

PORTRAITS, ESSAYS AND INTERVIEWS

TRUMP, NIXON, AND THE CIA¹

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Introduction

“Unproductive”, “disloyal”, “what the hell do those clowns do out there in Langley”. Richard Nixon, the 37th President of the United States, had some fairly waspish things to say about the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Nearly 50 years later, so too does the latest resident of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Donald J. Trump. In the 10 months or so since winning the 2016 presidential election against his Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton, the bombastic New York businessman has called CIA officers “politically motivated” and “sick people” who peddle “fake news”, and even equated the Agency with Nazi Germany. In his attitude towards the Agency, Trump is compelling reminiscent of Nixon, albeit with one big difference: while the latter expressed his feelings privately in the Oval Office, to be combed over by historians decades later, Trump – the self-appointed “Ernest Hemingway of a hundred and forty characters” – has made his animus towards the CIA public knowledge in real time, thanks largely to a series of early-morning social media tirades.

Many writers have acknowledged the similarities between Trump and Nixon: indeed, a cover of *New York* magazine featured a suited and red-tied Trump photo shopped as a latter-day “Tricky Dicky”, throwing his arms open in his trademark “V” for victory salute. Google “Nixon and Trump” and nearly 16 million websites come up, pointing out the myriad of parallels: their appeal to the blue-collar forgotten man – the silent majority; their uneasy relationship with the press; their love of rough and tumble verbal sparring; their belief that foreign policy negotiating leverage is increased if your opponent thinks you are a “mad man” who might go nuclear; and their paranoid view that everyone who isn’t with them is against them. What is striking, however, is that scant attention has been given to the striking similarities in their feelings towards, and dealings with, the CIA. It is argued

¹ A version of this article has already been published: see Christopher Moran & Richard J. Aldrich, ‘Borrowing from Nixon’s Playbook: Trump and the CIA’, *Foreign Affairs*, Online 24 April 2017.

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here that by understanding the dynamics that existed during the Nixon administration, we have a useful frame of reference for what might develop over the next few years.

Underpinning Trump's hostility is a seemingly unshakeable belief that the Agency is against him politically. Arguably, it is not hard to see why he might feel this way. Before the election, many senior intelligence officers like John Brennan, Jim Clapper, and Michael Hayden openly came out in favour of his rival Hillary Clinton, in doing so turning their back on the tradition that spies should remain neutral on political matters. Since then, the CIA has spearheaded investigations into possible links between Trump, his advisers, and Russian premier Vladimir Putin. Former acting CIA Director Michael Morell even accused Trump of being an "unwitting agent of the Russian Federation", an accusation, interestingly he has subsequently walked back on. Previously a fringe subculture, an amorphous movement known as the "Alt-Right" has burst onto the national stage, to some extent keeping the "CIA bogey" alive, penning story after story, tweet after tweet, about embittered Obama holdovers at Langley waging guerrilla warfare against the new president.

Trump's view that CIA is a political enemy has strong echoes of Richard Nixon. In 1950s, as Eisenhower's Vice-President, the hawkish Cold Warrior Nixon had enjoyed amicable relations with the CIA and its virulently anti-communist Director Allen Dulles, but the relationship soured with John F. Kennedy's narrow election victory in 1960. To his dying day, Nixon believed that Dulles, when briefing Kennedy, deliberately failed to refute the young senator's public statements and taunts about America slipping behind in the arms race, the so-called "Missile Gap". For Nixon, the belief that the CIA had some sort of political vendetta against him had a significant social dimension, stemming from a chip on his shoulder about the class of people who dominated the Cold War national security state, especially the CIA. As the son of poor small town grocer from Yorba Linda, California, he looked at the CIA with a fair degree of contempt, populated as it was then by veterans of the "Oh So Social" wartime Office of Strategic Services (OSS) – fashionable and silver-spooned Ivy Leaguers who, at their Georgetown cocktail parties, he imagined eulogising about Kennedy and snobbishly poking fun at social climbers like himself.

Trump has been notably critical of the CIA's performance. At campaign events, he regularly attacked the CIA for its faulty intelligence on Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), which paved the way for the invasion of the country in 2003. Elsewhere, controversially, he suggested that WikiLeaks has better intelligence than the Agency. To the horror of many CIA

professionals, he said on television that he may or may not read the Presidential Daily Brief (PDB), stating that once or twice a week was enough for a “smart guy” like himself. Given the dangers faced by some CIA officers to acquire this information, Trump’s remarks were insensitive at best.

Here, again, there are similarities with Nixon. Nixon regularly complained about CIA assessments of world affairs, lamenting that Agency estimators sat on the fence to avoid being blamed if they were wrong. On one occasion, after the CIA had failed to inform him that there had been a coup in Cambodia, he let rip at White House Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman: “Get rid of the clowns. What use are they? They’ve got 40,000 people over there reading newspapers.” Like Trump, there is evidence that Nixon did not read the Daily Brief, at least not religiously. When, in 1970, an NSC staffer examined the briefs sent to Nixon during the previous year, he observed that the president’s comments in the margins dwindled with every passing week, before vanishing completely.

Recognizing, then, that there are parallels between Trumps’ view of the CIA and Nixon’s, we would like to make some predictions about how CIA-White House relations might develop during the Trump administration.

It is likely, we would argue, that Trump will imitate Nixon by relying less on intelligence from the CIA and more on information from trusted White House advisers and ideologically-aligned external think tanks. Nixon’s preference was to be briefed by his National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, rather than the Director of the CIA. Indeed, Kissinger recruited and employed his own group of analysts who produced their own version of the PDB. Amazingly, Nixon tried to exclude CIA Director Richard Helms from attending meetings of the National Security Council (NSC). On many major foreign policy issues, from rapprochement with China to the secret bombing of Cambodia, Nixon kept the CIA in the dark. Kissinger later admitted that this was “demoralizing” for the Agency and unlikely to be taught in manuals on best practice in public administration.

Nearly a year into his presidency, Trump has followed a similar path to Nixon, keeping foreign policy decision-making within an inner sanctum of largely political advisers with no intelligence background. One example of this was the (albeit brief) elevation of then presidential strategist Steve Bannon onto the influential “principals committee” of the NSC, while demoting the committee status of both the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The promotion of Bannon, a former investment banker and the driving force behind the ultra-conservative Briethart News website, to a rank on the NSC equivalent to the Secretary of

State and above the country's top intelligence advisers sent shockwaves through political Washington. Although Bannon was later removed from the Committee and indeed later removed from the White House altogether, the episode provided a fascinating insight into Trump's thinking, specifically his desire to circumvent the CIA on national security decision-making.

Evidence suggests that Trump will at some stage look to reform the CIA, with the objective of turning it into a more obedient presidential tool. Such a move would be straight out of the Nixon playbook. In late 1970, fuelled by suspicions about the Agency's loyalty and efficiency, Nixon tasked James Schlesinger, then a renowned budget-cutter at the Office of Management and Budget, with carrying out a review of the CIA. Six months later, Schlesinger reported that the CIA had failed to adapt to the times, partly because it still recruited from a narrow Ivy League social base, and partly because it had been slow to grasp the potential of new technologies. To modernize the CIA and render it more attune to his worldview, Nixon eventually installed Schlesinger as CIA Director, in the process firing respected career intelligence professional Richard Helms. At Langley, Schlesinger's first words were "I'm here to make sure you don't screw Richard Nixon." In six short and stormy months at CIA, he sacked nearly 7% of the CIA's workforce, with the disproportionate share of the cuts being made in the Clandestine Division, the CIA's beating heart. Unsurprisingly, Schlesinger ranks as the least popular director in CIA history, with Porter Goss (2004-06), another interloper and perceived political hatchet man, in second place.

Annoyed and frustrated by intelligence assessments that contradict his policy preferences, especially in relation to Russia and his "America First" agenda, Trump has made no secret of his desire to reform and streamline the intelligence community. Before the inauguration, a source close to Trump told the *Wall Street Journal* that the CIA would be "slimmed down", with personnel levels cut and more staff uprooted from Agency headquarters in leafy suburbia to field postings around the world. Like Nixon with Schlesinger, we should expect Trump to appoint an intelligence outsider to lead such an effort. Indeed, Stephen Feinberg, a New York-based private equity executive, has been mentioned as a possible chairman, at least if Beltway backchat is to be believed.

Rather like Nixon before him, the worry among intelligence professionals who hold that the CIA should avoid a direct role in policy is that Trump is keen to create the conditions that will allow for CIA analysis to be moulded to support his world view. Despite being a critic of what he perceived as a liberal bias at CIA during the Obama years – evidenced by Director Brennan's public

support for the Iran Deal – Trump has laid the ground for politicized intelligence reporting of his own. His first visit to Langley was a gross display of politicization. Positioned in front of the Memorial Wall, a shrine to a hundred-plus of the Agency's lost heroes, he engaged in political grandstanding, boasting that his inauguration crowd had been more than Obama's in 2008 (incorrect), and stating (also incorrectly) that "almost everybody" in the room had voted for him. The message was one of, "get behind me, or get out"; Brennan called it a "despicable display of self-aggrandizement". Meanwhile, hawkish Kansas congressmen and Tea Party follower Mike Pompeo is perhaps the most openly partisan spy chief to ever lead the Agency. As a vocal member of the Republican-led House Select Committee inquiry into the deadly attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, Libya, in 2012, he was accused of politicizing the tragedy and turning it into a political hit job to bring down Hillary Clinton. Publicly, he has snapped with reporters who ask questions about Russian interference in the presidential election. Privately, in Cabinet meetings, he lends his opinion to matters far removed from national security, like health care. He also appears to have swallowed the staples of Trump's vocabulary, using words like "action" and "winning".

Anecdotally, there are suggestions that politicization of intelligence has already commenced. In spring 2016 – in an illustration of what Mark Lowenthal describes as "downward flowing politicization" (i.e., the policymaker telling the agency the analytical outcome they desire) – the media reported that the administration had sought to enlist the CIA and the Department of Homeland Security to build a case retrospectively for its controversial travel ban targeting citizens from seven majority-Muslim countries. Neither were said to be consulted before the immigration order was pushed out of the door; but, seemingly, both were expected to help Trump fulfill one of his main and most ideological campaign promises. The dangers of a president strong-arming intelligence professionals to adopt certain predetermined policy positions need not be elaborated here: suffice is to say that with so many delicate security challenges facing the US – from an emboldened Russia threatening NATO allies in the Baltic and allying itself with Bashar al-Assad's brutal regime in Syria, to Iran being on a slow but certain cadence to obtaining nuclear weapons – it is essential that the intelligence community is not a policy echo chamber and is allowed to deliver hard truths and alternative models unvarnished by political persuasion.

Most worrying is the prospect of politicized covert action. Nixon overturned the government in Bolivia in 1971 partly because he had memories of visiting the country as Eisenhower's Vice President and being pelted with rocks by an angry leftist mob. Thin-skinned to the extent that is a major psychological weak spot, one worries that Trump could use the CIA for similar score-settling abroad. This is a scary thought given that since 9/11, the

CIA has become much more “weaponized”, with drones, elite special forces, and powerful cyber-warfare weaponry.

Belittled with innuendo and ad hominem; marginalized from the centre of power; pressurized to toe the political line: it is interesting to speculate how the Agency will respond to an undoubted low ebb in CIA-White House relations. Michael Morell has forecast a “wave of resignations”. History, however, tells us that this will not be the case. Up against a similarly antagonistic figure in Nixon, CIA officers refused to lay down, choosing instead to be resilient and fight back. Rather than pursuing direct confrontation, their approach was more subtle, covert and disguised, comparable to what anthropologist James C. Scott has called “everyday resistance” or “infrapolitics”.

Down among the lower orders, infrapolitical activism involved leaving malicious comments about the president on noticeboards, as well as vandalizing Schlesinger’s official portrait. Indeed, to stop the vandals, Schlesinger had to install a CCTV camera on the wall next to the picture. Among the CIA’s senior managers, who resided in the seventh-floor executive offices, activism took the form of withholding information from the president. In 1971, for example, Britain’s Security Service (MI5) “turned” KGB officer Oleg Lyalin and sent intelligence digests of his material to the FBI for onward circulation to the CIA and then the president. When FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover asked Nixon if he liked the reports, the latter replied, “What reports?” For a long time, despite repeated requests from the White House, the CIA’s top brass refused to hand over any files detailing efforts to remove Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro, perhaps fearing that Nixon would use them for blackmail purposes. “Those bastards in Langley are holding back something”, fumed Nixon aide John Ehrlichman, “They just dig their heels in and say the President can’t have it. Imagine that! The Commander-in-Chief wants to see a document, and the spooks say he can’t have it”.

Other forms of resistance took on a darker edge. Famously, elements within the intelligence community bedevilled Nixon’s administration with leaks, the most significant coming from Deputy Director of the FBI Mark Felt, who, until he reached his nineties and revealed himself as Bob Woodward’s golden source behind some of the early Watergate revelations, was known to the public only as “Deep Throat”. Less famously, Admiral Thomas Moorer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, planted a spy in Nixon’s NSC. By his own admission, that spy (Yeoman Charles Edward Radford) photocopied “thousands, just thousands” of documents for Moorer.

It appears that Trump has awakened similar forces of resistance. To quote Senate Minority leader Chuck Schumer, “You take on the intelligence

community and they have six ways from Sunday of getting back at you". There have been numerous stories in the media of intelligence agencies hiding information from the president; in addition, we know that the CIA has denied security clearances to some of Trump's staff.

Analogous to the Nixon era, it appears that a key weapon in the secret state's arsenal of resistance will be leaks. From the moment he entered the White House, Trump has been besieged by illicit disclosures of sensitive information, from details of his telephone calls with foreign statesmen, to drafts of his executive orders on immigration and the possible revival of enhanced interrogation techniques against enemy combatants. Leaks have already claimed a high-profile victim in former National Security Adviser Mike Flynn, who was compelled to resign when details were leaked about a telephone conversation he had with a Russian diplomat prior to Trump's inauguration. Tellingly, perhaps, the story originated in the *Washington Post* with a piece by David Ignatius, who is well-known for his CIA sources. For angry intelligence officers, there is no doubting that Flynn's resignation was a significant coup. Since retiring from the military, Flynn has been a fierce critic of the CIA, accusing it of being a political tool of the Obama administration, and suggesting that in playing down warnings about terrorism from when he was Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), it enabled the rise of the Islamic State in the Middle East. A long time Trump ally, he also led chants of "lock her up", directed at Hillary Clinton, at the summer 2016 Republican National Convention. In short, he was an attractive target.

The leaks that have plagued Trump's presidency, plus their early success in removing Flynn, have generated a vogue for the theory of the "Deep State": an evil nexus of institutions – corporate media, Wall Street, Silicon Valley, the intelligence community, the federal bureaucracy – that operate outside the democratic system conspiring to destabilize, smear, and coerce the president. The latest fillip to this belief is the President's extraordinary claim that his predecessor had bugged his Manhattan HQ, Trump Tower, in the weeks leading up to the election. Trump himself has thus far refrained from using the term, at least in public, leaving the brush fire building about Deep State infestation to proxies that include the right-wing media; trusted aides like Newt Gingrich ("Of course the Deep State exists"); and, for different ideological reasons, leftist critics such as Glenn Greenwald fearful of runaway intelligence agencies. So far, the main target of Trump's public complaints about leaks has been the CIA, especially outgoing Director John Brennan. "Was this the leaker of Fake News?", he tweeted, in reference to Brennan, after the release of a salacious dossier by an ex-MI6 officer detailing his trips to Moscow and hotel room peccadilloes.

How Trump manages leaks is likely to be one of the most important challenges he faces as president. Right now, in America, some 5.1 million

people have security clearances, a consequence of the “Need to Share” culture that has swept across the national security realm since 9/11. Chances are, therefore, that further unauthorized disclosures will occur. Nixon was destroyed by leaks: they consumed him. While he didn’t rage about them 140 characters at a time, he did try to stop them, with disastrous consequences. Under Nixon, the war on leakers went to absurd lengths, allegedly prompting him even to discuss the possible poisoning of Jack Anderson, one of Washington’s more flamboyant investigative reporters. Kissinger was, if anything, even more paranoid than Nixon, gradually telling the CIA less and less in the hope of starving journalists like Seymour Hersh; then, as now, the tactic did not work. Famously, of course, in a bid to stop the leaks, Nixon ordered wiretaps, black-bag jobs, burglaries, surveillance, and mail opening against perceived enemies. He also authorised the creation of a “special investigations unit”, later nicknamed the “Plumbers”, to root out leakers and find incriminating information on political opponents. Together, these illegal efforts would ultimately lead to his resignation in disgrace.

As Trump grapples with the problem of leaks, perhaps he should reflect on Nixon’s experience. Clearly, he would be wise not to employ measures that cross the line, as Nixon’s did, into illegality. To date, and true to form, he has come out swinging, like a bareknuckle brawler, calling on the Justice Department and FBI to investigate “low-life leakers” in the government. Meanwhile, in what appears like a two-pronged strategy, his surrogates double down on the idea of the Deep State, dragging the concept from conspiracy-laden websites like Infowars into broader public discourse. By mainstreaming and normalizing fears about a shadow network of spies and bureaucrats, the administration presumably hopes to win public acquiescence for its domestic program, which includes radical restructuring of the federal bureaucracy. Nixon’s saving grace was a highly intelligent, if eccentric, National Security Advisor. Recently, Trump has also been forced to professionalise his senior appointments around the National Security Council, notably with the appointment of General H.R. McMaster. Even Senator John McCain, the Republican chairman of the Armed Services Committee and frequent Trump critic, called McMaster an “outstanding choice” adding that “he is a man of genuine intellect, character and ability”. However, to properly stem the tide of leaks, the main lesson of the Nixon era is that Trump must repair his relationship with the intelligence community, especially the CIA, which is currently broken. If he continues to bully, disparage and outflank them like he would contestants on a reality TV show, the rift will widen and infrapolitical resistance will continue. He cannot say he hasn’t been warned.