

# Trump's Cabinet is still full of scandals. History shows he may regret that.

## The perils of allowing scandals to linger



by **Lindsay M. Chervinsky** August 14 at 6:00 AM

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One week ago, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross was accused of swindling business associates out of \$120 million. A few days later, news broke that Betsy DeVos's personal yacht is registered as a foreign vessel to avoid a state tax evaluation.

Neither scandal should be that surprising, given that during President Trump's 18 months in office, eight Cabinet secretaries have resigned because of scandal or personal conflict with the administration. Prominent congressmen and interest groups have called for the resignation of least four others over serious ethical concerns, not including Ross.

No other president in the nation's history has experienced such turnover or frequent accusations of wrongdoing. The president, perhaps because of his ideas about loyalty and his own scandals, has been slow to respond, unwilling to hold his secretaries accountable. But he should. These incidents are costly distractions from governing, but they could also have a devastating impact on the reputation of his administration — as the first Cabinet scandal demonstrated.

On the morning of Aug. 19, 1795, President George Washington summoned Secretary of State Edmund Randolph to a meeting in his private study. When Randolph arrived, Washington pulled out a bundle of letters recently seized from a French ship. A hasty translation completed by Treasury Secretary Oliver Wolcott Jr. and Secretary of War Timothy Pickering suggested that Randolph had sold state secrets to the French the previous year during a domestic rebellion over a tax on whiskey.

Randolph sputtered a denial, but faced with the reality that the president no longer trusted him, he immediately offered his resignation. Washington asked for the resignation in writing and accepted it on the spot. Randolph then marched over to his department offices and locked the doors to preserve all

evidence to clear his name. Over the next three months, Randolph gathered his papers and requested copies of documents from the administration before publishing an essay defending his reputation in December 1795. After the publication of his "Vindication," Randolph and Washington never spoke again.

In light of recent scandals in the Trump administration, Washington's response to the allegations against Randolph offers a valuable lesson.

Randolph's resignation was the first time an official had left a presidential administration under ignominious circumstances. The previous Cabinet secretaries had retired while maintaining cordial relationships with the president. Washington knew that his response would set precedent for future administrations. He understood that his reputation, and his administration's reputation, was political currency and that he must be above reproach.

Randolph had served as the secretary of state since January 1794, the first attorney general of the United States for four years before that, Washington's aide-de-camp during the Revolutionary War and Washington's private attorney for decades. After Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton retired in December 1793 and January 1795, respectively, Randolph was Washington's most trusted adviser in the Cabinet.

Yet when Wolcott and Pickering delivered the confiscated letters, Washington accepted their translation without question. (He did not read or speak French.) He confronted Randolph without any further investigation and ended their professional and personal relationship without giving Randolph the opportunity to explain his behavior. Washington would not risk any hint of scandal tarnishing the administration or his personal reputation. He sacrificed a valuable friendship for what he believed was the safety of the nation.

In 18th-century honor culture, gentlemen vigilantly defended any slights to their integrity to ensure they retained their place in society, their social contacts and their ability to conduct business. Any hint of disloyalty, treason or scandal immediately disqualified a government official from serving in Washington's administration.

The United States is much larger and the government far more complex than it was in the 1790s. Under Randolph's tenure, the State Department managed five ministers abroad and a handful of clerks. Now the department oversees 13,000 Foreign Service employees, 11,000 Civil Service employees and 45,000 local employees.

The role of the president has also evolved significantly since Washington's tenure. Presidents represent the United States on the international stage, initiate legislative agendas and oversee military efforts across the globe. They also oversee a massive bureaucracy with a large amount of discretion to run the government through executive order and interpretation of legislation. And far more than in the 18th and

19th centuries, presidential personalities — and reputations — determine the nature and reputation of the administration.

With these expansive duties, scandals sabotage the president's ability to fulfill his responsibilities and represent the nation. Previous presidents followed this model and actively avoided scandal whenever possible. When administration officials were uncovered as corrupt or unethical, they were almost always quickly removed to shield the administration.

When they weren't, it often did serious damage to the president's reputation, sapped the administration's political capital and distracted from its agenda. For example, two weeks before President Bill Clinton nominated Zoë Baird to be the first female attorney general, he learned that she had hired undocumented immigrants to serve as her nanny and chauffeur and failed to pay their Social Security taxes. Ignoring warnings about a possible scandal, Clinton nominated Baird anyway. Eight days after her nomination, Baird removed her name from consideration under intense public pressure.

Trump has disregarded this precedent and encourages scandal when it distracts from unfavorable news stories or serves to energize his base. He also ignores it when the person who behaved improperly has been personally loyal to him — the exact opposite of how Washington handled Randolph.

While political insults no longer lead to duels, reputation in politics has not changed all that much. Party loyalty might keep the base in line, but for the rest of Americans, a president is only as strong as his public image and his reputation. While Washington is more often remembered for his Farewell Address, in which he urged future generations to avoid party factions and "passionate attachments" to foreign nations, perhaps the episode of his first Cabinet scandal is a better guide for 21st-century America. When faced with the possibility of treason, even if substantiated with little evidence, Washington acted without hesitation to remove Randolph from office.

Many aspects of Washington's presidency cannot be applied to the 21st century. But his unwavering commitment to protecting the nation's reputation and his expectation that his advisers would never undermine his administration by inviting personal scandal should be a standard we demand modern presidents uphold.



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