

New York Times Confirms: It's Trump Versus the "Deep State"

Even the Gray Lady admits the president is up against a powerful bureaucracy that wants him sunk.

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The New York Times on Thursday published a remarkable piece that essentially acknowledged the existence of an American "deep state" and its implacable hostility to Donald Trump. The Times writers (fully five on the byline: Peter Baker, Lara Jakes, Julian E. Barnes, Sharon LaFraniere, and Edward Wong) certainly don't decry the existence of this deep state, as so many conservatives and Trump supporters do. Nor do they refrain from the kinds of value-charged digs and asides against Trump that have illuminated the paper's consistent bias against the president from the beginning.

But they do portray the current impeachment drama as the likely denouement of a struggle between the outsider Trump and the insider administrative forces of government. In so doing, they implicitly give support to those who have argued that American foreign policy has become the almost exclusive domain of unelected bureaucrats impervious to the views of elected officials—even presidents—who may harbor outlooks different from their own.

This is a big deal because, even in today's highly charged political environment, with a sitting president under constant guerrilla attack, few have been willing to acknowledge any such deep state phenomenon. When in the spring of 2018, *The National Interest* asked 12 presumed experts—historians, writers, former government officials, and think tank mavens—to weigh in on whether there was in fact such a thing as a deep state, eight said no, two waffled with a "sort of" response, and only two said yes. Former Colorado senator Gary Hart made fun of the whole concept, warning of "sly devils meeting in the furnace room after hours, passing out assignments for subverting the current administration."

But now the *Times'* Baker et al weigh in with an analysis saying that, yes, Trump has been battling something that some see as a deep state, and the deep state is winning. The headline: "Trump's War on the 'Deep State' Turns Against Him." There's an explanatory subhed that reads: "The impeachment inquiry is in some ways the culmination of a battle between the president and the government institutions he distrusted and disparaged."

As the *Times* reporters put it in the story text, "The House impeachment inquiry into Mr. Trump's efforts to force Ukraine to investigate Democrats is the climax of a 33-month scorched-earth struggle between a president with no record of public service and the government he inherited but never trusted." Leaving aside the requisite rapier thrust at the president ("with no record of public service"), this is a pretty good summation of the Trump presidency—the story of entrenched government bureaucrats and a president who sought

to curb their power. Or, put another way, the story of a president who sought to rein in the deep state and a deep state that sought to destroy his presidency.

Baker and his colleagues clearly think the president is on the ropes. They quote Virginia's Democratic Representative Gerald Connolly as saying the nation is headed toward a kind of "karmic justice," with the House impeachment inquiry now giving opportunity to once-anonymous officials to "speak out, speak up, testify about and against."

Connolly and the *Times* reporters are probably right. The House seems headed inexorably toward impeachment. The president's struggle against the deep state appears now to be a lost cause. To prevail, he needed to marshal far more public support for his agenda—including curtailment of the deep state—than he proved capable of doing. He is a beleaguered president and is likely to remain so throughout the remainder of his term.

The reporters note that Trump sought from the beginning to minimize the role of career officials. He gave more ambassadorships to political appointees—"the highest rate in history," say the reporters (without noting that Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Ronald Reagan weren't far behind). The result, they write, has been "an exodus from public service." They quote a "nonpartisan organization" saying the Trump administration lost nearly 1,200 senior career service employees in its first 18 months—roughly 40 percent more than during President Barack Obama's first year and a half in office.

The reporters reveal a letter from 36 former foreign service officers to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo complaining that he had "failed to protect civil servants from political retaliation" and citing the removal of U.S. ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch. Another letter signed by more than 270 former employees of the U.S. Agency for International Development expressed anger at the treatment of public servants and the president's "cavalier (and quite possibly corrupt) approach to making foreign policy."

The tone of the *Times* piece seems to suggest these expressions and actions constitute a kind of indictment of Trump. But a more objective appraisal would be that it is merely the outward manifestation of that "33-month scorched-earth struggle" the *Times* was talking about. Does a president have a right to fire an ambassador? How serious an offense is it when he appoints political figures to ambassadorships at a rate slightly higher than some previous presidents? If foreign policy careerists decide to leave the government because they don't like the president's effort to rein in foreign policy careerists, is that a black mark on the president—or merely the natural result of a fundamental intragovernmental struggle?

But the *Times* reporters give the game away more explicitly in cataloguing a list of instances where those careerists sought to undermine the president because they found his policy decisions contemptible. "While many career employees have left," writes the *Times*, "some of those who stayed have resisted some of Mr. Trump's initiatives." When the president canceled large war games with South Korea, the military held them anyway—only on a smaller scale and without fanfare. Diplomats negotiated an agreement before a NATO summit to foreclose any Trump action based on a different outlook. When the White House ordered foreign aid frozen this year, agency officials quietly worked with Congress to get it restored. State Department officials enlisted congressional allies to hinder Trump's efforts to initiate weapons sales to Saudi Arabia and other nations.

Further, as the *Times* writes, “When transcripts of [Trump’s] telephone calls with the leaders of Mexico and Australia were leaked, it convinced him that he could not trust the career staff and so records of subsequent call were stashed away in a classified database.” And that was very early in his presidency, about the time Trump also learned there was a nasty dossier out there that was designed to provide grist for anyone interested in undermining or destroying his presidency.

And of course, now governmental officials are lining up before the House impeachment panel to slam the president over his effort to get Ukraine to investigate his Democratic rival Joe Biden and Biden’s son, Hunter, and his apparently related decision to hold up \$391 million in security aid to Ukraine. As I have written in this space previously, this outlandish action by Trump constituted a profound lapse in judgment that was a kind of dare for opposition Democrats to fire off the impeachment cannon. And fire it off they have. “Now,” writes the *Times*, “[Trump] faces the counteroffensive.”

But that doesn’t take away from the central point of the *Times* story—that Trump and the deep state have been in mortal combat since the beginning of his administration. And the stakes are huge.

Trump wanted to restore at least somewhat cordial relations with Russia, whereas the deep state considered that the height of folly.

Trump wanted to get out of Afghanistan, whereas the deep state totally opposed such a move.

Trump viewed America’s role in Syria as focused on defeating ISIS, whereas the deep state wanted to continue favoring the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Trump was wary of letting events in Ukraine draw America into a direct confrontation with Russia, whereas the deep state wants to wrest Ukraine out of Russia’s sphere of influence even if it means opening tensions with the Bear.

Trump wanted to bring China to account for its widespread abuse of normal trading practices, whereas the deep state clung to “free trade” even in the face of such abuse.

These are big issues facing America. And the question hovering over the country as the impeachment drama proceeds is: are these matters open to debate in America? Or will the deep state suppress any such debate? And can a president—any president—pursue the Trump policy options without being subjected to the powerful yet subtle machinations of a wily bureaucracy bent on preserving its status and outlook?

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