestic policy, and a vague notion of transactional governing. Like Bush, Trump appointed policy entrepreneurs because he lacked the relevant policy expertise. However, unlike Bush, Trump appeared to have a special respect and admiration for strong character generals in the first part of his presidency (Haberman, Thrush, and Baker 2017; Kelly 2016). This research
focuses on the three generals to whom Trump afforded the most independence in the area of foreign policy in the first part of his presidency; two in the Executive Office of the President (Secretary of Defense General James Mattis and National Security Adviser General H. R. McMaster), and the White House Chief of Staff (General John Kelly).

In his investigation, Laffin (1996) defines failure as: (1) there is limited policy achievement; (2) policy outcomes do not match the desired policy as proposed by the entrepreneur; and (3) there is disorganized and confusing decision making within the policy area. Laffin further identifies five scenarios outlined later in this article that might produce these three types of failure in a contractor presidency—with Bush’s unwillingness to expend his own political power in backing his entrepreneurs being the most important element of failure in his contractor presidency. The analysis of the five scenarios in Trump’s contractor presidency offered in the present article suggests two causal mechanisms for failure. First that Trump, like Bush, withheld crucial support of the relevant policy as put forth by the entrepreneurs and, second that Trump insisted in appointing too many inexperienced loyalists, who actively emasculated the entrepreneurs’ autonomy. The interplay between these causal factors and the evidence of policy failure are further illustrated through two cases: namely, the preservation and strengthening of the U.S. alliance system and the maintenance of sanctions on Russia. The case selection used here is determined by the importance of the policy and the levels of investment (in terms of time, energy, and reputation) that the entrepreneurs expended in advancing policy, and which was additionally independent of the president and views he espoused.

Because little attention has been paid to the elements of a contractor presidency, this investigation begins by verifying that the contractor model is a valid strategy, which is evidenced by a president empowering top-level policy entrepreneurs. It then establishes that Trump embraced the contractor presidency as an approach toward his foreign policy. The next step is to identify the alternate scenarios for a failed contractor presidency and consider whether these explanations apply to Trump’s version. The subsequent case studies further demonstrate that all three instances of failure were present and that two of the five possible explanations apply to Trump’s unsuccessful contractor presidency.

As for the methods employed, the consideration of the five scenarios utilizes a content analysis of the News on the Web corpus (Davies 2013). For the period between November 8, 2016 (the day that Trump won the election) and January 2, 2019 (the final day that any of the three operatives held office in the Trump Administration), 1,395 news reports were identified in the New York Times and the Washington Post that mentioned Trump in connection with search terms for the three policy entrepreneurs. The news reports were then reviewed manually

1 The restrictions inherent to Davies’ (2013) corpus mean that, after identification of a relevant article, the original source was retrieved from the New York Times or the Washington Post. This study always cites the original source.
for applicability and coded for the type of interaction. In total, 130 source documents were coded for 16 types of interaction that were related to the five potential causes, which are examined below. Appendix A provides a list of the codes and frequency of occurrence. The section Diagnosing a Contractor Presidency presents a preliminary overview of the evidence for each of the five potential causal factors. Additionally, qualitative process tracing is employed in the two case studies, which additionally illustrate the two causal mechanisms for failure in Trump’s contractor presidency. Process tracing is a valuable way to document the causal sequence of events in a case study (Bennett and Checkel 2015; Collier, Brady, and Seawright 2010, 2011).

Did Trump Establish a Contractor Presidency?

Most research on the relationship between the president and his top officials focuses on the administrative presidency strategy, as it mirrors the historical trend whereby presidents tighten central control (Kagan 2001; Lewis 2009; Nathan 1975; Resh 2015). A first step in overcoming the scarcity of research considering what qualifies as a contractor presidency is a focus on the discussion in previous literature on the functions of policy entrepreneurs and the activities that they might engage in (Carter and Scott 2009; Roberts and King 1991). This is important because policy entrepreneurs lie at the heart of the contractor presidency strategy. This research expands the analysis of policy entrepreneurship by placing it in the context of an executive strategy that empowers entrepreneurs to win good policy outcomes.

Entrepreneurial activities may include: to advocate new ideas and to develop innovative proposals (Dahl 1961; David 2015; Mintrom 1997; Mintrom and Norman 2009; Roberts and King 1991; Sheingate 2003); to define and reframe problems in accordance with their personal ideas (Arieli and Cohen 2013; Kelman 1987; Polsby 1984; Riker 1986; Sheingate 2003); to specify policy alternatives in accordance with their ideas of good public policy (Hersman 2000; Kingdon 1995; Polsby 1984); to mobilize public opinion (Kelman 1987; Kingdon 1995); and to help set the decision-making agenda (Kingdon 1995; Polsby 1984; Sheingate 2003). The three entrepreneurs considered in this study engaged in all of these activities in their quest to make policy. Entrepreneurial actors also build coalitions of supporters to secure policy outcomes (Kingdon 1995; Smith 1991).

2 De-selection criteria were misidentification of the policy operative, repetitions of previous reports without new details, news summaries (e.g., WaPo’s Daily 202; NYT Monday News Briefing), opinion pieces instead of factual reporting, reports of typical activities by the operative without any indication of their interaction or relation with the White House, reports of early thinking on which no exchange of opinions had occurred at the time of reporting (e.g., Mattis’ trial balloon regarding the potential provision of arms to Ukraine in late August 2017), personal episodes and biographic background, and reports of infighting among administration staff that lacked Trump’s clear preferences or involvement.
which the three entrepreneurs also attempted. Research has shown that policy entrepreneurs who are most adept at manipulating policy coalitions are more likely to attain their policy goals (Mintrom and Vergari 1998).

All three entrepreneurs examined here not only engaged in these activities, they also believed they were policy entrepreneurs. For example, Kelly made numerous public statements that he thought strong, independent leadership was essential in making progress in his work (Kelly 2016). Undoubtedly, the placing of a strong policy entrepreneur was also clearly the idea behind Mattis’ selection as Secretary of Defense. Upon his appointment, Trump gave Mattis more latitude than any other executive had given his defense chief, especially with policy regarding Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and all of Southwest Asia (Gordon 2017). Soon after his easy confirmation process, Mattis began to pursue foreign policy in accordance with his own ideas of good policy, in particular he moved to reassure allies in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe (Mattis 2017).

Three U.S. strategic planning documents that came out in December 2017 and January 2018, further clearly point to the generals’ autonomy in formulating foreign and security policy in agreement with their own views. In a major speech presenting the administration’s National Defense Strategy (NDS), Mattis made clear that he and McMaster were its authors and that it reflected their concerns about future threats to America, including elevating Russia as a main threat (U.S. Department of Defense 2018b; Wormuth 2018). Though Trump presented the second document, the National Security Strategy (NSS), in a December 2017 speech, he also appeared not to know its contents (Brands 2018b; Trump 2017f).

The NSS, which was written by McMaster and senior National Security Council (NSC) staffer Nadia Schadlow, restated America’s commitment to its strategic partners, rejected isolationism, and reaffirmed America’s broader role overseas. The third document is the January 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which included new policy goals to acquire low-yield tactical nuclear weapons as a direct response to Russia’s announcement to develop similar nuclear options (U.S. Department of Defense 2018a). Mattis emphasized the development of low-yield nuclear weapons in the NPR because he wanted the U.S. nuclear posture to remain a credible deterrent in relation to Russia’s modernizing arsenal. Together the three documents present policies that disagreed with Trump’s inclination toward neo-isolationism and cultivating a personal relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Policy related to Afghanistan is another example of all three generals’ capacity to develop policy that was different from any ideas voiced by the president as well as policy that was dissimilar from the previous administration. Though he initially rejected his entrepreneurs’ plan for Afghanistan, by the fall of 2017 Trump fully accepted it, which included a massive increase in offensive air power support and a large-scale troop expansion. Trump also gave Mattis the authority to set U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan (U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee 2017). This was a major shift from the Obama administration’s more administrative presidency practice of tightly controlling the decisions on
military troop levels and those troops’ authority to call for airstrikes against the Taliban—a practice that led critics to charge that Obama was micromanaging the war in Afghanistan (Gates 2014). Trump accepted these changes despite the fact they went against his campaign stance on Afghanistan and the viewpoint of his then Chief Strategist, Steve Bannon (Nakamura and Phillip 2017). To overcome Bannon’s enabling viewpoint, in mid-August 2017, Kelly, McMaster, and Mattis planned a Camp David national security retreat, which deliberately excluded Bannon, to mobilize support for their policy on Afghanistan.

The corpus further identifies a number of instances where the policy entrepreneurs actively resisted implementing Trump’s proposals within their areas of influence. For example, Mattis worked with Republicans in Congress to avoid a ban on transgender people in the military while Kelly slow-walked its implementation (Hirschfeld, Davis, and Cooper 2017; Kelly 2017a). Kelly and McMaster also delayed the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and the attempt to declare China a currency manipulator (Baker 2017). Mattis further repeatedly attempted to soften the administration’s stance on trade (Swanson 2018). Kelly’s statements, upon his departure from the White House, show how central key policy entrepreneurs considered their resistance to Trump’s policies: “in his Los Angeles Times interview, Kelly suggested his tenure should be judged on the actions that Mr. Trump did not engage in, as opposed to the ones he did” (Haberman 2018).

Diagnosing a Contractor Presidency

Before embarking on the analysis of the evidence supporting the five potential causes of failure in Trump’s contractor presidency, it is important to establish what is meant by failure. How do you recognize failure, which might have come about as the result of one of the five scenarios? Laffin (1996) detects failure in a contractor presidency when: (1) there is limited policy achievement; (2) policy outcomes do not match the desired policy as proposed by the entrepreneur; and (3) there is disorganized and confusing decision making within the policy area. Trump’s contractor presidency failed on all three output levels (Brands 2018a, 2018c; Cohen 2018; Goldsmith 2017; Patrick 2018; Sestanovich 2017). The two cases studies below further document this failure in more detail, with U.S. policy suffering from a debilitating credibility gap between the stated policy and what the president said and did. As will be established in both cases, the entrepreneurs worked diligently to operationalize their policy goals, yet, after a year, it was clear that they did not succeed.

Laffin (1996) further identifies five different scenarios that might produce the three stated failures:

1. The entrepreneurs themselves could be poorly functioning bureaucratic and political performers;
2. the president’s strategy, in practice, is more akin to an administrative presidency, with the president making excessive attempts to throttle policy initiatives;
3. the president might insist on appointing too many inexperienced loyalists, whose devotion lies outside the department or agency to which they are posted;
4. the permanent bureaucrats exhibit a resistance to any policy change based on their careerists’ self-interest or self-aggrandizement;
5. and/or the members of Congress attempt to defeat the policy emanating from the entrepreneurs.

This section continues with an initial overview of the evidence supporting the five potential causes of failure of Trump’s contractor presidency, with an integration of the coded interactions, followed by an investigation of two case studies via process tracing.

Poorly Functioning Policy Entrepreneurs

The first of the five scenarios that Laffin (1996) delineates that might produce failure is that the entrepreneurs themselves are poorly functioning bureaucratic and/or political performers. While it is true that all three generals were not outright politicians, they all were respected for their successful work in the military bureaucracies of previous administrations before they were appointed to their positions. For example, Mattis, the most independent of the three entrepreneurs, was a former NATO Supreme Allied Commander and one of the U.S. military’s leading intellectuals (Sestanovich 2017). The former four-star general was an able commander in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Mattis’ appointment as the Defense chief was key evidence to Republicans early on that a more traditional foreign policy would be forthcoming.

Similar to Mattis, McMaster was a widely respected military scholar, with a reputation for telling the truth (Braniff 2017; Kroenig 2017; Sestanovich 2017; Wright and Herb 2017). At the time of his appointment, he was a three-star general, a graduate of West Point, had earned a PhD in military history, and had authored a best-selling book about the failures of leadership during the Vietnam War. McMaster’s thoughtful views on security and defense meant that the foreign-policy establishment was extremely pleased about his appointment. Michael O’Hanlon of the Brookings Institution even said that McMaster was “quite possibly the single most talented 3-star in U.S. military history” (Wright and Herb 2017).

However, such accolades also meant that “America First” devotees were against the general from the start and, unlike Mattis, whose position enjoyed more political security, they worked hard to oust McMaster (Brannen 2017; Gray 2017a). This tension meant that, of the three generals, McMaster had the poorest relationship with Trump, who had wanted to hire retired Vice Admiral Bob Harward. However, Harward withdrew his name because he was not given assurances that he would be able to select his own staff (Wright and Herb 2017). Whatever the obstacles against him, the evidence is that McMaster improved the
functioning of the NSC considerably over his immediate predecessor (Braniff 2017; Brannen 2017; McLaughlin 2017).

Kelly, a four-star general, was head of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) before moving unexpectedly to the White House in late July 2017. He soon forged a close partnership with both Mattis and McMaster to realize their shared policy goals. Kelly was also a highly respected former Marine general who served as a senior military assistant to Secretaries of Defense Robert Gates and Leon Panetta and who promised to speak “truth to power” during his confirmation process (Abrams 2017; Kelly 2016). Of the three generals, Kelly was the closest to Trump ideologically, as evidenced by the zeal that he enacted Trump’s tough immigration policy while at the DHS (Trump 2017e). Indeed, Kelly’s leadership qualities at the DHS is why Trump picked him to be Chief of Staff and why Kelly was empowered to bring control to a chaotic West Wing (Bender 2017; Haberman, Thrush, and Baker 2017).

The corpus of reporting also does not indicate major policy mistakes caused by any of the three individually. Instead, it shows evidence of their functioning as typical policy entrepreneurs. Their arrivals were overwhelmingly hailed as a welcome injection of policy experience. Moreover, their influence was expected to be moderating and normalizing, with all three entrepreneurs initially living up to these expectations (Tennis 2017; Tumulty 2016). Examples of a moderating influence include steering the administration away from controversy and calming international allies and opponents, thereby retaining political capital (Birnbaum and Parker 2017; Lamothe 2017). The New York Times states clearly that “the structure [Kelly] has established [as Chief of Staff] resembles that of previous presidents” (Baker 2017). The level of experience amassed by Kelly, Mattis, and McMaster, and their traditional conduct in office, suggests that the poor functioning of policy entrepreneurs is not a likely scenario for Trump’s failed contractor presidency.

**Trump’s Contradictions**

Laffin’s (1996) second causal factor is an attempt by the president to undermine or throttle policy proposals by his own entrepreneurs. The corpus shows a number of examples of the president attempting to implement policies without any form of consultation with the relevant departments: such as the executive order aimed at re-opening CIA black sites (Miller 2017), the administration’s first travel ban (Rein and Eilperin 2017), Jared Kushner’s informal talks with Russia (Rucker 2017), the ban on transgender people serving in the military (Hirschfeld, Davis, and Cooper 2017), and Trump’s threatening rhetoric toward North Korea (Baker and Harris 2017).

During the timeframe under investigation, the president often exhibited passive-aggressive behavior and a tendency to agree with the last person with whom he spoke (Allin 2016; Chong and Wittes 2017; Cohen 2018; Glasser and Kruse 2016; Goldsmith 2017; McAdams 2016; Visser, Book, and Volk 2017; Wolf 2017). In this behavior, Trump’s personality appeared to be a factor
That Trump was easily suggestible is one reason why Kelly was brought on board to replace Reince Priebus. When Kelly moved to the White House, he immediately tried to restrict and control both who saw the president and what information was given to Trump that might be counter to Kelly’s own ideas of good public policy (Bender 2017; Kelly 2018). In this task he joined McMaster, who also tried to control information from enablers like Bannon and staff appointed by former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, which contradicted their personal ideas on best foreign policy. Mattis further contributed to the task of controlling information that the president received that might prove counterproductive to their goals to secure good policy outcomes. For example, in February 2017, the Associated Press reported that he and Kelly made an agreement after the inauguration that one of them should remain in the United States to monitor Trump at all times (Salama and Pace 2017).

It should be noted that monitoring Trump was no small task. General Kelly (2017b, 2018) thought his attempts to shape good public policy in the Trump White House was more difficult than being a combatant commander in Iraq. General Kelly’s struggle spills over into the next causal factor identified by Laffin (1996) that the president might insist on appointing too many inexperienced loyalists.

**Loyalty before Competence**

To emphasize the importance of loyalty, regarding the third scenario linked to failure, Laffin (1996, 552) quotes Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of Defense, Frank Carlucci, who said, “If you don’t get your own people in place, you are going to end up a one-armed paper hanger.” Successful entrepreneurial leaders rely heavily on their sublevel appointments to translate their ideas into policy. Building a team that has internalized a clear sense of mission gives top-level officials considerable personal independence and ensures that they can define and reframe problems in accordance with their personal ideas. The presence of loyalists—who have allegiances to the president—creates centrifugal forces. The pull of allegiances is likely to result in confused decision making. Thus, the less cohesive a team, the less likely an entrepreneurial executive will be able to develop and implement his or her policies.

Trump clearly prevented his entrepreneurs from building their own teams. For instance, Mattis and Trump (at Bannon’s behest) tussled over who would fill the undersecretary of defense for policy position, with Trump twice objecting to Mattis’ picks. Mattis wanted to bring in staff from across the political spectrum while Trump was determined to appoint loyalists, in particular excluding the 122 Republican national security experts who signed the “Never Trump” letter (Open Letter on Donald Trump from GOP National Security Leaders 2016).

McMaster also waged battles against Trump loyalists on issues related to trade, immigration, and America’s role in the world. One of McMaster’s first steps as the NSA was to remove Bannon from the NSC but his clashes with loyalists ultimately led to a conflictive relationship between himself and the
president. McMaster further clashed with Bannon and Kushner about whether or not to keep Flynn’s personnel in the NSC (Costa and Phillip 2017). For their part, General Flynn’s staff (labeled “Flynnstones”) actively worked to push McMaster out of office with such tactics as an online campaign labeled #FireMcMaster (Brannen 2017). McMaster also ran into difficulty in wanting to keep NSC holdovers from the Obama Administration; staff that Bannon and Kushner wanted to fire (Gray 2017a). Gradually McMaster did place a number of his own staff in the NSC, who then spent much time and effort fighting Flynnstone stalwarts. The NSC Flynn-aligned holdovers also embarked on a leak campaign against McMaster, especially against his support for increasing the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. In their attempt to tarnish McMaster with the failures of Afghanistan, Trump loyalists called the 16-year conflict “McMaster’s War” (Everett and Dawsey 2017).

General Kelly also met with resistance when he tried to bring senior staff with him from the DHS. His preferred deputy chief of staff, Christian Marrone, was a Republican but had served in the Obama Administration as the chief of staff to Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson and was, therefore, rejected. The woman he did choose, Kirstjen Nielsen, known as an adept enforcer of Kelly’s gatekeeping policy, found significant resistance when implementing Kelly’s new disciplinary measures (Parker and Rucker 2017).

The corpus also reveals a pattern of rapid dismissal and turnover in the Trump Administration for two reasons. First, staff were fired because of perceived disloyalty (Baker and Haberman 2017; Shear 2017). Second, a preponderance of staff who were appointed because of their allegiance or their ability to flatter the president, were quickly exposed as poorly suited for their jobs and as a result soon left or were fired. At the one-year mark of Trump’s presidency, half of his high-level officials were either fired or had resigned, a record-setting rate of turnover (Dunn Tenpas 2018). According to Kathryn Dunn Tenpas (2018), who wrote a Brookings Institution report on the Trump White House’s “staggering” hiring and firing rate, “turnover creates disruption, it creates inefficiencies, it affects the morale” (quoted in Keith 2018). The high turnover in staff contributed to the chaotic manner that the White House functioned. This, in turn, led to more staff leaving and a further inability to develop sound, coherent policy.

**Bureaucrats that Resist**

Laffin’s (1996) fourth scenario that might produce failure relates to the permanent bureaucrats who could exhibit a resistance to any policy based on their positions within their own bureaucracies. Perhaps it is an unusual situation, but the career civil servants were largely in agreement with the entrepreneurial executives who were put in charge of their departments and agency. This was especially true for policy in the two case studies below because the three officials were advocating a course of action that built upon the post-war consensus on U.S. foreign policy, ideas that had penetrated all bureaucracies of the executive branch (Boot 2017).
Civil servants did not trust Trump and found his campaign rhetoric to be ideologically hostile to deeply rooted views on a U.S.-led global order. Once in office, Trump also challenged accepted norms and broke with diplomatic traditions, which further distanced him from the permanent bureaucracy (Goldsmith 2017; Michaels 2017). Thus, any bureaucratic intractability or drag on policy as promoted by the entrepreneurs was largely absent. There was little conscious obstructionism by individual careerists to policy promoted by the entrepreneurs.

In contrast, career bureaucrats acted outside the normal networks by leaking documents or using their back-channel contacts within Congress to stop Trump, for example, in his attempts to remove sanctions on Russia. The career bureaucrats’ support of the policy entrepreneurs led Trump loyalists to argue that a “deep state,” a secret conspiracy of powerful permanent-government administrators, was obstructing Trump’s agenda (Michaels 2017).

A Congress that Resists

The final scenario that Laffin (1996) identifies that might produce failure relates to the checks and balances of the legislative branch, whose members might attempt to defeat policy emanating from the entrepreneurs for their own reasons. An assertive Congress could stymie policy put forward by the entrepreneurs, particularly when the Executive branch and Congress are controlled by opposing parties. However, the corpus and the case studies clearly show that leading figures in Trump’s own party disagreed with him just as much as members of the opposition differed with him. Meaning that, though Trump enjoyed Republican majorities in both the House and the Senate (at least until November 2018), powerful members of Congress disagreed with him.

Instead, in the realm of foreign policy, Congress supported the three entrepreneurs over the president, almost from the beginning of Trump’s presidency (Hirschfeld, Davis, and Cooper 2017). Similar to the bureaucracies of the Executive branch, Congress advocated a line of policy that built upon the post-war consensus on U.S. foreign policy, most obviously concerning the maintenance of alliances and policy toward Russia. For example, Republican Senators Lindsey Graham, Marco Rubio, Bob Corker, and John McCain supported new crippling sanctions against Russia and Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said he was against lifting sanctions. In contrast to what Trump advocated, Congress passed the Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which called for new sanctions against entities conducting business with Russia’s defense and intelligence sectors and required Trump to compile a list of Russian names for possible further sanctions. Congress also supported the closing of Russian consulates suspected of espionage.

This discussion points to two of the five possible explanations applying to Trump’s failed contractor presidency. The following two case studies additionally
show the interplay between the causal factors and the evidence of policy failure through process tracing historical facts.

**Case One: Maintaining America’s Alliance System**

The first of the two policies that all three military men tried to shape in accordance with their own ideas is the preservation and strengthening of the U.S. alliance system. This policy stance is in clear disagreement to Trump’s campaign rhetoric and instincts (Haass 2017). While it is hard to say that Trump holds a particular worldview, one constant that he repeated over the years was his belief that the United States is poorly served by the order that it built after World War II (Chandler 2017; Trump 2017a, 2017b, 2017g, 2017h; Wolf 2017).

Trump’s transactional view of alliances certainly differed substantially from the three generals, who immediately attempted to reframe their boss’ statements concerning U.S. allies. For example, in his first overseas trip, Mattis reformulated Trump’s foreign policy to be more in line with his own views, meaning that Mattis reassured worried allies in Seoul and Tokyo that the United States remained a credible partner in the Asia-Pacific (U.S. Department of Defense 2017b). Later that same month, in both Brussels and at the Munich Security Conference, Mattis again re-engineered policy by assuring European allies that the United States was a committed alliance partner (U.S. Department of Defense 2017c; U.S. Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization 2017).

In a clear move to shape policy in a different direction from Trump’s campaign rhetoric, Mattis and McMaster, with the help of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, inserted a strong commitment to European allies in the draft speech that Trump would give on his first overseas visit—an eight-day trip to the Middle East and Europe. However, when Trump (2017c) gave the speech in Brussels, he removed the reference to NATO’s Article 5. The last-minute change pointed to an early rupture inside the administration with the source of the deletion being Trump loyalist Stephen Miller.

Instead of complying with his entrepreneurs’ preferred stance, Trump harangued his fellow alliance members in his speech and again in the subsequent closed-door meetings held at the new NATO headquarters (Gray 2017b; Shear, Landler, and Kanter 2017). Trump’s treatment of his fellow leaders caused pushback from both German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron, who both publicly criticized Trump shortly after the Brussels meeting (Birnbaum and Noack 2017; Calamur 2017). By the time they got back to Washington, DC, it was clear to Mattis and McMaster that the policy they advocated was in tatters. The three elements that Laffin (1996) identifies as indicators of failure were already present: (1) European doubts about American commitment to allies pointed to a limited policy achievement; (2) Trump and his loyalists’ attempts to reverse the entrepreneurs’ objectives meant that the desired policy as proposed by the entrepreneurs did not match outcomes; and (3) the interference by loyalists, such as Miller and Bannon, resulted in a disorganized and confusing decision-making structure within the policy area.
Realizing that the trip to NATO headquarters failed in the realization of their policy goals, and that they failed to keep Miller and Bannon away from the president, McMaster and Mattis moved to allay European offense and fears as soon as they got back to Washington, DC. They again attempted to reframe what Trump has said in Europe to align it more with their personal ideas. They also tried to mobilize public opinion and build coalitions of support to secure their preferred policy outcomes. For example, McMaster wrote a Wall Street Journal op-ed (with National Economic Council Chief Gary Cohn) that put a positive spin on Trump’s trip. The article was entitled “America First doesn’t mean America alone: We are asking a lot of our allies and partners. But in return the U.S. will once again be a true friend” (McMaster and Cohn 2017a). The article further emphasized a policy of fostering cooperation with allies and it praised Trump for reaffirming a U.S. commitment to Article 5, which he specifically had not done.

Similarly, McMaster gave a speech at the American Jewish Committee’s Global Forum where he praised the outcomes of Trump’s visit to NATO headquarters. McMaster again insisted that Trump had reaffirmed America’s unbreakable commitment to its European allies (which he had not). Moreover, he re-engineered the negative reaction by many European leaders as an appreciation of Trump’s critical remarks on defense spending (Jaffe 2017). McMaster (2017) also downplayed Trump’s nonmention of NATO’s Article 5 with arguments that doubts about American commitments were “manufactured,” and he described the relationship with Europe as involving “tough love” that was making the alliance “stronger.”

McMaster also tried to mobilize public opinion and build a coalition of support through another op-ed with Cohn for the New York Times (McMaster and Cohn 2017b). This opinion editorial came after Trump’s second trip to Europe in July, to attend the G20 Summit in Germany as well as additional meetings in Poland. In the op-ed, McMaster and Cohn (2017b) emphasized the importance of American leadership, the strengthening of alliances, and restated Trump’s words in Poland that “a strong Europe is a blessing to the West and the world.” However, such sentiments were in sharp contrast to Trump’s support of European disintegration and praise for Brexit, which was also on display during the trip.

There is no better example of the differences between Trump’s views and those of his policy entrepreneurs on alliances than the NSS, the NDS, and the NPR, which all enunciated proposals to strengthen alliances. Mattis further advocated new higher spending levels for European defense. For example, in June 2017, Mattis requested $4.8 billion for the 2018 European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) (Pellerin 2017). The ERI was first authorized in 2014, after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, with the goal to enhance NATO’s deterrence capacities and to reemphasize U.S. commitments to the alliance. Mattis, with help from McMaster, also continued to apply pressure on Trump to state publicly that he supported Article 5. It was not until two weeks after he returned from his trip
to Europe that Trump finally voiced such a reaffirmation (Baker 2017; Gramer 2017). When Trump read the statement, McMaster stayed close to him, carefully blocking Stephen Miller from view (Miller, Jaffe, and Rucker 2017).

Despite efforts by Mattis and McMaster, doubts about America’s commitment to the liberal world order featured prominently in the 2018 annual Munich Security Conference (February 16-18), where discussions focused on the contradictory messages coming from the Trump Administration, providing more evidence of policy failure. German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel (2018) captured the frustration, saying, “We Germans in particular are perturbed when we look across the Atlantic. Is it deeds, is it words, is it tweets that we should look at to measure America?” McMaster met with Gabriel after his speech to reassure him that, despite what Trump tweeted, the United States was still committed to its allies, but the conference nonetheless ended on a contentious note (Schreck 2018).

By the end of Trump’s first year in office, U.S. policy toward its allies suffered from a debilitating credibility gap between the stated policy and what the president said and did. Even Trump’s point that European NATO members ought to spend more on defense failed. Trump’s amplified toxicity in Europe after his summer 2017 visit resulted in European leaders shifting away from any pledges to increase defense spending, lest they appear to be kowtowing to Trump’s demands (Gramer 2017). In contrast, America’s trustworthiness and reputation greatly declined (Cohen 2018; NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist Poll Results 2018). According to the 2018 Report on Rating World Leaders by Gallup, approval ratings of U.S. leadership dropped 40 points or more in places such as Portugal, Belgium, Norway, and Canada (Ray 2018).

The pattern was set early on: when the president needed to support his entrepreneurs’ policy, he did not, preferring to rely on loyalists outside the official process. Over time, Trump replaced his entrepreneurs with devotees. Kelly was replaced with Mike Mulvaney, who indicated he wanted “to let Trump be Trump.” McMaster was replaced by John Bolton, who regularly praised the president on Fox News, and Mattis was replaced by his deputy, Patrick Shanahan, who soon left in disgrace for personal reasons (Blake 2018; Parker et al. 2018). Thus, the entrepreneurs did not see their policy achieved before they left office and allies were disturbed by the disorganized and confusing messages coming from the administration. Trump’s contractor strategy failed to bring about a credible foreign policy in relation to U.S. allies.

**Case Two: Sanctions on Russia**

The second case equally illustrates that Trump’s contractor presidency strategy met with great disappointment. Indeed, the public displays of animosity between the president and his entrepreneurs on whether to maintain sanctions on Russia were highly unusual and highly undermining for policy success (Cohen 2018; Dunford 2017; Mercier 2017; Strategic Foresight Analysis Report 2017). Sanctions were placed on Russia in 2014 by the Obama Administration
via executive order to protest Russia’s annexation of Crimea, its military intervention in Ukraine, and the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17. Obama (2016) added further sanctions in response to Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. elections, specifically targeting four Russian intelligence officers, two Russian intelligence services, and three companies. Obama also expelled 35 Russian diplomats and closed two compounds on U.S. soil that Russia used in its spy operations.

Trump and his first NSA, loyalist Michael Flynn, immediately moved to undo the Obama administration’s measures (DeYoung and Filipov 2017). Early on, it was also clear that Trump’s views on Putin and Russia significantly contradicted the specific policy goals expressed by the three generals (Trump 2016a, 2016b, 2017d). Mattis’ (2017) entrepreneurial activities designed to counter Trump’s stance included: proposing to take new integrated steps against Putin in his Senate confirmation hearings; mobilizing public opinion to support sanctions by arguing that they remain in place (U.S. Department of Defense 2017d); and building coalitions with the opposition by voicing agreement that the Russians had interfered in the U.S. elections (U.S. Department of Defense 2017a). Kelly supported Mattis in these activities; for example, shortly after becoming Chief of Staff in July 2017, Kelly publicly said at the Aspen Security Forum that he stood by the U.S. intelligence community’s conclusion that Russia had tried to influence the election in Trump’s favor.

It was also clear when Trump appointed McMaster as Flynn’s replacement that he would disagree with the president on Russian sanctions (Braniff 2017; Wright and Herb 2017). In 2014, McMaster led a secret study that analyzed how the army should adapt to Russian military efforts in Ukraine (Bender 2016). Moreover, before his February 2017 appointment, McMaster was the director of the Army Capabilities Integration Center where his job was to forecast future threats to the army and then, devise means to meet those threats. In this post, he was on the record as saying that, in addition to China, Russia was the greatest security threat facing the United States (McMaster 2017). Like Kelly and Mattis, McMaster also said he believed that the Kremlin tried to influence the 2016 U.S. election, stating that he thought the evidence was “incontrovertible” (Dawsey and Rucker 2018). Trump’s subsequent public scolding of his NSA for making these remarks led to speculation that McMaster was about to be fired.

The dynamics of these disparate views meant that any critical discussions that the entrepreneurs had about Putin, Russia, or sanctions took place outside Trump’s hearing, with the daily brief often structured to avoid upsetting the president with negative news related to Russia (Miller, Jaffe, and Rucker 2017). Trump also ignored McMaster’s advice not to meet Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Ambassador Sergey Kislyak in the Oval Office in May 2017. Trump set up the meeting after a phone call with Putin where the Russian leader specifically requested it. Obama had refused to meet with Lavrov since 2013 (Glasser 2017). During the meeting, Trump volunteered that he fired FBI Director James Comey because of the investigation into Russia meddling in
the 2016 campaign and he shared highly classified intelligence from an Israeli
counterterrorism operative (Apuzzo, Haberman, and Rosenberg 2017).

Trump further tried to go around the three generals through loyalists like
Kushner who, though inexperienced in foreign policy, was in line with the
president’s view on Russia. For example, during Trump’s May 2017 foreign trip,
it emerged that Kushner had discussed the possibility of setting up a secret and
secure communications channel with the Kremlin (Rucker 2017). Shortly after
this, at the G20 summit in Germany when Trump and Putin met again, the
deep divisions within the administration became publicly apparent, revealing
the chaos in U.S. policy toward Russia (Salama 2017). McMaster again advised
against holding an official bilateral meeting with Putin and, as a result, refused
to attend the meeting. Not only did the meeting go on for more than two
hours, but a Kremlin interpreter was the only other person present and Trump
announced after it the possibility of a cybersecurity initiative with Russia, which
was subsequently rejected outright by Congress.

Not only did Congress reject Trump’s proposals, congressional leaders also
supported the generals’ policy views on sanctions. Members of Congress were
alarmed by a series of activities carried out by Trump loyalists, including: efforts
at the Republican National Convention to rewrite the platform that called for
maintaining or increasing sanctions against Russia; exertions by NSA Flynn
to lift sanctions soon after taking office; and efforts to return control over the
two diplomatic compounds, the latter being a major grievance for Putin. After
Trump met Putin alone in Germany, alarmed congressional leaders worked with
equally anxious bureaucrats within the executive branch to pass CAATSA with
an overwhelming majority. This legislation codified Obama’s executive order,
blocked any efforts to roll back sanctions, and applied new sanctions against
entities conducting significant business with Russia’s defense and intelligence
sectors (Miller, Jaffe, and Rucker 2017). Incorporated into the legislation was
a stipulation that the executive branch should compile a list of names of well-
connected Russians with links either to the Kremlin or within Putin’s inner circle
(Demirjian 2016).

Though Trump signed CAATSA into law, he said the legislation was
“seriously flawed,” throwing into doubt whether he would actually enforce it
(Phillip and Demirjian 2017). Putin’s reaction to the law was to expel 755 U.S.
government employees and close two U.S. diplomatic properties. Rather than
criticize Putin, Trump thanked him for saving taxpayers the task of paying their
salaries. In time, Trump loyalists also did not fulfill the spirit of the CAATSA
law and refused to add sanctions.

Differences between Trump and his policy entrepreneurs over U.S. policy
toward Russia was also on public display several times. For example, in his
December 2017 speech introducing his administration’s NSS, Trump (2017f) soft-
pedaled differences between the United States and Russia though the contents
of the NSS (written by the entrepreneurs) called out Russia for meddling in
other countries’ politics. The result was that after a little over year into the
administration, Trump and his key policy entrepreneurs were at loggerheads over sanctions on Russia.

The policy was not only in doubt; conflict with Russia was more likely after Trump’s first year in office than at any time in the last 20 years (Dunford 2017; Mercier 2017; Strategic Foresight Analysis Report 2017). As Eliot Cohen (2018) commented, “the curious tension between the president’s sympathetic rhetoric and his administration’s more hostile actions has increased the risk that a contemptuous and irritated Russia will poke back in eastern Europe.” Laffin’s (1996) criteria for failure in a contractor presidency were in evidence: outcomes did not match the desired policy as proposed by Trump’s entrepreneurs with regard to sanctions. And the process of making policy oscillated between what Trump and his appointed entrepreneurs preferred, with Trump loyalists attempting to undercut entrepreneurial activities.

Conclusion

This research has two goals. First, it presents a greater understanding of the failures of Trump’s first year in office, which was one of the messiest in the history of American foreign policy. Trump did not prepare to be elected president. Thus, when the time came to choose individuals to fill important foreign policy posts, Trump chose capable top executives and gave them considerable freedom to make policy. Trump adopted a contractor presidency strategy as a way to augment his policy-making shortcomings.

Still, this did not mean that Trump supported the entrepreneurs he appointed. The analysis of the five scenarios and the investigation of two case studies in the present article indicate the causal mechanisms for failure in Trump’s contractor presidency. These are: first, the president withheld crucial support of the relevant policy as put forth by his entrepreneurs, often undermining and sabotaging their best efforts; and second, he appointed too many inexperienced loyalists whose aim was to undercut their department and agency heads.

The second goal of this study is to overcome the lack of research on contractor presidencies and the policy entrepreneurs that are empowered in this executive strategy. In the last few decades, most investigations on the relationship between the president and his key officials focused on the administrative presidency strategy because it reflected the historical trend whereby presidents tighten central control over their policy-making agenda. In an era of anti-establishment fervor where voters choose the candidate promising to shake-up Washington—with voters choosing the insurgent who may even champion his or her lack of policy expertise—the contractor presidency may become more relevant. This research, thus, endeavors to consider what activities and relationships qualify as a contractor presidency. The analysis further incorporates the varied interpretations of the functions of policy entrepreneurs, the activities that they might engage in, and the potential for policy success or failure.
Finally, the foreign policy failures of Trump’s contractor presidency reveal how misguided Republicans were that Trump was either trainable, or that the party could install enough adults in leadership positions to ensure that a conventional Republican foreign policy would emerge. Republicans who thought they could maneuver Trump should have looked back to the last time a Republican president handed over policy making to entrepreneurs in his administration. In the realm of domestic policy, the contractor presidency model failed for George H. W. Bush. Just as Bush’s relationship with his entrepreneurs led to policy failure, Trump’s contradicting relationship with his entrepreneurs also resulted in policy failure—this time in the area of foreign policy.

APPENDIX A

Codes

Policy Implementation

- **Assisting with policy implementation**: policy entrepreneur is said to assist with the implementation of Trump’s policies. 9 occurrences.
- **Resisting policy implementation**: policy entrepreneur is said to have worked to resist the implementation of Trump’s policies. 13 occurrences.

Consultation between policy entrepreneur and White House

- **Effort to consult**: policy entrepreneur is said to have been consulted or involved by Trump or the White House. 3 occurrences.
- **Lack of consultation/influence**: policy entrepreneur is said not to have been consulted or to lack influence on relevant policy matters. 13 occurrences.

One-sided influence of policy entrepreneur on Trump

- **Influence on worldview**: policy entrepreneur is said to (attempt to) exert an influence on Trump’s world view. 8 occurrences.
- **Moderating influence**: policy entrepreneur is said to have a moderating influence on Trump. 23 occurrences.
- **Asserting control**: policy entrepreneur is asserting control over a policy domain in opposition to Trump or White House staff. 2 occurrences.
- **Public criticism**: policy entrepreneur is said to have publicly criticized Trump. 3 occurrences.

Agreement and disagreement

- **View agreement**: policy entrepreneur is said to agree with the views of Trump. 18 occurrences.
• View disagreement: policy entrepreneur is said to disagree with the views of President Trump. 43 occurrences.
• Policy agreement: policy entrepreneur is said to agree with President Trump on a specific policy question. 11 occurrences.
• Policy disagreement: policy entrepreneur is said to disagree with President Trump on a specific policy question. 41 occurrences.

Spin

• Calming PR: policy entrepreneur is said to have communicated a calming message in response to a more extreme view communicated by Trump. 24 occurrences.
• Escalating PR: policy entrepreneur is said to further escalate extreme messages by Trump. 3 occurrences.

Potential for termination

• Resignation: policy entrepreneur is said to be considering resigning from his post in the Trump Administration. 9 occurrences.
• Dismissal: policy entrepreneur is said to be a candidate for dismissal. 9 occurrences.

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