

Trump's Non-Governmental Organization

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Trump's actions may appear impulsive and erratic, but there is method in the madness. His strategic goal is radically cutting the role of government in the United States. Trump's team could well get away with it, despite vehement criticism from social and business leaders, particularly after the incidents in Charlottesville.

Those who compare the activities of the Trump team to established models of representative democracy may easily conclude that this is a government stuck in trial-and-error mode. But it is wrong to assume that Washington's current administration lacks a strategic plan. Far from being irrational, Donald Trump's mission is to shrink government – to reduce its influence on the economy and people's lives as much as possible. That's why his supporters voted for him. That's why many in the business community backed his campaign. And that's what could well get him elected a second time – even if prominent representatives of the US economy publicly distanced themselves from him in the wake of his ambivalent response to the recent racist and anti-Semitic rally in Charlottesville. As deplorable and erratic as the president's public performances may be, his mission of dismantling the government is clear, and it is more than welcome to both business circles and Republicans.

Seen from this angle, Trump's political actions to date are much more rational and calculated than many believe. The budget proposal for 2018 was a first indication of his administration's radical agenda. In this budget, wide areas of government influence were cut back, from social aid programs and environmental protections to foreign policy and foreign aid, right up to the costs of government personnel. Only the military and intelligence services have been spared. With his budget plan, Trump began putting into practice what his former chief strategist Stephen Bannon had promised under the catchphrase "deconstruction of the administrative state."

Deregulation – or Budget Cuts for Established Governmental Structures

While slashing established governmental structures, Trump set up a sort of shadow cabinet of trusted staff members in the White House. These associates work at the highest levels of government, yet they do not answer to their respective department heads. Instead, they report to Rick Dearborn, a White House deputy chief of staff. This chess move relegates departmental secretaries to the role of altar boys and further demolishes the state.

For example, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson – the man whom many Western democracies hope to be a moderating voice in the White House – does not even have the authority to appoint a deputy or any other important State Department personnel.

In contrast, Secretary of the Treasury Steve Mnuchin, who trained as a hedge fund manager and political fundraiser with Goldman Sachs, has more power – provided he keeps undoing the cautious financial regulations put in place by the Obama administration. Stanley Fischer, Vice Chairman of the Federal Reserve, recently described this development as "very dangerous." In energy and environmental policy, too, Trump's team is systematically pursuing a strategy of deregulation and demolition. Heading the Department of Energy is Rick Perry, the very man who called for the department to be shuttered when he was a presidential candidate. Before that Perry was gover-

nor of Texas, an office he won with substantial financial support from the oil industry.

Another former lobbyist, Scott Pruitt, today calls the shots at the Environmental Protection Agency. He previously joined forces with energy companies to hollow out environmental regulations by suing the very agency he now leads.

Neil Gorsuch: A Foe of Regulation on the Supreme Court

The Trump administration has also been dismantling the government in the judiciary – the branch of government tasked to serve as watchdog and corrective to executive power. Little by little, the Trump White House is shaping the jurisdiction of the federal courts, from the lowest-level District Courts to the Courts of Appeal all the way to the highest authority, the Supreme Court. The nine judges on this bench are nominated by the president but must be approved by the legislative branch, i.e. the Senate, before taking up their lifetime appointments.

Neil Gorsuch's nomination only 11 days after Trump's inauguration proved that the new president is able to act swiftly and effectively when something is important to him. Unlike his predecessor, Barack Obama – who struggled for nearly a year and ultimately failed to fill the empty seat on the bench – Trump pushed his candidate through the Senate via the “nuclear option,” bypassing the filibuster, a democratic control mechanism by which the Democratic minority could have blocked Gorsuch's nomination.

Set on taking apart the state, the president thus placed a comrade in arms at the pinnacle of the American judicial system. The ultra-conservative Gorsuch is widely known for his general opposition to government interventions in the private and economic spheres. The notable exception is his position on abortion – half the battle in winning the Christian right's support for Trump's reelection.

It is obvious, then, that the Trump administration's policies on budget and personnel issues as well as staffing the judiciary are in fact far from incoherent. Instead, they consistently pursue the goal of dismantling the state. This is also true of Trump's course of action toward the legislative branch. Each political measure that increases government debt measurably reduces the government's effectiveness simply by removing the means required for possible future regulatory measures. Less money means less government. It is with this in mind

that Trump calculates that Republicans in Congress will play along with him when it comes to cutting taxes.

If Trump's economic plans, with their evocations of Reagan's “voodoo economics,” come to fruition, national debt levels are bound to rise, just as they did in the 1980s. Debt today is already out of control. At 19 billion dollars, it has doubled since the 2007–08 financial crisis, not even counting the debt of individual states and municipalities.

Empty Coffers for Future Administrations

The US government could face paralysis very soon – all the more so since demographic developments are likely to overstretch social security budgets in the foreseeable future. As baby boomers enter retirement age, they are burdening not only the national pension system but also Medicaid and Medicare, the health insurance programs for the poor, the elderly, and the handicapped. Like his predecessor, President Trump is cautious about attacking programs for older citizens, as he would risk alienating a particularly important and active demographic. Without cuts in this area, however, the Congressional Budget Office estimates debt levels to rise to 86 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the next ten years, and to 141 percent of the GDP by 2046 – an order of magnitude that far exceeds the World War II record high of 106 percent. The office is already warning that a growing mountain of debt carries “substantial risks” for the country. The looming financial collapse could cripple the government's power to act, it says.

Empty coffers will spell idle engines for future administrations. Trump's debt policy, too, trims the American state down to the minimal role envisioned by lobbyists and their business sponsors. Tea Party activists are driven by the idea of making government as small as possible – “to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub,” in the oft-quoted witticism of the libertarian strategist Grover Norquist, head of the organization Americans for Tax Reform. His Washington office has become a weekly meeting point for some 150 government officials from the legislative and executive branches as well as representatives from interest groups and grass-roots organizations. Their perennial theme: tax policy. Norquist has also convinced a vast majority of the Republicans in the House of Representatives and the Senate to openly pledge that they will vote down any proposed increase in taxes.

Trump's chaos is thus a good deal more systematic than many suspect, and his policies of dismantling the government are a well-choreographed whole. Those who conclude from his high-profile breaks with established political norms that the administration will either "come to its senses" soon or be doomed to

fail at some point should not be fooled. The strategy of dismantling the state pursued by Trump and his supporters must be taken seriously. It will certainly have long-term consequences.

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