

What's Worse: Trump's Campaign Agenda or Empowering Generals and CIA Operatives to Subvert It?

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During his successful 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump, for better and for worse, advocated a slew of policies that attacked the most sacred prongs of long-standing bipartisan Washington consensus. As a result, he was (and continues to be) viewed as uniquely repellent by the neoliberal and neoconservative guardians of that consensus, along with their sprawling network of agencies, think tanks, financial policy organs, and media outlets used to implement their agenda (CIA, NSA, the Brookings/AEI think tank axis, Wall Street, Silicon Valley, etc.).

Whatever else there is to say about Trump, it is simply a fact that the 2016 election saw elite circles in the U.S., with very few exceptions, lining up with remarkable fervor behind his Democratic opponent. Top CIA officials [openly declared war](#) on Trump in the [nation's op-ed pages](#) and one of their operatives (now [an MSNBC favorite](#)) was tasked with [stopping him in Utah](#), while [Time magazine reported](#), just a week before the election, that “the banking industry has supported Clinton with buckets of cash. ... What bankers most like about Clinton is that she is not Donald Trump.”

Hank Paulson, former Goldman Sachs CEO and George W. Bush's treasury secretary, went to the [pages of the Washington Post](#) in mid-2016 to shower Clinton with praise and Trump with unbridled scorn, saying what he hated most about Trump was his refusal to consider cuts in entitlement spending (in contrast, presumably, to the Democrat he was endorsing).

“It doesn't surprise me when a socialist such as Bernie Sanders sees no need to fix our [entitlement programs](#),” the former Goldman CEO wrote. “But I find it particularly appalling that Trump, a businessman, tells us he [won't touch](#) Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.”

Some of Trump's advocated assaults on D.C. orthodoxy aligned with long-standing views of at least some left-wing factions (e.g., his professed opposition to regime change war in Syria, Iraq/Libya-style interventions, [global free trade deals](#), [entitlement cuts](#), greater conflict with Russia, and self-destructive [pro-Israel fanaticism](#)), while other Trump positions were horrifying to anyone with a plausible claim to leftism, or basic decency (reaffirming torture, expanding GITMO, killing terrorists' families, launching Islamophobic crusades, fixation on increasing hostility with Tehran, further unleashing federal and local police forces). Ironically, Trump's principal policy deviation around which elites have now coalesced in opposition — a desire for better relations with Moscow — was the same one that Obama, to their great bipartisan dismay, also adopted (as evidenced by

Obama's [refusal to more aggressively confront the Kremlin-backed Syrian government](#) or [arm anti-Russian factions in Ukraine](#)).



It is true that Trump, being Trump, was wildly inconsistent in virtually all of these pronouncements, often [contradicting](#) or [abandoning](#) them weeks after he made them. And, as many of us [pointed out at the time](#), it was foolish to assume that the campaign vows of any politician, let alone an adept con man like Trump, would be a reliable barometer for what he would do once in office. And, as expected, he has [betrayed](#) many of [these promises](#) within months of being inaugurated, while the very Wall Street interests he railed against have found a [very welcoming embrace](#) in the Oval Office.

Nonetheless, Trump, as a matter of rhetoric, repeatedly affirmed policy positions that were directly contrary to long-standing bipartisan orthodoxy, and his policy and personal instability only compounded elites' fears that he could not be relied upon to safeguard their lucrative, power-vesting agenda. In so many ways — due to his campaign positions, his outsider status, his unstable personality, his witting and unwitting unmasking of the truth of U.S. hegemony, the embarrassment he causes in Western capitals, his reckless unpredictability — Trump posed a threat to their power centers.

It is often claimed that this trans-partisan, elite coalition assembled against Trump because they are simply American patriots horrified by the threat he poses to America's noble traditions and institutions. I guess if you want to believe that the CIA, the GOP consulting class, and assorted D.C. imperialists, along with Bush-era neocons like Bill Kristol and David Frum, woke up one day and developed some sort of earnest, patriotic conscience about democracy, ethics, constitutional limits, and basic decency, you're free to believe that. It makes for a nice, moving story: a film from the "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" genre. But at the very least, Trump's campaign assaults on their most sacred pieties was, and remains, a major factor in their seething contempt for him.

From the start of Trump's presidency, it was clear that the permanent national security power structure in Washington was deeply hostile to his presidency and would do what it could to undermine it. Shortly before Trump was inaugurated, I wrote [an article](#) noting that many of the most damaging anti-Trump leaks were emanating from anonymous CIA and other Deep State operatives who despised Trump because the policies he vowed to enact — the ones American voters ratified — were so contrary to their agenda and belief system. Indeed, they were even anonymously boasting that they were [withholding secrets](#) from Trump's briefings because they decided the elected president should not have access to them.

After Trump openly questioned the reliability of the CIA in light of its Iraq War failures, Chuck Schumer went on Rachel Maddow's show to warn Trump — explicitly — that he would be destroyed if he continued to oppose the intelligence community:

Chuck Schumer on Trump's tweet hitting intel community: "He's being really dumb to do this." <https://t.co/MOcU8ruOPK>

— Kyle Griffin (@kylegriffin1) [January 4, 2017](#)

Although it is now common to assert — as a form of in-the-know mockery — that the notion of a “Deep State” in the U.S. was invented by Trump supporters only in the last year, the reality is that the U.S. Deep State has been reported on and openly discussed in numerous circles long before Trump. In 2010, the Washington Post’s Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Dana Priest, along with Bill Arkin, published [a three-part series](#) that the paper titled “Top Secret America: A hidden world, growing beyond control.”

The Post series documented that the military-intelligence community “has become so large, so unwieldy and so secretive that no one knows how much money it costs, how many people it employs, how many programs exist within it or exactly how many agencies do the same work.” The Post concluded that it “amounts to an alternative geography of the United States, a Top Secret America hidden from public view and lacking in thorough oversight.”



In 2014, mainstream national security journalists Marc Ambinder and D.B. Grady published [a book](#) titled “Deep State: Inside the Government Secrecy Industry,” which documented — in its own words — that “there is a hidden country within the United States,” one “formed from the astonishing number of secrets held by the government and the growing ranks of secret-keepers given charge over them.”

Other journalists such as [Peter Dale Scott](#) and [Mike Lofgren](#) have long written about the U.S. Deep State completely independent of Trump. The belief that the “Deep State” was invented by Trump supporters as some recent conspiratorial concoction is based in pure ignorance about national security discourse, or a jingoistic desire to believe that the U.S. (unlike primitive, inferior countries) is immune from such malevolent forces, or both.

Indeed, mainstream liberals in good standing, such as the New Republic’s Jeet Heer, have repeatedly and explicitly speculated about (and, in Heer’s case, warned of) the possibility of Deep State subversion of the White House:

The terrifying thing here is the only people able to stand up to Trump so far are the denizens of the Deep State. Also the Chinese gov't.

— Jeet Heer (@HeerJeet) [February 14, 2017](#)

The American Deep State is in open conflict with an incoming president who is twitchy, thin-skinned & paranoid. What could go wrong?

— Jeet Heer (@HeerJeet) [January 11, 2017](#)

For me, the most terrifying thing about this political moment is the intervention of the Deep State (against both Clinton & Trump) <https://t.co/qBnyH47W6z>

— Jeet Heer (@HeerJeet) [January 12, 2017](#)

Call it what you will — the National Security Elite, the Deep State, the Blob. It's very pig-headed & knows how to sabotage change.

— Jeet Heer (@HeerJeet) [April 17, 2017](#)

To qualify earlier tweet, there's a lot Deep State can do short of a coup: leaking and investigation. That's all to the good.

— Jeet Heer (@HeerJeet) [May 12, 2017](#)

That the U.S. has a shadowy, secretive world of intelligence and military operatives who exercise great power outside of elections and democratic accountability is not some exotic, alt-right conspiracy theory; it's utterly elemental to understanding anything about how Washington works. It's hard to believe that anyone on this side of a sixth grade civics class would seek to deny that.

The last several weeks have ushered in more open acknowledgment of — and cheerleading for — a subversion of Trump's agenda by unelected military and intelligence officials. Media accounts have been almost unanimous in heralding the arrival of retired Marine Gen. John Kelly as White House chief of staff (pictured, top photo), widely depicted as a sign that normalcy is returning to the executive branch.

"John Kelly Quickly Moves to Impose Military Discipline on White House," the New York Times headline [announced](#).

The current storyline is that Kelly has aligned with Trump's national security adviser, Army Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, to bring seriousness and order to the White House. In particular, these two military men are systematically weakening and eliminating many of the White House officials who are true adherents to the domestic and foreign policy worldview on which Trump's campaign was based. These two military officials (along with yet another retired general, Defense Secretary James Mattis) have long been hailed by anti-Trump factions as the Serious, Responsible Adults in the Trump administration, primarily because they support militaristic policies — such as the war in Afghanistan and intervention in Syria — that are far more in line with official Washington's bipartisan posture.

As the Atlantic's Rosie Gray [reports](#), McMaster has successfully fired several national security officials aligned with Steve Bannon and the nationalistic, purportedly non-interventionist foreign policy and anti-Muslim worldview Trump advocated throughout the election. As Gray notes, this has provoked anger among Trump supporters who view the assertion of power by these generals as an undemocratic attack against the policies for which the electorate voted. Gray writes:

"McMaster's show of force has set off alarm bells among Bannon allies in the pro-Trump media sphere, who favored Flynn and regard the national security adviser as a globalist interloper."

In a bizarre yet illuminating reflection of rapidly shifting political alliances, Democratic

Party [think tanks](#) and [other groups](#) have rallied behind McMaster as some sort of besieged, stalwart hero whose survival is critical to the Republic, notwithstanding the fact that, by all accounts, he is fighting to [ensure the continuation](#) of the U.S. war in Afghanistan and escalate it in Syria. As [usually happens these days](#), these Democrats are in lockstep with their new neocon partners, led by Bill Kristol, who far prefer the unelected agenda of McMaster and Kelly to the one that Trump used to get elected:

The success or failure of the Bannon/alt-right/Russian assault on McMaster will be a key moment for the Trump Administration-& the country.

— Bill Kristol (@BillKristol) [August 4, 2017](#)

It is certainly valid to point out that these generals didn't use tanks or any other show of force to barge into the White House; they were invited there by Trump, who appointed them to these positions. And they only have the power that he agrees that they should exercise.

But there's no denying that Trump is deluged by exactly the kinds of punishments that Schumer warned Trump would be imposed on him if he continued to defy the intelligence community. Many of Trump's most devoted haters are, notably, GOP consultants; one of the most tenacious of that group, Rick Wilson, [celebrated today](#) in the Daily Beast that the threat of prosecution and the tidal waves of harmful leaks have forced Trump into submission. The combination of the "Goldman Boys" and the generals has taken over, Wilson crows, and is destroying the Bannon-led agenda on which Trump campaigned.

Whatever else is true, there is now simply no question that there is open warfare between adherents to the worldview Trump advocated in order to win, and the permanent national security power faction in Washington that — sometimes for good, and sometimes for evil — despises that agenda. The New Republic's Brian Beutler [described the situation](#) perfectly on Friday:

Where the generals haven't been empowered to run the show, they have asserted themselves nonetheless. "In the earliest weeks of Trump's presidency," the Associated Press [reported Tuesday](#), Mattis and Kelly agreed "that one of them should remain in the United States at all times to keep tabs on the orders rapidly emerging from the White House."

It would be sensationalizing things to call this a soft coup, but it is impossible to deny that real presidential powers have been diluted or usurped. Elected officials have decided that leaving the functioning of the government to unelected military officers is politically preferable to invoking constitutional remedies that would require them to vote.

Beutler is a full-scale, devoted enemy of Trump's political agenda, and is clearly glad that something is impeding it. But he also recognizes the serious, enduring dangers to democracy from relying on military officials and intelligence operatives to serve as some sort of backstop, or supreme guardians, of political values and norms.

It's particularly ironic that many of the same people who have spent the year ridiculing the notion that the U.S. has any kind of Deep State are now trumpeting the need for the U.S. military to save the Republic from the elected government, given that this, roughly

speaking, is the defining attribute of all Deep States, at least as they depict themselves.

There have been some solitary Democratic Party voices expressing concern about these developments. Here, for instance, is what Barbara Lee had to say as most of her fellow Democrats were cheering the arrival of Gen. Kelly in the West Wing:

By putting Gen John Kelly in charge, Pres Trump is militarizing the White House & putting our executive branch in the hands of an extremist.

— Rep. Barbara Lee (@RepBarbaraLee) [July 28, 2017](#)

But hers was clearly the minority view: The military triumvirate of Kelly, Mattis, and McMaster has been cast as the noble defender of American democracy, pitted against those who were actually elected to lead the government.

No matter how much of a threat one regards Trump as being, there really are other major threats to U.S. democracy and important political values. It's hard, for instance, to imagine any group that has done more harm, and ushered in more evil, than the Bush-era neocons with whom Democrats are now openly aligning. And who has brought more death, and suffering, and tyranny to the world over the last six decades than the U.S. national security state?

In terms of some of the popular terms that are often thrown around these days — such as “authoritarianism” and “democratic norms” and “U.S. traditions” — it's hard to imagine many things that would pose a greater threat to all of that than empowering the national security state (what, before Trump, has long been called the Deep State) to exert precisely the power that is supposed to be reserved exclusively for elected officials. In sum, Trump opponents should be careful of what they wish for, as it might come true.

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