

Is the Trump Revolution Over?

Description

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A year after President Donald Trump's inauguration, analysts and commentators are assessing both his performance in the first year of his presidency as well as the outlook for the remainder of his first term. Entering office as a surprise winner and a political neophyte, many people didn't know just what to expect from Trump. Would he do what he pledged to do as a candidate, or was his campaign rhetoric just a lot of hot air to bamboozle enough people into voting for him? One of Trump's most popular promises was to "drain the swamp" and, while the President has tried to make some strides in that respect over the past year, there are concerning signs that any swamp draining may be coming to an end.

Personnel Is Policy

One of the primary rules in politics is "personnel is policy." What a politician says he'll do is less important than who he hires to implement his policies. In many cases, the people he hires may not agree with his policies and may work to surreptitiously (or not so surreptitiously) undermine and co-opt him. We certainly see this on Capitol Hill all the time, where class after class of freshman Congressmen enters Congress pledging to fix the way Congress works. Yet time after time they get corrupted by the system in Washington. Why is that? It's because of the people they hire.

Coming into office often with no experience of how things operate in DC, they rely on their respective party apparatuses to staff their offices. They'll hire Hill veterans as their chiefs of staff and legislative directors, staffers who are more concerned with the future of their careers and who consequently do

everything they can not to upset party leadership so that they can maintain their ability to work on the Hill and work the government/lobbying revolving door. We're seeing much the same thing happening in the White House today too, as Trump continues to hire establishment Republicans who wouldn't be out of place in a Jeb Bush, Mitt Romney, or John McCain White House.

A prime example of that was Reince Priebus, President Trump's first White House chief of staff. Trump's initial appointment of Priebus as chief of staff was a confusing one, as Priebus' establishment credentials all but guaranteed that he would try to bring as many establishment operatives to the White House as possible. By all accounts there was a civil war of sorts within the White House regarding appointments both within the [White House](#) and at cabinet agencies, as the pro-Trump insurgent wing fought things out with the establishment and its cadre of opportunistic former never-Trumpers.

While rumors of Priebus' ouster were at first thought to be a promising sign that the insurgents were winning, Trump's appointment of Secretary of [Homeland Security](#) and former Marine Corps general John Kelly as Priebus' successor dashed any hopes of that occurring. Kelly immediately cracked down on access to the President, appointing himself as the gatekeeper through whom all information to and from the President was to flow. In less than a month Kelly had [forced Steve Bannon out](#) of the White House, and he slowly began to purge the White House of Trump loyalists. Anyone who wasn't going to go along with Kelly's organizational plans wasn't going to last long.

One of the more recent loyalist departures was that of Omarosa Manigault, the former The Apprentice contestant who served as Director of Communications for the White House Office of Public Liaison and who reportedly [enjoyed direct access to President Trump](#). By all accounts Omarosa bristled at Kelly's attempts to control staffers' access to the President, and attempted to continue contacting the President directly. Kelly obviously couldn't handle what he viewed as insubordination and, after a series of [scathingly negative](#) articles in the media about Omarosa's personality and job performance, she was [forced out too](#).

Trump Supporters Replaced With Establishment Figures

It isn't just the White House that has seen departures either. Cabinet agencies have witnessed similar incidents, such as Tom Price's resignation as Secretary of Health and Human Services. In Price's case, as with Omarosa and others, his departure fell into a familiar pattern. The official is targeted for removal, either by disgruntled insiders or outside political opponents, a series of negative articles in the vehemently anti-Trump media ensues, the media continue to fan the flames as long as they can, and eventually the target either resigns or is forced to quit.

In many cases the replacements after these resignations are retreads from previous administrations, or candidates favored by the establishment. For instance, the [nominee to succeed Price](#) at HHS, Alex Azar, served as General Counsel and Deputy Secretary at HHS during the George W. Bush Administration before becoming the top lobbyist for pharmaceutical firm Eli Lilly and later President of the company's US operations. Kelly's replacement as Secretary of Homeland Security was his chief of staff while at DHS, Kirstjen Nielsen, another veteran of the George W. Bush Administration.

Trump's replacement for Michael Flynn as National Security Adviser was LTG H.R. McMaster, an Army general whose 1997 book, *Dereliction of Duty*, was critical of Vietnam-era military leaders for not questioning and criticizing the strategy they received from civilian leaders. McMaster's deputy national security adviser was Dina Powell, a former managing director and partner at Goldman Sachs, and his

pick to replace her is Nadia Schadlow, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

The policies these appointees pursue, too, are nothing more than a continuation of some of the worst violations of our freedoms, such as pushing for [reauthorization of Section 702 of FISA](#) and forcing states to [comply with the REAL ID Act](#). These appointees and their policies wouldn't be out of place under any other establishment administration, so how exactly does Trump expect to drain the swamp by appointing these people and why is he doing it?

Foreign Policy Is the Canary in the Coal Mine

President Trump is increasingly hemmed in by the people he has chosen to staff his administration. Kelly is doing his best to control the flow of information to the President so that he can control what ideas Trump can choose from. Kelly's relationship with Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, a former Marine Corps general, and National Security Adviser McMaster is said to be a close one, meaning that [Trump's foreign policy will essentially be controlled by generals](#) who have fully embraced the mindset and world view of the military-industrial establishment. Given the trust Trump has placed in "his generals," it is unlikely that we'll see a sensible foreign policy coming from the White House any time soon.

Trump's ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, has taken a far more hawkish line than candidate Trump ever did, and has been [doing that since day one](#) with no repercussions. Trump's Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, recently [announced a "new" US policy towards Syria](#) that is committed to the overthrow of Syrian President Assad, a policy whose outcome would have a severe destabilizing effect on the Middle East and whose execution would continue the risk of provoking a war with Russia. The US Senate has increasingly become emboldened in standing up to President Trump too, questioning some of his anti-establishment appointments or, in the case of former Congressman Scott Garrett, Trump's nominee to head up and reform the Export-Import Bank, [rejecting them outright](#). Establishment figures finally sense that the populist wave that swept Trump into office is subsiding, and they are beginning to feel their oats.

Many in Trump's electoral base are unaware of the political machinations that are going on to isolate and co-opt the President. They see passage of a tax reform bill, withdrawal from TPP, and continued movement towards building a border wall as signs that Trump is still "winning." But [recent comments from Kelly](#), who called Trump's previous stances on immigration and the border wall "not fully informed" make it clear that the cabal encircling the President has its own ideas and will continue working to bring them to fruition. They'll chip away at Trump and his policy ideas piece by piece until they are able to substitute their own ideas for his.

The establishment's ideal is to surround the President with policy experts who present him with a limited range of policy options which have the establishment's stamp of approval, excluding any non-interventionist or outside-the-box thinking. They hope to then get the President to claim their ideas for his own when doing his victory laps, making him think that he was responsible for what are actually the same doomed-to-fail policies that have circulated throughout DC for decades. When things inevitably go belly up, it will be Trump taking the blame in the media while the establishment figures advising him slink back to their think tanks, law firms, or lobbying firms to await the next President they can hijack.

The establishment isn't averse to using the media to nudge Trump towards their side either, as [Kelly's latest interview](#) indicates. Although there have been some reports that [Trump is getting fed up with Kelly](#)

, he recently [took to Twitter to support his chief](#), capitulating to the establishment to ensure the appearance of a unified front within the White House. One thing is for sure, there won't be any changes in the direction of White House policy until Kelly leaves or is fired. But even then, Trump may be so hopelessly encircled by now that he'll end up picking another establishment chief of staff, perhaps even at the [recommendation of those closest to him](#).

Parallels Between Trump and Reagan

Trump's current situation brings back memories of President Reagan's first term, when chief of staff James Baker, a former Democrat and Bush family friend, was able to put his allies in key positions, ensuring that he was largely successful in keeping President Reagan from enacting any real conservative policies or appointing conservatives to key positions such as the Supreme Court. Another poor personnel pick, Treasury Secretary (and later White House chief of staff) Don Regan, chaired the [US Gold Commission](#) and was instrumental in neutering the nascent movement to return the US dollar to a commodity standard, thus completely sidelining a [policy that was important to Reagan](#).

What the Reagan Revolution could have accomplished was nipped in the bud, replaced by what we have now come to know as neoconservatism – a focus on hawkish and interventionist foreign policy, making peace with the welfare state, and economic views that pay lip service to free markets while continuing a policy of big government and crony capitalism. Large budget deficits and a series of proxy [wars](#) all over the world were the Reagan legacy, and set the pattern for the actions of future Presidents.

Had it not been for the Soviet Union's collapse and the post hoc ergo propter hoc assignation of the collapse to the Reagan Administration's military spending, Reagan's stature would not be nearly what it is today. Unfortunately the timing of that collapse, even though it was [economically inevitable](#), provided neoconservative foreign policy with a shot in the arm that it has continued to ride for the past quarter of a century in an attempt to maintain its veneer of legitimacy.

We're facing a similar, Reagan-like situation with President Trump now, as the voters who put him into office intending to give Washington the middle finger have found their man stymied at every turn. If Trump supporters fail to understand what is going on and reflexively support everything coming out of the White House because they view it as originating from President Trump, then their ability to actually effect a change in Washington's policies will be virtually nil.

The policy establishment surrounding the President knows what it wants and has a strategy to achieve it. They believe that dangling red meat issues like the border wall in front of Trump supporters, or occasionally rattling sabers against North Korea or Iran, giving those in the base just a taste of what they want, is enough to keep them placated while the establishment pursues its own ambitions. Trump supporters are still in the honeymoon phase right now, so that strategy may work, at least for the present.

If Trump supporters don't wake up and recognize what is transpiring very soon, by the time they realize that they've been hoodwinked and that Trump has become the establishment's Manchurian President it will be too late. Any possibility for good that could have come out of the Trump White House will have been squandered and it may take another generation or more before a similar opportunity presents itself.

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