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# The civil service is being destroyed

by [Anne Applebaum](#)

We take it for granted. Historically, though, the phenomenon of the neutral civil service — apolitical government employees, chosen and promoted on merit, working on behalf of the state rather than a person or party — is vanishingly rare. Take a step back from the other crises of this summer and think about it.

In Europe, the idea of a professional civil service appeared relatively late, around the [18th century](#). The United States didn't have [a federal civil service](#) for [most of its first hundred years](#). The British seized on the idea of civil service exams only when [they faced a sudden need](#) to administer an empire; they may well have been influenced by China, which had been administering such exams for [two millennia](#), and which was widely admired for that reason at the time.

At most other times and in most other places, state employees have been chosen according to systems of patronage, what Americans once called "[spoils](#)." Even now, all around the world, most people get government jobs because they know (or know someone who knows) a person in power. Aside from being inefficient — patronage systems don't promote people for their competence or knowledge — they are easily corrupted. I was once told of an Asian country in which people pay hefty fees to the foreign minister to become ambassadors.

Of course, the United States still has some patronage: Every new president gets to make about [4,000 appointments](#), a number far higher than anything a British prime minister could dream of. But most of the rest of [the 1.8 million people](#) who work full-time for the U.S. federal government, from the Foreign Service to the Forest Service to the Justice Department and the FBI, are neutral, expected to loyally serve every president and every member of every Cabinet. This system has some disadvantages — civil servants who know their briefs can run rings around politicians who don't — but it has enormous, overwhelming advantages.

Think about whether you want your water's cleanliness to be measured by an expert or by someone's cousin. Think about whether you want your tax forms read by people looking for information they can use as a political tool against you. There are reasons a neutral, professional civil service, as well as one that is small and efficient, is intimately connected to any definition of good government.

But to function, an apolitical civil service needs an apolitical ethos. Laws aren't enough: The majority of the people who work for the state need to believe that they are employees of their

country, not of a particular person. They need at least some patriotic motivation, because these are not jobs that you do for the money alone. And here is the tricky part: While this kind of ethos can take a long time to build — decades, even centuries — it can be destroyed overnight. All it takes is one leader to sack everyone and stuff the system with loyalists. Then it's gone — and what follows is invariably worse.

Hugo Chávez [took revenge](#) on civil servants who refused to support him, and that was the beginning of the end of democracy in Venezuela. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan used the aftermath of an attempted putsch [to sack 150,000 public officials](#) and arrest 50,000 more, ushering in an era of fear and chaos.

This is the background that you need to understand why the long-term, possibly irreversible damage that President Trump's administration is doing to America's civil servants matters so much; why his campaign to undermine public faith in the integrity of the FBI and the Justice Department is so dangerous; why it matters that Fox News is supporting it; and why even the minor forms of Cabinet corruption or incompetence that are now suddenly common are so dispiriting for the people who work for the departments of the environment, housing or veterans affairs.

This goes well beyond the routine critique of “bureaucrats,” some of which is doubtlessly deserved, or the normal attempts to curb “[waste, fraud and abuse](#),” which are always worth pursuing. It's very possible that many government departments are too big or unwieldy. But the Trump White House isn't reforming those departments. It's carrying out a wholesale, rapid destruction of civil service culture, which helps nobody.

A few in Congress are fighting back: Pressure from the Senate, plus Post reporting, [just helped to persuade](#) the administration to install a professional (with a Pentagon background) at the head of the Department of Veterans Affairs. It's time for everyone else to wake up. If we want clean water and safe streets — not to mention more complicated things, like a counterintelligence service that can detect foreign spies — then we should demand that our government appoint people for their qualifications, not their red Make America Great Again hats.