

The Open Plot to Dismantle the Federal Government

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By Russell Berman

Of the many targets Donald Trump has attacked over the years, few engender less public sympathy than the career workforce of the federal government— the faceless mass of civil servants that the former president and his allies deride as the “deep state.”

Federal employees have long been an easy mark for politicians of both parties, who occasionally hail their nonpartisan public service but far more frequently blame “Washington bureaucrats” for sti"ing your business, auditing your taxes, and taking too long to renew your passport. Denigrating the government’s performance is a tradition as old as the republic, but Trump assigned these shortcomings a sinister new motive, accusing the civilian workforce of thwarting his agenda before he even took oce.

As he runs again for a second term, Trump is vowing to “dismantle the deep state” and ensure that the government he would inherit aligns with his vision for the country. Unlike during his 2016 campaign, however, Trump and his supporters on the right—including several former high-ranking members of his administration— have developed detailed proposals for executing this plan. Immediately upon his inauguration in January 2025, they would seek to convert thousands of career employees into appointees \$reable at will by the president. !ey would assert full White House control over agencies, including the Department of Justice, that for decades have operated as either fully or partially independent government departments.

Trump’s nearest rivals for the Republican nomination have matched and even exceeded his zeal for gutting the federal government. !e businessman Vivek Ramaswamy has vowed to \$re as much as 75 percent of the workforce. And Florida Governor Ron DeSantis promised a New Hampshire crowd last month, “We’re going to start slitting throats on day one.”

These plans, as well as the vicious rhetoric directed toward federal employees, have alarmed a cadre of former government officials from both parties who have made it their mission to promote and protect the nonpartisan civil service. They proudly endorse the idea that the government should be composed largely of experienced, nonpolitical employees. “We’re defenders not of the deep state but of the elective state,” says Max Stier, the CEO of the Partnership for Public Service, a nonpartisan organization devoted to strengthening government and the federal workforce. Trump’s drive to eviscerate this permanent bureaucracy, Stier and other advocates fear, will bring about a return to the early American spoils-and-patronage system, wherein jobs were won through loyalty to a party or president rather than merit, and which the century-old laws that created the modern civil service successfully rooted out.

“I can’t overstate my level of concern about the damage this would do to the institution of the federal government,” Robert Shea, a former senior budget official in the George W. Bush administration, told me. “You would have things formerly considered illegal or unconstitutional popping up all across the government like whack-a-mole. And the ability to fight them would be inhibited.”

The Biden administration last week proposed new rules aimed at preventing future attempts to purge the federal workforce, which numbers around 2.2 million people. Even if the regulations are finalized, however, they could be undone by the next president. So defenders of the civil service have been looking elsewhere, trying to mobilize support in Congress and among the broader public. But their effort has not gained much traction, and legislation to protect career employees, roughly 85 percent of whom live outside the Washington, D.C., area, has stalled on Capitol Hill. “I don’t know how much attention the public pays to this type of thing,” laments Jacqueline Simon, the director of public policy for the American Federation of Government Employees.

To Stier, that is precisely the problem. A Clinton-administration veteran who has run the partnership for more than 20 years, he has emerged as perhaps the nation’s most vocal cheerleader of the federal workforce. The partnership bestows awards on top-performing civil servants every year at an Oscars-style gala called the Sammies, and it advises presidential campaigns of both parties — including

Trump's—on the Herculean task of stang a new administration every four years. Stier tries to keep his organization rigidly nonpartisan, but he views the proposals from Trump and his conservative allies as a unique threat. "I have never seen anything remotely close to an eort to convert a very large segment of the federal workforce and return to the patronage system," he told me. "And that's eectively what you have here."

Stier compared right-wing proposals to overhaul the civil service to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's campaign to weaken the judiciary in Israel. Tens of thousands of Israeli citizens protested in the streets, virtually shutting down the country and forcing Netanyahu to back o. "We have a similar order of threat to our democracy," Stier said, "and yet not the same level of engagement and involvement as you do there."

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the right-wing push to dismantle the federal civil service is how open its conservative leaders are about their designs. !ey are not cloaking their aims in euphemisms about making government more eective and ecient. !ey are stating unequivocally that federal employees must give their loyalty to the president, and that he or she should be able to remove anyone insuciently devoted to the cause. !e fundamental structure of the executive branch, and the independence with which many of its agencies have operated for decades, these conservatives argue, represents a misreading of the Constitution and a usurping of the president's power.

"We're at the 100-year mark with the notion of a technocratic state of dispassionate experts," Paul Dans, who served as chief of sta of the Oce of Personnel Management during the Trump administration, told me. "!e results are in: It's an utter failure."

Dans is the director of the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, a \$22 million eort to recruit an army of conservative appointees and lay the foundation for what the project hopes will be the next Republican administration. He uses terms like "smash" and "wrecking ball" to describe what conservatives have in mind for the federal government, comparing their eort to the 1984 Apple commercial in which a runner takes down an Orwellian bureaucracy by chucking a sledgehammer at a movie screen.

The project has released a 920-page playbook detailing a conservative policy agenda, including its vision for an executive branch that functions fully under the command of the president. “The great challenge confronting a conservative President is the existential need for aggressive use of the vast powers of the executive branch,” writes Russ Vought, a former director of the Office of Management and Budget under Trump, in one section. The president must use “boldness to bend or break the bureaucracy to the presidential will.” Vought now runs the Center for Renewing America, another organization serving as an incubator for policies that Trump’s allies want to implement if the former president—or another conservative Republican—regains the White House.

At the top of Vought and Dans’s must-do list for the next president: reissuing an executive order that Trump signed during his 41 months in office—and which President Joe Biden promptly reversed—that would allow the government to remove civil-service protections from as many as 50,000 federal jobs. The move would create a new class of employees known as Schedule F whom the president could fire at will. It would essentially supersize the number of political appointees in senior positions in the government, currently about 4,000.

To Trump’s critics, the Heritage project is an effort to provide intellectual cover for the authoritarian tendencies that he exhibited as president—and which some of his primary competitors, including DeSantis and Ramaswamy, have mimicked.

Vought, however, says the changes are needed to ensure that the government adheres to the results of presidential elections. The federal bureaucracy “is largely unresponsive to the president,” who, he argues, better represents the will of the people. As their prime example of the civil service supposedly run amok, Vought and Dans cite the career of Anthony Fauci, the longtime director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases who had been lionized by presidents of both parties before becoming a conservative bogeyman under Trump during the coronavirus pandemic. In our interview, Vought compared Fauci to Robert Moses, the notorious New York City parks commissioner who for decades during the 20th century used his unelected positions to exert as much influence as mayors and governors.

“You’ve got to be able to ensure that those actors are no longer empowered,” Vought said, “unless they truly are going to serve the policy agenda of the

president that gets elected by the American people.” Fauci’s status as a career civil servant rather than a political appointee made him difficult—although not impossible—to remove. Trump’s Schedule F would have made it easier.

As OMB director, Vought chafed at the civil service’s opposition to Trump’s decision to bypass Congress and begin building his promised southern border wall by repurposing money appropriated to the Department of Defense. Vought said OMB officials told him the border plan was illegal even after his office’s general counsel had signed off on the idea. “You’re always up against a paradigm shift where people don’t want you to have an opportunity to make policy changes outside of a very clear, confined, very unrisky lane,” Vought said.

To Shea, a fellow Republican who also served as a senior OMB official, such pushback from career employees was a healthy and crucial part of the job. “It was incumbent on the career staff to keep me out of jail,” he said wryly.

By the time Vought left his post, at the end of the Trump administration, he had developed plans to convert 90 percent of OMB’s 535 employees to at-will positions. Even the mere talk of Schedule F, he told me, had resulted in a cultural change at the department, as people “for the first time were understanding that there could be consequences for their resistance.”

No conservative proposal has generated more controversy than the push to remove any separation between the White House and the Department of Justice, where federal prosecutors and agencies like the FBI have long made law-enforcement decisions independently of the president. Jerrey Clark, the former assistant attorney general who along with Trump was indicted by a Georgia grand jury for his role in attempting to overturn the 2020 election, published a paper online in May titled “The U.S. Justice Department Is Not Independent” for the Center for Renewing America. Paired with Trump’s repeated calls to prosecute Biden and other Democrats, this argument raises the prospect that Trump, if elected again, could effectively order the Justice Department to jail anyone he wants, for no other reason than he has the power to do so as president.

I asked Dans whether a president should be able to direct prosecutions against specific individuals. He initially deflected the question. “That’s happening right now,” he said, accusing Biden of ordering the charges that the Justice Department has

brought in two separate cases against Trump—a claim for which there is no evidence.

I changed the topic to Mike Pence. Trump has assailed his former vice president for refusing to help him overturn their defeat, but Pence has never been accused of criminal wrongdoing. Could Trump, as president, simply order the Department of Justice to prosecute him under this theory of presidential power? “Whether a president actually gets into identifying people who ought to be prosecuted, I don’t know if we ever get to that stage,” Dans said. He brought up a different example, arguing that a president could direct prosecutors to go after, say, Mexican drug cartels for their role in the opioid epidemic.

I pressed him one more time on whether Trump could order the prosecution of someone like Pence. His answer wasn’t no.

“I’m not in law school,” Dans replied. “We’re not going to hypotheticals.”

The modern civil service dates back to a presidential assassination nearly 150 years ago. On July 2, 1881, an aspiring diplomat named Charles Guiteau shot President James Garfield at a railroad station in Washington, D.C. Guiteau had become enraged after the new president, inaugurated just four months earlier, had refused to offer him a consulship in Europe as a reward for his help in getting Garfield elected. Garfield’s successor, Chester A. Arthur, signed what became known as the Pendleton Act of 1883, which mandated that federal jobs be awarded based on merit and forbade requirements that prospective hires make political contributions.

Defenders of that system now worry that the escalating vilification of the federal workforce will lead to another outbreak of political violence, this time directed at civil servants. Trump has continued to decry the “deep state” with his customary bellicosity, but advocates were aghast after DeSantis took the rhetoric a step further with his promise to begin “slitting throats.” “They’re going to get somebody killed,” Simon, at the American Federation of Government Employees, told me, ridiculing DeSantis as “a weak little man trying to sound strong and scary.”

Unions representing federal employees have been lobbying Congress to pass a bill that would prevent future administrations from implementing Schedule F and stripping career employees of their job protections. His proposal has received scant

Republican support, however. “If we had a floor vote on this today, I don’t know that I could get it passed in either the House or the Senate,” one of the proposal’s lead sponsors, Democratic Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia, told me. Kaine said he is trying to attach the bill to one of the must-pass spending bills that Congress will likely approve before the end of the year, but that appears to be a long shot.

Senator James Lankford of Oklahoma, the top Republican on the Senate subcommittee overseeing the federal workforce, has criticized the incendiary rhetoric directed toward government workers. But he told me he thinks Congress should debate proposals like Schedule F to determine whether some of the career workforce should be converted to at-will appointees. “There should be more political appointees. I don’t know exactly what that number is,” Lankford said. “It’s not tens of thousands.”

With Congress unlikely to act, the Biden administration last week unveiled its new regulations aimed at thwarting the return of Schedule F. The proposed rule would “clarify and reinforce” existing protections for civil servants, forbidding changes that would take away a career employee’s status without their consent. It would also establish new procedures that the government would have to follow before converting career employees to at-will appointees. The regulations, Deputy OPM Director Robert Shriver told me, represent “what we think is the strongest action we can take under our existing authority.”

The likely effect is that once finalized, the new regulations would slow—but not altogether stop—a future Republican administration from implementing Schedule F. “Can it be undone? Yes, it could be undone,” said Stier, who emphasized that legislation was a preferred route.

Complicating the conservative push to dramatically increase the number of political appointments is the fact that administrations of both parties—and Trump’s in particular—have struggled to hire people to fill the approximately 4,000 appointed positions that already exist. Beyond the concerns about whether an administration should prioritize political loyalty over merit in hiring, former officials say the increase in turnover such a change would bring would simply be bad for the government and, as a result, the public. “We can’t change the leadership of an organization every three or six years and expect the organization to perform in an outstanding way,” says Robert McDonald, the former CEO of Procter &

Gamble and a longtime Republican whom President Barack Obama nominated to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2014. “You’ve got to have continuity of leadership.”

That doesn’t much concern Dans, who downplayed the importance of government experience in his recruitment drive for the next Republican administration. “I’m fully confident that the American people have the skills and have the ability to do these government jobs. It’s not rocket science,” he told me. (“Rocket science may be some of the simpler things they do,” Stier retorted.)

The fight to defend the very existence of the civil service is particularly frustrating for Stier, who has spent the bulk of his career forging a bipartisan consensus in support of the federal workforce. He and the Partnership for Public Service have pushed the government to improve its performance, especially in areas visible to the public. They’ve advocated for changes that would grant presidents more power over appointments by making fewer positions subject to Senate confirmation. Another idea would increase accountability for civil servants by making them earn the protections of tenured service rather than receiving them automatically a year into their employment.

“We can do better,” Stier told me. “But doing better is not burning the house down.”

