

Washington Bureaucrats Are Quietly Working to Undermine Trump's Agenda

Across the government, career staffers are finding ways to continue old policies, sometimes just by renaming a project.



Photographer: Brendan Smialowski/AFP

By Christopher Flavelle and Benjamin Bain

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In report after report following Donald Trump's election, career staffers at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration kept saying the same thing: climate change is real, serious and man-made.

That's surprising because Trump has called global warming a hoax. His political appointees at the Commerce Department, which oversees NOAA, have complained to its staff, but stopped short of demanding changes or altering the findings. So the reports, blog posts and public updates kept flowing. The bureaucrats won.

"Everything coming out of NOAA does not reflect this administration," said David Schnare, a retired lawyer for an industry-backed think tank who served on Trump's transition team and is skeptical about climate change. "It reflects the last one."

That's true across the government as some of the roughly two million career staff have found ways to obstruct, slow down or simply ignore their new leader, the president.

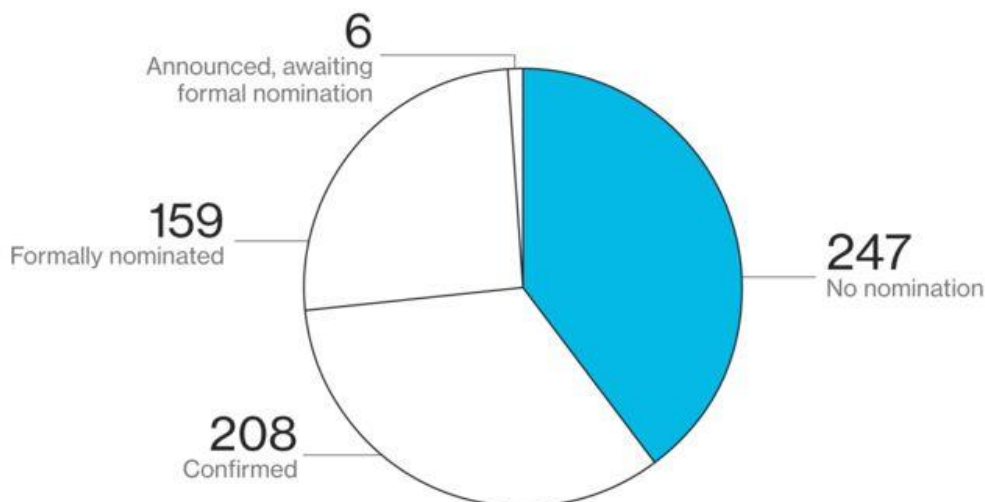
Staff at the [Securities and Exchange Commission](#), for example, issued a report contradicting the White House's position about the negative effects of banking regulations. The [State Department](#)'s embassy staff preserved Obama-era programs to boost the economies of developing countries — at odds with Trump's "America First" campaign pledges — not by changing the substance of the programs but merely by relabeling them as a way to create markets for U.S. exports.

Perhaps no policy area better illustrates the dynamic than climate change. A report commissioned by the energy secretary to explore the dangers of wind and solar energy to the power grid initially found just the opposite. Pentagon staffers effectively stalled a Trump reversal of an Obama policy on climate change and national security by initiating a review that's apparently still underway nine months later. Federal procurement officials have kept promoting zero-emission vehicles but by focusing on economic gains rather than environmental benefits.

Two factors may be making it harder for this White House to impose order: a desire to reorient major agencies from their traditional missions and the slow pace at which it has filled key posts. Less than two-thirds as many appointments have been submitted and won Senate confirmation as were in place at this time during the Obama administration.

Trump's Plodding Pace of Appointments

Status of 620 key executive branch positions requiring Senate confirmation



Note: Key leadership positions are a portion of the about 1,200 positions that require Senate confirmation

Source: Partnership for Public Service & The Washington Post's Political Appointee Tracker, as of Dec. 12

Bloomberg

But even that wouldn't fully tame the "permanent government" layer of bureaucrats who stay on from president to president, burrowed deep in agencies across Washington.

"It's an enormous challenge for a new president and administration to exert influence over the bureaucracy," said David Lewis, chairman of the political science department at [Vanderbilt](#)

[University](#). “They know a lot more than the political appointees who come into the agencies. That gives them an advantage.”



Photographer: Alex Wong/Getty Images

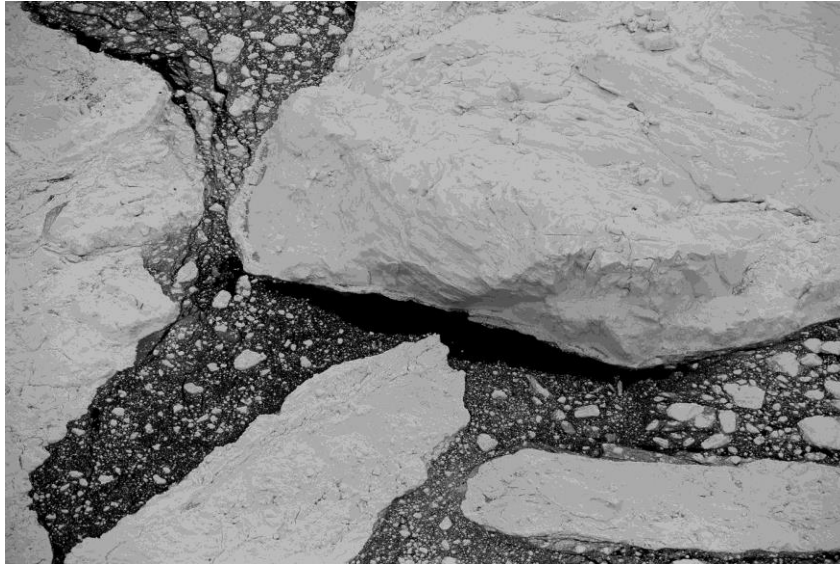
Before taking office, Trump repeatedly dismissed global warming as a hoax — a position at odds not only with the vast majority of scientists, but also with the longstanding policy of the U.S. government.

In 1990, Congress directed the executive branch to research the effects of global warming, and convey that research at regular intervals. Since then, the federal government’s involvement in fighting climate change has grown, to include regulating emissions and working to mitigate their consequences.

Trump has used his executive authority to reverse some of the most prominent environmental policies initiated by President Barack Obama, including rolling back limits on greenhouse gas emissions from power plants, pulling out of an international agreement to cut carbon emissions signed in 2015 in Paris and effectively opening up more public land to oil drilling and coal mining.

But when it comes to the endless number of more mundane policies and decisions farther from the spotlight, Trump and his appointees have met with resistance — some of it subtle, some of it not.

“The bureaucracy is generally resistant, no matter what the hell you’re trying to do,” Leon Panetta, who guided presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama through transitions, said in an interview. But when a president sets out to be as disruptive as Trump has, Panetta added, getting career staff to implement those policies “is gonna take a hell of a lot longer.”



Photographer: Joe Raedle/Getty Images

As the case of NOAA illustrates, the most radical example of bureaucratic resistance may also be the simplest: continuing to issue information or reports that are factually accurate, even when they clash with the administration's policies.

Different agencies have taken different approaches to the reports written. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross told Bloomberg in a statement, "I have not suggested one word of change to any NOAA research report on any topic." But political officials in other departments have been more willing to get involved — sometimes triggering pushback from civil servants.

Just ask Rick Perry.

In April, Perry, Trump's secretary of energy, directed career staff at his agency to write a report on the question of whether the expansion of wind and solar power threaten the stability of the electricity grid, by reducing the amount of "critical baseload resources" — in other words, power generated by coal, nuclear and other traditional sources.

With Trump pledging to [reverse regulations](#) that have harmed coal, the study was viewed by critics as a way the administration would justify curtailing the surging expansion of wind and solar power and provide help to coal plants and coal miners.

But the draft staff report, coordinated by an Energy Department contractor, reached a surprising conclusion: the growth in renewables wasn't endangering the reliability of electric power after all. "Grid operators are using technologies, standards and practices to assure that they can continue operating the grid reliably," concluded the draft report, obtained by Bloomberg in July.

The draft's conclusions were those of the contractor, not of career staff at the agency, according to Shaylyn Hynes, a department spokeswoman.

Trump appointees at the agency pushed back on the draft's conclusions; one official called some of its findings "unacceptable" and "inflammatory," according to a copy of the draft marked up by the official. Drafts of the report soon leaked out, making it harder for political staff to alter them.

Officials eventually unveiled a version of the report that hewed closely to the initial draft, but with policy recommendations that supported Perry's stated goal of preserving the nation's coal and nuclear fleet. Travis Fisher, a political appointee in Perry's office and a lead author of the study, said in an interview that the leak "didn't have an effect on the overall posture" of the report. "It was always going in the direction that it ended up," he said.

But career staff, who asked not to be identified, viewed the episode as a qualified success, arguing that report's findings would otherwise have been even more hostile to renewables.



Photographer: Luke Sharrett/Bloomberg

Bureaucrats can also continue programs or initiatives that pre-date Trump by calling them something new or describing them in different ways.

Take the General Services Administration, which manages the federal government's fleet of more than 640,000 cars, trucks and other vehicles. Since 2011, GSA has added more than 1,000 electric vehicles to the fleet — a policy that was presented in distinctly environmental terms.

"The Federal Government is leading by example," the GSA boasted when it announced the electric-vehicle program in 2011. The goal was "to build a 21st century clean energy economy."

Those goals are now squarely at odds with the Trump administration's view on climate change, which strongly favors fossil fuels.

Rather than cutting the program, GSA staff have focused on its contributions to jobs and cost cutting, rather than reducing emissions.

That messaging workaround was on display in late summer when the GSA promoted National Drive Electric Week, whose presenters include the [Sierra Club](#). "Welcome to National Drive

Electric Week!” the agency said in a September blog post that it said was to celebrate the benefits of alternative-fuel vehicles.

“GSA recognizes that emerging technologies play a significant role in our mission to save taxpayer dollars, create jobs and stimulate economic growth in the [United States](#); which is one reason we provide the federal fleet with vehicles that offer the latest and most efficient transportation technologies available, including electric vehicle (EV) technology,” the agency wrote on its website in a post promoting the event.

The post made no mention of environmental benefits. If the agency had any non-economic reasons for using electric vehicles, they went unmentioned.

A GSA spokeswoman, Pamela Dixon, didn’t respond to emails seeking comment.

“The career bureaucracy is seen by many in the administration, and by the president himself, as sort of the problem,” said Paul Verkuil, who served under Obama as chairman of the [Administrative Conference of the United States](#), an independent federal agency charged with improving the efficiency of the bureaucracy. “The irony is, because they’re not confirming their own policy people, the quote-unquote ‘problem’ is running the government.”



In other agencies, officials have found it best to simply delay implementation of new initiatives in hopes they may be modified or canceled.

In March, for example, Trump, flanked by Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt and coal miners, signed an order that rescinded some Obama policies to fight climate change. “You’re going back to work,” Trump told the men around him.

Among the policies Trump reversed was Obama’s 2016 Presidential Memorandum on Climate Change and National Security, which had instructed the [Defense Department](#) to account for the effects of global warming. Those effects include rising sea levels that threaten U.S. naval facilities; stronger and more frequent heat waves, which interfere with the military’s ability to train its personnel; and the interplay between extreme weather events and conflicts overseas, which risks entangling U.S. forces.

The department was aware of those threats, and had already started putting Obama’s policy into effect through a directive called “Climate Change Adaptation and Resilience.”

But rather than reverse or alter that directive after Trump’s order, staff at the Pentagon launched what it called a review, which served to forestall changes. Adam Stump, a department spokesman, refused to say whether that review has concluded, or what it found. For now, he said, the directive issued under Obama’s administration remains current.

Defense Secretary James Mattis has said that “Climate change can be a driver of instability and the Department of Defense must pay attention to potential adverse impacts generated by this phenomenon.”

Even seemingly insignificant actions by civil servants can add up to a meaningful difference in federal policy, according to Anna Aurilio, director of the Washington office at Environment America, a nonprofit.

“I don’t think it’s a silver bullet, unfortunately,” Aurilio said. Still, “It can be very helpful for career staff to actually do their jobs properly, and not rubber stamp the rollback or weakening of regulations.”



Photographer: Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg

Career staff who slow down policy directives are sometimes justified in doing so, according to Lewis, the Vanderbilt professor. For example, they may feel that stalling gives political appointees, some of whom are new to the policy areas they're responsible for, time to consider other options.

“To carry out your job faithfully requires you to balance sometimes conflicting demands — from the president, from Congress and from the law itself,” Lewis said. “What can be seen as slow-walking something, and has a nefarious meaning, also has a charitable interpretation.”

In the long run, career staff can face consequences. While it's hard to outright fire a civil servant, congressional Republicans in January gave themselves the ability to reduce the annual pay for any individual federal employee to \$1.

An administration can also punish bureaucrats through punitive reassignments, designed to make them quit. Joel Clement, a senior policy manager at the Department of Interior, was moved to the accounting office in June — retaliation, he alleged, for speaking out about the risks of climate change.

A department spokeswoman, Heather Swift, denied that, telling Bloomberg the move was “to better serve the taxpayer and the Department's operations.”

Clement, who has since left the agency, described a checklist he said bureaucrats should follow before acting to impede a political directive.

Clement said career staff should first consider whether they simply didn't like the new policy, which he said wasn't a reason to get in its way. But if the new policy put public health and safety at risk, for example, or was based on deliberately inaccurate information, Clement argued staff should then try to raise their concerns through internal channels. "You first have to try a legitimate approach before you obstruct," he said.

Only if that didn't work, Clement said, should civil servants take action outside of normal channels — leaking documents, for instance, or slowing down the implementation of the policy. But he said he expects more career staff to start doing so, as more of the Trump administration's specific policy initiatives make their way through the bureaucracy.

"The tide is rising on that kind of resistance," Clement said. "Whether it's public or not."

— *With assistance from Catherine Traywick.*

(Updates with comment from Energy Department spokeswoman in 21st paragraph.)