

LETTER FROM TRUMP'S WASHINGTON

# THE SCANDAL OF TRUMP'S CABINET PICKS ISN'T JUST THEIR PERSONAL FAILINGS

*The President-elect and his appointees now view their internal enemies as America's biggest national-security threats.*

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Pete Hegseth, Donald Trump's pick for Defense Secretary. Source photograph by Francis Chung / Politico / AP



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In just the past few days, the French government collapsed, civil war in Syria reignited, and South Korea's President, briefly, declared martial law. But

here in Washington, Donald Trump's brand of political chaos is a world unto itself. It is all-consuming, almost timeless, with little reference to any but the most shocking external events, and flows seamlessly from one scandal to the next. This week, it's Pete Hegseth's turn in the barrel; next week, who knows? Maybe it will be Tulsi Gabbard, or R.F.K., Jr. (Again.) Does anyone even remember the details of the Matt Gaetz underage-sex investigation? On Thursday, there was another closed-door House Ethics Committee meeting to debate whether to release the panel's report on Gaetz's seamy doings. But now that his nomination to Attorney General has blown up, would it matter even if they did?

Over the Thanksgiving weekend, Trump named the fathers-in-law of two of his children to senior government positions—Massad Boulos, the Lebanese-born dad of Tiffany Trump's husband, will be Trump's senior Middle East adviser, and Charles Kushner, Ivanka Trump's father-in-law and a seven-figure Trump donor, will be nominated for Ambassador to France. The Kushner appointment, in particular, was the kind of Trump troll that might have, at another, less frenetically troubled time in our history, caused an uproar. In 2004, Kushner pleaded guilty to eighteen counts of illegal campaign contributions, tax evasion, and witness tampering; during the case, it emerged that he had hired a prostitute in an attempt to entrap a brother-in-law who Kushner feared was ratting him out. Chris Christie, the former Trump ally who prosecuted Kushner, called it “one of the most loathsome, disgusting crimes” he had handled as a U.S. Attorney. Trump, on his way out of office in 2020, pardoned Kushner. Now, in elevating him to one of America's premier diplomatic postings, Trump has managed to both insult our oldest ally and flout whatever remaining standards there are for holding a senior U.S. position. “In the madness of Trump's nominations, there is expressed the near total contempt for human respect, customs and the law,” Gérard Araud, who was the French Ambassador to the U.S. during Trump's first term, said in response.

But the Kushner outrage was soon overshadowed. His appointment was announced via a Trump social-media post at 1:17 p.m. on Saturday. (So fast

has the relative weekend peace of the Biden era been shattered.) Less than six hours later, at 6:47 p.m., Trump revealed perhaps his most dangerous decision yet—a plan to install Kash Patel, an ostentatious Trump loyalist who has explicitly promised to go after Trump’s political enemies in the press and in both parties, as the next director of the F.B.I. The wording of the revenge-minded President-elect’s announcement was telling: one of Patel’s selling points, Trump said, was his “pivotal role in uncovering the Russia, Russia, Russia hoax.” Also telling was a key fact that Trump’s announcement omitted: there is no actual opening atop the F.B.I. Christopher Wray, the current director, was named to the post by Trump himself, in 2017, after Trump fired the previous F.B.I. director, James Comey, in a failed effort to stop the Bureau’s investigation into Russia’s interference in the 2016 election. (“Russia, Russia, Russia,” in Trump-speak.) But Wray disappointed Trump by failing to quash the probe, and he has long since been considered a “deep state” enemy of the Trumpists. Today, Wray has more than two years left in his ten-year term—a tenure that was set up by Congress in the aftermath of Watergate and J. Edgar Hoover’s decades-long reign to insulate the Bureau from the twin evils of politicized law enforcement and an excessively powerful director—and yet Trump has not bothered to make his intentions clear: Will he fire Wray outright to make way for Patel? Or wait him out or hope he resigns? Either way, the question of whether Patel, who not only sits on the board of Trump’s Truth Social media company but appeared onstage at campaign rallies with him this year, is confirmable may provide the clearest answer thus far about Trump’s ability to govern as he pleases, free from congressional constraint.

For the Republican senators who are required to approve nominees for senior posts in the upcoming Administration, extremism in defense of Trump has proved to be no obstacle whatsoever. The nominees who seem most embattled, for now, are those, like Gaetz, whose personal behavior and fitness for office have been called into question in such flagrant ways they cannot be avoided. Take Hegseth, whose rapidly collapsing prospects to serve as Trump’s Defense Secretary has been the week’s consuming Washington drama.

Hegseth's nomination is about as troubled as a nomination can be without already having been withdrawn: as questions mounted about his thin credentials and an alleged sexual assault that led him to make an undisclosed settlement payment last year, the *Times* reported last Friday that Hegseth's own mother had once written him an e-mail—which she has disavowed—accusing him of being the kind of man who “belittles, lies, cheats, sleeps around, and uses women for his own power and ego.” On Sunday, my colleague Jane Mayer published a lengthy account concerning Hegseth's alleged alcohol abuse, sexual impropriety, and financial mismanagement at two veterans' groups that he ran before becoming a Fox News host. (Hegseth has denied wrongdoing.) Days' worth of additional revelations about Hegseth's alleged drinking during his time at Fox quickly invited comparisons to the 1989 nomination of John Tower as George H. W. Bush's Defense Secretary, which was voted down by the Senate after reports of Tower's heavy drinking and sexual misconduct.

As of Thursday afternoon, Hegseth's fate was a matter of hourly speculation as he continued to deny the reports about him—not even a repentant appearance on Fox this week by his mother, who insisted that her son was reformed and that she never believed all those bad things that she had written, could persuade wavering Republican senators, such as Iowa's Joni Ernst, who is a survivor of sexual assault, to back off calling for a full vetting of Trump's obviously unvetted candidate. Trump himself was already reported to be looking at alternatives, including, perhaps, Ron DeSantis, the Republican governor of Florida, who infuriated Trump by running against him in this year's primaries.

The surprise, at this point, would be if Hegseth manages to make it. Whether or not he does, there is a bigger story here than Hegseth's personal failings: the President who would have him running the world's most powerful military. Hegseth, like Patel, has a voluminous record of speaking and writing on the theme of what would constitute American national security in a second Trump Administration. For both of them, “America First” is no longer the Trump

campaign slogan of 2016 about pivoting American foreign policy to focus less on the big world beyond our shores. Instead, it's morphed into something different altogether—a radical reimagining of our national-security institutions, which have become not the means by which our leaders combat external threats but the source of the threats themselves.

This is why Hegseth's recent book, "The War on Warriors," published in June, focusses so much on an array of "woke" generals and other "domestic enemies" seeking to undermine the Pentagon from within in their ongoing "cultural Marxist revolution." It's why Patel's 2023 book, "Government Gangsters: the Deep State, the Truth, and the Battle for Our Democracy," has an appendix that names no fewer than sixty "deep state" enemies from the executive branch to be targeted, including many Republican appointees of Trump's first term, such as his Attorney General, Bill Barr, and his White House counsel, Pat Cipollone, who did not pass Patel's loyalty test.

Hegseth and Patel are not going rogue in advancing such radical views—they are reflecting the boss's own radicalization over these past few years. It did not get as much attention as it ought to have, but the single most worrisome—and revealing—Trump statement of the entire 2024 campaign in my view came in a mid-October interview on Fox News, when Trump said, "We have two enemies—we have the outside enemy, and then we have the enemy from within. And the enemy from within, in my opinion, is more dangerous than China, Russia, and all these countries."

Given Trump's moves since the election, this should be considered no idle statement, but an outright mission statement for the new Administration. Who exactly gets confirmed to what job may not yet be known, but this much looks more clear with each Trump appointment: internal purges, far more than anything overseas, will be the order of the day in Trump 2.0. ♦