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Ron Ashkenas' blog post on Forbes
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Warning to the White House: Lack of Dissent Usually Leads to Dysfunction

Several years before the French Revolution, King Louis XVI silenced a royal dissenter by saying: "It is legal because it is my will." At the time of course, there were no courts or legislative branches of government that could counter the King's will. So Louis XVI continued down the path of believing that he was always right until his disconnect with reality ended with his beheading.

Obviously this is an extreme example of executive isolation, but it echoes much of what we are hearing about the Trump administration's damping down of internal dissent. One example was the firing of HUD employee [Shermichael Singleton](#) for having written a critical article about then-candidate Trump during the election campaign. Similarly [Craig Deare](#) was removed from his role on the National Security Council because he criticized the administration's policies. And at the State Department, President Trump personally eliminated [Elliott Abrams](#) from consideration for the number two job, despite his stellar foreign policy credentials, because he also had spoken negatively about the president during the campaign. What this means, according to the [New York Times](#), is that President Trump is applying a "loyalty test" as a criterion for filling many of the key jobs in his administration, which has made hiring a slow and difficult process.

Not being able to fill important positions more quickly is clearly a problem for the administration in the short term. In the long run however, the bigger problem is that the elimination of non-loyalists not only reduces the size and quality of the talent pool that the administration can draw from, it also is likely to insulate the President and his team from alternative and diverse worldviews. We know from years of research that [diversity](#), both in background and thought, leads to better problem solving and creativity. But if criticism and constructive conflict is not valued, and is actually punished, then there will be very little intellectual diversity. As a result, who will push back on ideas and policy proposals? How much robust debate will actually take place? To what extent will subject matter experts tailor their views to what they think the administration wants to hear rather than what they believe? These kinds of "group-think" dynamics can severely constrain not only the range of possible decisions, but also the way that they are carried out.



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Staffing the administration solely with loyalists also has the potential to intensify the conflict between the Executive Branch and everyone else. When the only criticism comes from the outside, then the true believers on the inside of the administration will start to see everyone else as the “enemy” rather than legitimate contributors with different views. We’ve already seen this starting to happen in President Trump’s disparagement of the courts, Democratic (and some Republican) legislators, and the media. If other leaders in the administration take their cues from this approach, then they are likely to devalue and delegitimize these alternative views, rather than find ways of acknowledging them, taking them into consideration, or even incorporating them into Executive branch initiatives.

The problem of executive isolation of course is not limited to the Trump administration. As I’ve written over the years, it’s a [leadership challenge](#) for most large organizations. Senior people are incredibly busy and have to manage their time carefully. As a result, they surround themselves with staff members and “handlers” who filter out what they consider to be extraneous noise, oftentimes including controversial views or topics. Subordinate managers also sometimes shield their bosses from reality by only bringing forward good news in the hope that they will be rewarded. And all of this is exaggerated when senior executives have large egos, thin skins, or short tempers that make it difficult for people at lower levels to approach them comfortably. As Jack Welch used to say, sometimes being at the top of an organization is like wearing so many sweaters that you no longer know whether it’s hot or cold outside.

But it doesn’t have to be this way, either in the Trump administration or in any large organization. Senior executives can encourage diversity in their leadership teams, rather than looking for people who will agree with them or be afraid to dissent. In the past for example, Presidents have appointed members of the minority political party to cabinet or sub-cabinet posts. Lincoln’s [team of rivals](#) approach is another illustration. Executives also can intentionally get out of their bubbles by taking time to meet with critics or constituents who might have contrary views, and listening to what they have to say. When James Wolfensohn was the president of the World Bank, for example, he used to intentionally find ways of visiting villages where international aid was not making a difference so that he could better understand how to improve the Bank’s approaches.

Obviously executives have the right – and even the obligation – to pursue the agendas that they were hired to carry out, whether this mandate came from a board of directors or an electorate. In complex social systems such as organizations or governments however, carrying out these agendas is never straightforward and



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simple. There are multiple stakeholders, different centers of power, unclear priorities, and limited resources. Successfully navigating this complexity requires people who can produce diverse and often-conflicting ideas – and then allowing them to turn those different approaches into workable solutions.

Hopefully President Trump and his administration will allow this to happen – and not recreate the patterns that led to the demise of Louis XVI.

[Ron Ashkenas](#)' blog post on Forbes

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/ronashkenas/2017/02/21/warning-to-the-white-house-lack-of-dissent-usually-leads-to-dysfunction/#65d0f2723a71>