

A most important task of an incoming president is nominating the men and women who will serve as the cabinet. Each nominee, as well as nominees for federal judges and more rarely, Supreme Court, must go through Senate confirmation. For the most part, our norms have been that with only a few exceptions, these nominees secure bipartisan approval.

Each president has his own process for selecting this team. Abraham Lincoln provided a sterling example: he selected his most vociferous rivals to serve in his administration because he recognized their abilities. He converted "enemies" into admirers and gave history such excellent administrators as Secretary of State, William H. Seward, Attorney General Edward Bates, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, among others. His one bad choice was a political one: choosing a Southern Democrat, Andrew Johnson, for Vice President. This was done in the hope of political reconciliation. Johnson became President after Lincoln\222s assassination. He did everything he could to undo the Reconstruction, was impeached and nearly convicted.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt came to office during the great depression, a period of great danger to our society. He selected as his cabinet a "brain trust," the smartest, most capable cabinet we have ever had, including the first woman to be named Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins. He had no vanity about admitting that he didn\222t know everything, but was willing to surround himself with the best. He chose Joseph Kennedy to be the first chairman of the US Securities and Exchange Commission because he knew that Kennedy, a slick operator, knew every corrupt trick. Kennedy indeed cleaned up all the corruption.

President Nixon followed a different model in selecting his cabinet. He appointed people, including his Attorney General, who would put loyalty to him above their duty to the country. Nixon was removed from his presidency and a number of his cabinet members had jail sentences for their corruption.

President Trump is following the Nixon model, with demands of personal loyalty rather than appropriateness. He has since nominated cabinet officers who, had there been a bipartisan Senate, would never have been confirmed due to conflicts of interest. Were this a normal presidency (one following norms), his own party in the Senate would have rejected such nominations.

Most of his appointments have had short tenure. Some were fired, others quit, but quite a few have criminal indictments and prison terms facing them. Those who quit because of corruption or conflict of interest (or sheer incompetence) have done damage while in office. Most blatantly compromised cabinet member to date is Elaine Chao, Secretary of Transportation and wife of Senate leader Mitch McConnell. Her money, much from her Chinese family transportation businesses, has not been put in blind trust. Her husband has also benefitted from her largess to his state, Kentucky, good for his reelection bid.

His judicial appointments have been uniformly right wing and rubber stamped by Mitch McConnell\222s Senate. The norm in judicial appointments was that the professional lawyers\222 guilds (Bar Associations) would provide suitable names for the president and then his choice would be approved by both parties. Not this time. Trump appoints only the most extreme conservatives, most of whom get passed by McConnell\222s senate. But there have been a few nominations whom even the partisan Republicans could not stomach. One such was Matthew Petersen, who admitted that he had never tried a case in court; after sarcastic Republican questioning, he withdrew his name.

Another Trump judicial nominee, Wendy Vitter, refused to say if "Brown v. Board of Education" was correctly decided. This casts suspicion on her views about desegregation. In addition, she has left a trail of opinions in print that promote conspiracy theories: such as claiming that abortion and contraception cause cancer. It is difficult to imagine this woman as a lifetime judge in the US District Court of Louisiana, yet the Republicans have pushed her forward.

We are living through a presidency that has violated every norm of behavior and judgment that we formerly took for granted. He is a wrecking ball of democratic institutions and appoints people of like character.

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