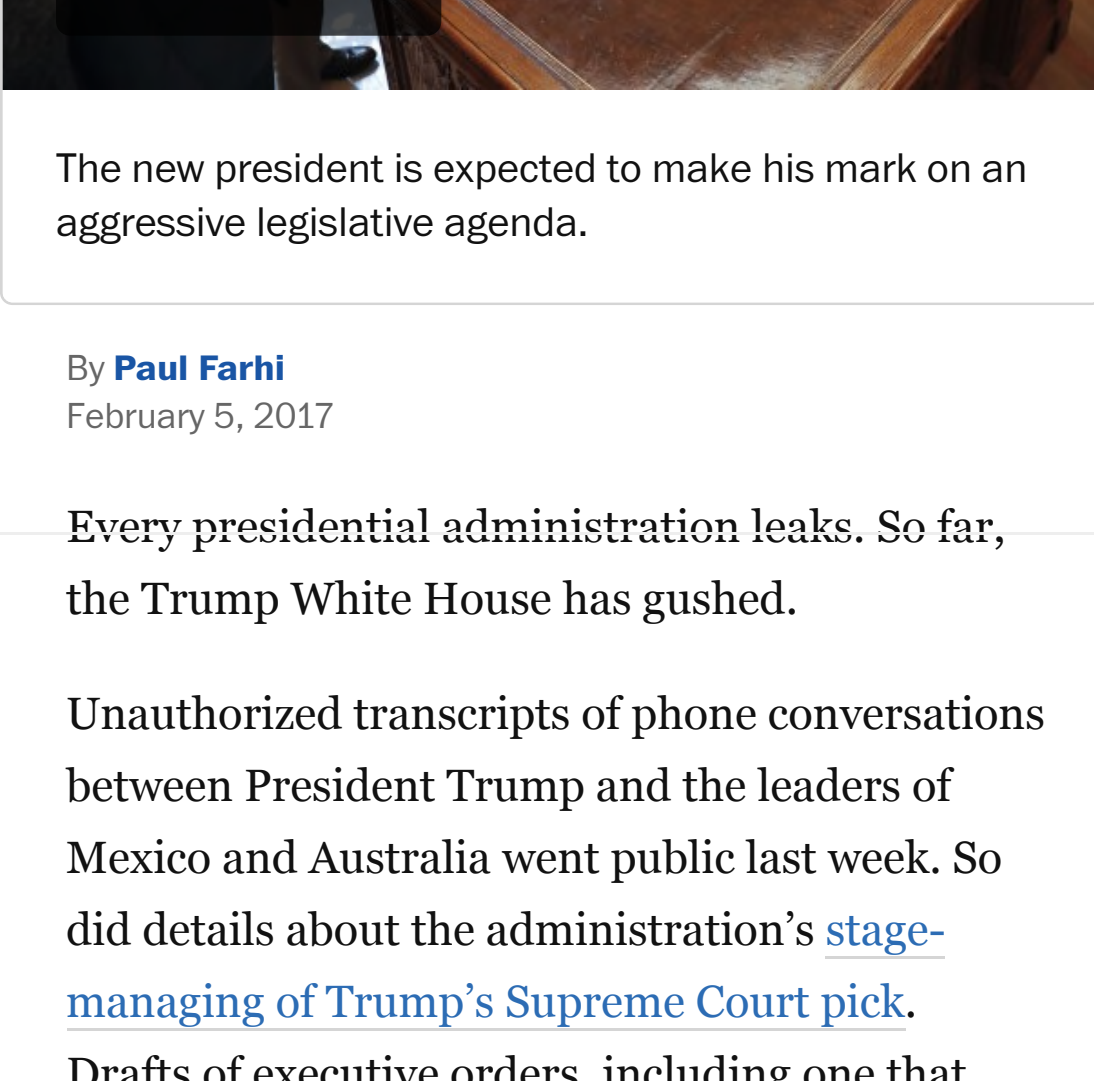


The Trump administration has sprung a leak. Many of them, in fact.

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By **Paul Farhi**
February 5, 2017

Every presidential administration leaks. So far, the Trump White House has gushed.

Unauthorized transcripts of phone conversations between President Trump and the leaders of Mexico and Australia went public last week. So did details about the administration’s [stage-managing of Trump’s Supreme Court pick](#).

Drafts of executive orders, including one that would grant legal protection to people and businesses that discriminate against same-sex married couples on moral or religious grounds, also slipped out before they were ready for prime time.

The leaks have been a bonanza for news organizations, particularly mainstream outlets such as the New York Times, The Washington Post, NBC and the Associated Press. The pattern of leaks to these organizations suggests the leakers are seeking not just wide distribution of confidential information but are hoping to gain the credibility conveyed by establishment news organizations — the very news outlets that Trump has frequently derided as purveyors of “fake news.”

They also suggest the extent of rivalries and some possible misgivings within Trump’s inner circle about policies and would-be policies.

Leaks, after all, are often designed to isolate a rival or to whip up public pressure to derail a decision.

The Post was first to report on Trump’s [conversation with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull](#), in which Trump blasted a refugee resettlement agreement and bragged about his election victory before abruptly ending the call.

The Times [broke the news](#) that the administration was preparing an order permitting the CIA to reopen secret “black site” prisons in which terrorist suspects were once tortured. The newspaper also described the White House’s attempt to set up [a reality show-like competition](#) to gin up the suspense about Trump’s Supreme Court appointment.

[AP was first with a story](#) that Trump, in a call with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, had threatened to send U.S. troops to Mexico to stop “bad hombres down there.”

Smaller news outlets have tapped into the leaky pipeline, too. [The Nation](#) magazine, primarily known for its liberal commentary, reported last week that the White House was circulating the draft of an executive order that would [permit “sweeping” discrimination](#) against gay and transgender people based on religious or moral objections; the Nation even reproduced a copy of [the leaked draft document](#).

The breadth of the leaks has surprised — and, of course, delighted — journalists, who say it gives the public an unfiltered view of what those in power are thinking and doing. The leaks of Trump’s calls to Turnbull and Peña Nieto may have been the most surprising of all; it’s rare for transcripts of presidential phone calls or details of meetings with foreign leaders, especially potentially embarrassing exchanges, to leak so soon afterward.

“Given Trump’s erratic nature and lack of experience, especially in foreign affairs, these leaks may be more important than ever,” says [David Corn](#), a reporter with the muckraking [Mother Jones](#) magazine. “They give us a sense of how he’s doing his job” and what important advisers such as Stephen K. Bannon and Jared Kushner are telling him to do.

Other reporters say the leaks reflect a certain degree of chaos within the new administration, with factions warily circling one another. At the top of the organization is an executive who has himself flouted White House norms, which may be setting a certain tone. “I tend to think chaos begets chaos begets chaos, and that’s what we’re seeing here,” said a reporter familiar with some of the senior players.

But others see the leaks as whistleblowing — an effort to expose Trump’s initiatives before they become policy.

The draft executive order expanding religious objections to gay and transgender people was probably leaked because the leaker was alarmed that such a policy might be enacted, said [Sarah Posner](#), who broke the story for the Nation. She notes that there was no leak of Trump’s most controversial order to date, [a ban on travel and immigration](#) from seven Muslim-majority countries, and the secrecy caused disruption and controversy. “I think [the proposed religious order] was very concerning to a lot of people inside and outside of government,” she said.

If so, mission accomplished. Trump hasn’t signed the religious-objection order, and the White House hasn’t indicated when or if he will. Similarly, the administration [appears to have pulled back](#) its plans to revive the “black site” prisons after the Times disclosure of it incited pushback from Congress and Cabinet officials.

Of course, the leaks could also be trial balloons launched by the administration.

Neither Trump nor his top officials have challenged the veracity of any of the major leaks. A few weeks before taking office, however, Trump [demanded an investigation](#) into who leaked to NBC News a top-secret report about Russian hacking of Democratic officials during the campaign.

This record suggests that mainstream news organizations are getting a reliable flow of unauthorized information. But reporters say such information needs to undergo the journalistic equivalent of extreme vetting.

“Careful news organizations don’t just throw unverified leaks into the world,” said [David Sanger](#), a veteran White House and national security reporter for the New York Times. “Reporters want to understand the motives [of the leaker] and the context of what’s leaked so that you’re not just simply becoming the handmaiden to someone’s private agenda. You have to dig into it and ask questions about it, starting with, ‘Why am I seeing this?’”

Given Trump’s management style and the competing “power centers” within his administration, “I don’t see [leaks] simmering down anytime soon,” said Corn. “It’s going to be a continuing problem for him and his administration. But it’s going to be good for the public. And it’s going to be very good for journalists.”

596 Comments

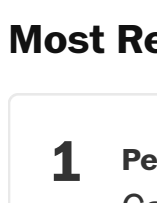


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