

# American Kakistocracy

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*Kakistocracy* is a term that was first used in the 17th century; derived from a Greek word, it means, literally, government by the worst and most unscrupulous people among us. More broadly, it can mean the most inept and cringeworthy kind of government. The term fell into disuse over the past century or more, and most highly informed people have never heard it before (but to kids familiar with the word “kaka” it might resonate).

As I wrote my new book with E.J. Dionne and Tom Mann, *One Nation Under Trump*, I kept returning to the term. Kakistocracy is back, and we are experiencing it firsthand in America. The unscrupulous element has come into sharp focus in recent weeks as a string of Trump Cabinet members and White House staffers have been caught spending staggering sums of taxpayer dollars to charter jets, at times to go small distances where cheap commercial transportation was readily available, at times to conveniently visit home areas or have lunch with family members. While Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price was forced to resign after his serial abuse, others—including Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt, and Trump adviser Kellyanne Conway, remain in place.

With Pruitt and Price, the problems were evident before they were confirmed. Pruitt told the Senate he had done no official business on a personal email account while serving as Oklahoma attorney general. When a judge ordered Pruitt’s emails to be made public, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell rushed through his confirmation before they appeared—and, too late, they showed he had misled the Senate. Tom Price had engaged in a string of stock transactions while in Congress that led to accusations of manipulation and insider trading; McConnell and his Republican Senate colleagues brushed the evidence aside. Similarly, Attorney General Jeff Sessions’s misleading claims in his confirmation hearing about his own relationships with Russians during the campaign met with no pushback or interest from Republicans on the Judiciary Committee.

The Constitution prohibits anything of value other than a salary going to a president from the federal government or the states. (Trump had also been pushing the District of Columbia for more favorable property taxes.) The failure of GSA top officials to act on Trump's apparent violation is under investigation by the agency's inspector general. Foreign-government entities falling over themselves to stay in the hotel and schedule meetings and events there at premium prices may have violated the Foreign Emoluments Clause, just one of a string of in-your-face elements of a president enriching himself via his office. Doubling the initiation fee at Mar-A-Lago to \$250,000, and advertising that those putting on weddings there or at his Bedminster, New Jersey, country club might get a photo-op with the president of the United States, are equally outrageous examples.

News that the president's daughter Ivanka and son-in-law Jared Kushner had used a private server and private email accounts for official business—multiplying to several accounts, then hurriedly transferred to the Trump business server after the revelations—showed a remarkable indifference to the rules; Kushner's repeated failure to disclose his foreign contacts on security-clearance forms represented clear violations that underlined that cavalier attitude. And the efforts of Ivanka's business and the Kushner family business to leverage their White House status parallel the ethical violations of the president. A competent and honest Congress would be all over these issues, with hearings and efforts to clean up the system. The number of hearings on any of these issues of absence of ethics, abuse of power, and misuse of taxpayer money: zero.

Awful as the grifterish mentality and behavior may be, worse is the other part of kakistocracy—inept, corrupt, and disruptive governance. Impulsive, stream-of-consciousness communications from the president by tweet are one thing. Examples like a budget that aims to knock out our weather satellites and cut our ability to respond to a pandemic, along with the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) removing from its website information about the disastrous conditions in Puerto Rico while pumping up the good news, are another.

The misguided and reckless travel bans instituted at the beginning of the administration were a harbinger of indifference to norms and practices of government previously embraced by both parties. The moves undertaken now by Trump and his aides to sabotage Obamacare, after the embarrassing failures to enact a bill to repeal and replace it, are sadistic and outrageous. They include cutting off the funding to notify people about the period for enrollment on the health exchanges, and shortening the time to enroll, along

with most recently ordering the head of Medicare and Medicaid Services to deny a critical waiver to Iowa which will result in many losing insurance and skyrocketing premiums for others.

More troublesome still is the danger to world stability reflected in the embarrassing contretemps-triangle involving Secretary of State Tillerson, Secretary of Defense Mattis, and Trump. Within the last week, Trump undercut Tillerson via tweet, taking diplomatic talks with North Korea off the table while his secretary of state was in China (after undercutting our vital ally South Korea by attempting to blow up our joint free-trade agreement). Then NBC reported that Tillerson had privately called the president a “moron.” Mattis then told the Senate that America should continue to certify the Iran-nuclear deal, as it is in our national-security interest—after which the president threatened to decertify the deal, undercutting the credibility of his defense secretary.\* While we have seen many instances in the past of presidents and Cabinet members at odds—remember Gerald Ford and James Schlesinger; Ronald Reagan and Alexander Haig—we have had nothing like these public disputes and contradictory signals involving the most sensitive trouble spots on earth.

Donald Trump campaigned by promising to run government like a business. Unfortunately, that business is Trump University. There are 602 key policy positions in the executive requiring Senate confirmation. Almost nine months into the Trump presidency, only 142—less than a quarter—have been filled, and nearly half, 289, have not even had a nominee chosen. The record here is starkly worse than under the previous four presidents, from George H. W. Bush through Obama. At the State Department, we have a secretary and two deputy secretaries in place—but only two of the nearly 30 critical undersecretaries or assistant secretaries, with none even nominated for the vast majority of the positions. A slew of key ambassadorships remain vacant, including sensitive spots like South Korea, Congo, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and Venezuela—none of which even have a nominee! Rumors have circulated that Tillerson has proposed many experienced Bush hands for some of these posts, which have been blocked by a White House personnel office that screens for early support for Trump, and vetoes those who offered any criticism during the campaign—which eliminates the vast majority of those with any experience in foreign affairs.

John Kelly left his position at Homeland Security for the White House in July; the vacancy at the top of that critical department remains, with no nominee on the horizon. There are still no nominees for undersecretary for national protection, undersecretary for science and technology, or assistant secretaries

for policy or immigration. The same pattern holds true for almost every other cabinet department or key agency. At FEMA, there is a director, but the nominee for deputy director was forced to withdraw after a series of stories about his crony behavior in his previous role at FEMA in the Bush administration. Speaking of science, the Trump nominee for chief scientist at the Department of Agriculture, Sam Clovis, is a right-wing talk radio host whose Ph.D. is in public administration.

To be sure, Trump himself suggested that he did not need to fill many of these 602 posts, because there are “hundreds and hundreds of unnecessary jobs.” It is true that we have had, as scholar Paul Light has put it, a “thickening of government,” with multiple layers of management added over the years. Substituting political appointments with career senior managers taking on their responsibilities would make sense.

But at the same time that there are hundreds of key vacancies in presidential appointees, the administration is signaling deep distrust in the bureaucracy and waging war on the Senior Executive Service. Tillerson has moved actively to hollow out the diplomatic corps, purging the department of many distinguished experts in regions and in management. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke is under investigation by the inspector general for trying to move a series of senior managers out of their posts and home areas without following the civil-service rules.

*The New York Times* [reported that](#) EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt has filled his schedule almost exclusively with meetings and fancy dinners with coal-mining and chemical companies and others EPA regulates—often followed by moves to deregulate them—while scheduling almost no meetings with environmental groups. Pruitt has also spent \$25,000 in taxpayer money to put a soundproof phone booth in his office, raising red flags about why this was necessary.

The kakistocracy applies as well to Congress. I have already outlined some of the failures of the confirmation process for Cabinet officers and the abysmal lack of oversight of kleptocratic behavior. Add to those the eleventh hour backdoor effort in the House in January to eviscerate its independent Office of Congressional Ethics and the outrageous attempts by House Intelligence Committee Chair Devin Nunes, unchecked by Speaker Paul Ryan, to collude with the Trump White House to mislead about allegations of its own ties to Russian officials during and after the 2016 campaign. Nunes was forced to recuse himself from the Russia investigation—but has continued to try to use his office to [influence the process](#).

Then there is the ineptitude of the policy process in Congress. Despite Speaker Ryan's boast that this could be the most productive [presidency and Congress in our lifetime](#), the record of Congress in its first nine months is abysmal. Not one of the big goals set by the president or majority congressional leaders—health repeal and replace, infrastructure, a wall on the border with Mexico, major tax reform—has been achieved. While the number of bills enacted is about average for new presidents, the number of significant bills is extremely low, especially compared to George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Except for a series of narrow measures to roll back Obama regulations and a bill to increase sanctions on Russia, most of the enactments are minor.

Moreover, Republican leaders, especially Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, have blown up most of the remaining norms about how laws are developed, debated, and enacted. The process used to attempt the single most significant congressional promise, repealing and replacing Obamacare, was an embarrassing jumble of ineptitude, casuistry, irregularity, and abnormality. After eight years of promises to offer an alternative to the Affordable Care Act, Republicans in Congress only slapped together careless and unworkable plans after they took the White House and both houses of Congress. In the Senate, the plan was crafted behind closed doors by a small group of older, white male senators without the involvement of experts from the two relevant committees, Health and Finance, and with no input from the most savvy health experts, conservative or otherwise, or any of the stakeholders in the health-policy world. The plan, and its even more embarrassing alternative crafted by Senators Cassidy and Graham after the first one flamed out, were opposed by every major health organization and provider group, and were ripped by Senator John McCain for violating every principle of deliberation and debate. The sponsors lied repeatedly to their colleagues and to journalists and others about what the bills did and did not do, and made ham-handed efforts to throw money or exemptions at individual senators in Maine and Alaska to induce their votes.

The failure to pass any health measure, or to send Trump any significant bills he can use to have lavish Rose Garden victory ceremonies to show how much he is winning, has led to another round of presidential insults aimed at his own party leaders McConnell and Ryan, and at apostates like John McCain and Jeff Flake. The latest is a round of ridiculous and counterproductive attacks by Trump on Senate Foreign Relations Chair Bob Corker, who responded with his own broadsides at an unstable president lacking adult supervision. Many observers are now writing and talking about a Republican civil war, with the latest battle being the Senate primary in Alabama that led to the [nomination of radical Roy Moore](#).

“Can’t anybody here play this game?” was Casey Stengel’s famous lament about his inept 1962 New York Mets. The same lament could apply to the Trump administration and its majority team in Congress—but the problem is deeper and worse when ineptitude joins with venality and recklessness, and when the stakes are far more than baseball pennants.