

Opinion

The Day After Election Day

Current and former Trump administration officials are worried about what might happen on Nov. 4.

By Ron Suskind

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There will of course be an Election Day — and it could be one of tumult, banners colliding, incidents at the polls and attempted hacks galore. More likely than not, it will end without a winner named or at least generally accepted.

America will probably awaken on Nov. 4 into uncertainty. Whatever else happens, there is no doubt that President Trump is ready for it.

I've spent the last month interviewing some two dozen officials and aides, several of whom are still serving in the Trump administration. The central sources in this story are or were senior officials, mainly in jobs that require Senate confirmation. They have had regular access to the president and to briefings at the highest level. As a rule, they asked for anonymity because they were taking a significant professional and, in some cases, personal risk in speaking out in a way that Mr. Trump will see as disloyal, an offense for which he has promised to make offenders pay.

Several of them are in current posts in intelligence, law enforcement or national security and are focused on the concurrent activities of violent, far-right and white supremacy groups that have been encouraged by the president's words and actions. They are worried that the president could use the power of the government — the one they all serve or served within — to keep himself in office or to create favorable terms for negotiating his exit from the White House. Like many other experts inside and outside the government, they are also concerned about foreign adversaries using the internet to sow chaos, exacerbate divisions and undermine our democratic process.



One senior government official, who spent years working in proximity to Mr. Trump, said: “He has done nothing else that’s a constant, except for acting in his own interest.” Erin Schaff/The New York Times

Many of those adversaries, they report, are already finding success in simply amplifying and directing the president's words and tweets. And they're thoroughly delighted, a former top intelligence official told me, "at how profoundly divided we've become. Donald Trump capitalized on that — he didn't invent it — but someday soon we're going to have figure out how to bring our country together, because right now we're on a dangerous path, so very dangerous, and so vulnerable to bad actors."

None of these officials know what will happen in the future any better than the rest of us do. It is their job to fret over worst-case scenarios, and they're damn good at it. I can't know all their motives for wanting to speak to me, but one thing many of them share is a desire to make clear that the alarm bells heard across the country are ringing loudly inside the administration too, where there are public servants looking to avert conflict, at all costs.

It is possible, of course, that this will be an Election Day much like all other Election Days. Even if it takes weeks or months before the result is known and fully certified, it could be a peaceful process, where all votes are reasonably counted, allowing those precious electors to be distributed based on a fair fight. The anxiety we're feeling now could turn out to be a lot of fretting followed by nothing much, a political version of Y2K.

Or not.

Many of the officials I spoke to came back to one idea: You don't know Donald Trump like we do. Even though they can't predict exactly what will happen, their concerns range from the president welcoming, then leveraging, foreign interference in the election, to encouraging havoc that grows into conflagrations that would merit his calling upon U.S. forces. Because he is now surrounded by loyalists, they say, there is no one to try to tell an impulsive man what he should or shouldn't do.

"That guy you saw in the debate," a second former senior intelligence official told me, after the first debate, when the president offered one of the most astonishing performances of any leader in modern American history — bullying, ridiculing, manic, boasting, fabricating, relentlessly interrupting and talking over his opponent. "That's really him. Not the myth that's been created. That's Trump."

Still another senior government official, who spent years working in proximity to Mr. Trump, put it like this: "He has done nothing else that's a constant, except for acting in his own interest." And that's how "he's going to be thinking, every step of the way, come Nov. 3."

One of the first things senior staff members learned about Mr. Trump was that he was all but un-briefable. He couldn't seem to take in complex information about policy choices and consequences in the ways presidents usually do in Oval Office meetings.

What they saw instead was the guy from the first debate. He'd switch subjects, go on crazy tangents, abuse and humiliate people, cut them off midsentence. Officials I interviewed described this scenario again and again.

In the middle of a briefing, Mr. Trump would turn away and grab the phone. Sometimes the call would go to Fox television hosts like Sean Hannity or Lou Dobbs; sometimes the officials wouldn't even know who was on the other end. But whoever it was would instantly become the key voice in the debate.

In one meeting about the border wall, Mr. Trump called a person "who built a flagpole at one of his golf courses," said an official in attendance that day. Mr. Trump explained that because this person "got in a big fight about the size of the flagpole" and because it was "really big," "the president thought, of course, they would understand how to build a wall."

"Obviously," this official said, "it is not the same."

"We used to joke that it was like a phone-a-friend thing, a lifeline thing" from "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire," this person said. Soon, senior officials — frustrated that they couldn't seem to get a word in during briefings — adopted their own version of this technique. They'd ask an array of people — some Trump friends, some members of Congress, assorted notables — to call Mr. Trump and talk to him about key issues. The callers just couldn't let on that a senior official had put them up to it. Two of these senior officials compared the technique to the manipulations of "The Truman Show," in which the main character, played by Jim Carrey, does not know that his entire life is being orchestrated by a TV producer.

President Trump in the Oval Office in 2017. Doug Mills/The New York Times

In March 2018, Mr. Trump took a trip on Air Force One to Charlotte, N.C., for the funeral of the Rev. Billy Graham.

History may note that the most important thing that happened that day had little to do with the religious leader and his large life, save a single thread of his legacy. That would be his grandson, Edward Graham, an Army Ranger “right out of central casting,” as Mr. Trump liked to say, who’d served eight tours in Afghanistan and Iraq over 16 years. In full uniform he met Mr. Trump to escort him, and the two talked about the country’s grueling conflicts overseas.

For Mr. Trump, the meeting was a face-to-face lifeline call. When he returned to Washington, he couldn’t stop talking about troop withdrawals, starting with Afghanistan. During his campaign, he had frequently mentioned his desire to bring home troops from these “endless wars.” As president, his generals — led by the polished, scholarly, even-keeled Defense Secretary Jim Mattis — explained the importance of U.S. troops in stabilizing whole regions of the world, and the value of that stability. Suddenly, after talking to Edward Graham, Mr. Trump didn’t want to hear it.

“In a normal, sane environment,” said a senior Pentagon official, “were it Obama or Bush, or whatever, they’d meet Billy Graham’s grandson and they’d be like ‘Oh that’s interesting,’ and take it to heart, but then they’d go and they’d at least try to validate it with the policymakers, or their military experts. But no, with him, it’s like improv. So, he gets this stray electron and he goes, ‘OK, this is the ground truth.’ ”

Mr. Graham, now working in his family’s ministry, said, “Any conversations that I have had with the president are private.” And, “additionally, when I had those conversations with the president, I was in the Army and I was speaking with our commander in chief.”

Several weeks later, at a speech in Ohio, Mr. Trump said, “we’re knocking the hell out of ISIS” in Syria and the U.S. troops there would be coming home “very soon.”

Once they heard this, shock started to run through Mr. Mattis and his old friend, John Kelly, who’d commanded Marine forces but was then the chief of staff to the president. Both men understood that the 2,000 U.S. troops in Syria were, soldier for soldier, probably the most valuable fighting force on the planet. They not only fought alongside the Kurds in routing ISIS, which was battered yet still a threat. These few troops helped hold the region intact, supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces, also filled with Kurds, which in turn checked the expansion of Syria’s murderous leader, Bashar al-Assad, and also kept Russia, Mr. Assad’s patron, in check. The Kurds had suffered tremendously in these conflicts, much more than the Americans had.

U.S. Special Forces soldiers at an outpost outside the northern Syrian city of Manbij, in 2018. Mauricio Lima for The New York Times

Word spread, and soon much of Congress, the Pentagon, the State Department and Mr. Kelly were doing various versions of “The Truman Show,” trying to get people on the phone that Mr. Trump trusted.

This went on for much of the year — as various voices, both inside and outside of government, worked to try to excise this idea of pulling troops out of Syria from the man.

On Dec. 19, 2018, top brass at the Pentagon received notification via Mr. Trump’s Twitter feed, along with more than 80 million of his followers: The United States would be pulling troops out of Syria. It wasn’t clear what, precisely, Mr. Trump was thinking, beyond the tweet: “We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump presidency.”

ISIS was shrunk, but not yet fully defeated. And the move meant a radical reduction in American influence in Syria, an increase in the power of Russia and Iran to determine events there and quite possibly a land grab by the Turkish government, sworn enemy of the Kurds. Senior leadership of the U.S. government went into a panic. Capitol Hill, too. John Bolton, who was still the national security adviser then, and Virginia Boney, then the legislative affairs director of the National Security Council, hit the phones, calling more than a dozen senators from both parties. Mr. Bolton started each call, saying, in an apologetic tone, “This is the mind of the president, he wants to bring home our troops,” and then switched to frank talk about what might be done. Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina was beside himself. Senator Joni Ernst of Iowa, who served during the Iraq War, was dumbstruck. So was Senator Dan Sullivan of Alaska, a colonel in the Marine Corps Reserves who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan. “Is there any way we can reverse this?” he pleaded. “What can we do?”

That’s what Mr. Mattis wondered. He’d worked nearly two years developing techniques to try to manage Mr. Trump, from colorful PowerPoint slides to several kinds of flattery. This was his moment. The next day, he suited up, put on his cherished, navy blue NATO tie, with the four-pointed symbol of the alliance from which Mr. Trump had threatened to withdraw, and entered the Oval Office. He tried every technique — his entire arsenal, every tack, every argument. The president was unmoved. Mr. Mattis paused, and then pulled from his breast pocket an envelope with his resignation letter.

Down the hall, the very next day, Mr. Kelly was almost done cleaning out his office. He, too, had had enough. He and Mr. Trump had been at each other every day for months. Later, he told The Washington Examiner, “I said, whatever you do — and we were still in the process of trying to find someone to take my place — I said whatever you do, don’t hire a ‘yes man,’ someone who won’t tell you the truth — don’t do that.” But, in fact, that’s exactly what Mr. Trump wanted. Seventeen months as chief of staff, stopping Mr. Trump from umpteen crazy moves, from calling in the Marines to shoot migrants crossing the Rio Grande — “It’s illegal, sir, and the kids, they’re good kids, they just won’t do it” — to invading Venezuela. The list was long. Were they just trial balloons? Sure, some were. And, if someone wasn’t there to challenge Mr. Trump, might they have risen to action? Surely.

“I think the biggest shock he had — ‘cause his assumption was the generals, ‘my generals,’ as he used to say and it used to make us cringe — was this issue of, I think, he just assumed that generals would be completely loyal to the kaiser,” a former senior official told me. “And when we weren’t, that was a huge shock to him, because he thought if anyone was going to be loyal, it would be the generals. And the first people he realized were not loyal to him were the generals.”

This shock, and his first two-plus years of struggle with seasoned, expert advisers, led to an insight for Mr. Trump. It all came back to loyalty. He needed to get rid of any advisers or senior officials who vowed loyalty to the Constitution over personal loyalty to him. Which is pretty much what he proceeded to do.

In February 2019, William Barr arrived as attorney general, having auditioned for the job with a 19-page memo arguing in various and creative ways that the president's powers should be exercised nearly without limits and his actions stand virtually beyond review. He stood ready to brilliantly manage the receipt of the Mueller Report in March. Mr. Barr's moves constituted what amounted to a clean kill, decapitating the sprawling nearly two-year investigation led by his old friend with a single blow.

The director of national intelligence, John Ratcliffe. Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA, via Shutterstock

Attorney General William Barr. Doug Mills/The New York Times

That summer, two more heavyweight senior officials, Dan Coats, the director of national intelligence, and his deputy, Sue Gordon, a beloved 32-year veteran of the C.I.A., both resigned. To replace Mr. Coats, Trump selected Representative John Ratcliffe of Texas, a small-town mayor-turned-congressman with no meaningful experience in intelligence — who quickly withdrew from consideration after news reports questioned his qualifications; he lacked support among key Republican senators as well. Mr. Trump then picked a communications official in the administration of George W. Bush and ambassador to Germany under Mr. Trump, Richard Grenell. Mr. Grenell's stint was temporary and in May Mr. Trump brought back his first choice, Mr. Ratcliffe, who is now director of national intelligence for Mr. Trump's homestretch and postelection period.

In other words, by the summer of 2020, Mr. Trump was well along in completing the transition to a loyalty-tested senior team. When I asked the White House to respond to this idea, I heard back from Sarah Matthews, a deputy press secretary.

"President Trump serves the American people by keeping his promises and taking action where the typical politician would provide hollow words," she said. "The president wants capable public servants in his administration who will enact his America First agenda and are faithful to the Constitution — these principles are not mutually exclusive. President Trump is delivering on his promise to make Washington accountable again to the citizens it's meant to serve and will always fight for what is best for the American people."

The reason having loyalists at both the Department of Justice and D.N.I. is so very important for the president is that it allows him, potentially, to coordinate two key agencies of the government — secret intelligence and prosecution — toward his own political ends. This is exactly what he was criticized for doing in the summer and fall of 2020, with Mr. Barr being accused of announcing politically motivated action and investigations — including to support the fiction of widespread voter fraud — and Mr. Ratcliffe, with collecting and releasing information that is targeted at Mr. Trump's opponents.

The third leg of what would be an ideal triad for this sort of activity is the F.B.I. director, Christopher Wray, who drew Mr. Trump's ire in September, when, in congressional hearings, he echoed the consensus of the intelligence community that the Russians intervened in the 2016 election on Mr. Trump's behalf, that they were doing it again in this election cycle, that “racially motivated violent extremism” — coming mostly from right-wing white supremacists — was a persistent threat, and that widespread voter fraud was a nonissue.

The F.B.I. has been under siege since this past summer, according to a senior official who spoke on the condition of anonymity. “The White House is using friendly members of Congress to try to get at certain information under the guise of quote-unquote, oversight, but really to get politically helpful information before the election,” the official said. “They want some sort of confirmation that we've opened an investigation,” for example, into Hunter Biden, “which, again, the F.B.I. doesn't confirm or deny whether it's opened investigations.”

This official said that Senator Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs committee, “sends letters constantly now, berating, asking for the sun, moon, stars, the entire Russia investigation, and then either going on the morning talk shows or calling the attorney general whenever he doesn't get precisely what he wants.” The urgency, two F.B.I. officials said, ratcheted up after Mr. Trump was told three weeks ago that he wouldn't get the “deliverables” he wanted before the election of incriminating evidence about those who investigated and prosecuted his former national security adviser, Michael Flynn.

Ben Voelkel, a spokesman for Senator Johnson, specifically disputed the idea that Mr. Johnson had made requests to receive material quickly for TV appearances.

Furthermore, he said, “Senator Johnson has been frustrated by the failure of the F.B.I. and many other federal agencies to timely produce documents since taking over as chairman of the Senate's chief oversight body in 2015. In that time, the F.B.I. habitually rebuffed oversight requests, which prompted Senator Johnson to issue F.B.I. a subpoena in August 2020. Senator Johnson has been putting pressure on the F.B.I. — and other federal agencies — because that's the only way to get the records the committee is entitled to receive.”

Rumors swirled a week before the election that Mr. Trump was preparing to fire Mr. Wray, as well as, perhaps, the director of the C.I.A., Gina Haspel — who had also drawn Mr. Trump's ire, according to both former and current senior intelligence officials. The speculation is that they could both be fired immediately after the election, when Mr. Trump will want to show the cost paid for insufficient loyalty and to demonstrate that he remains in charge.

The senior official at the F.B.I., however, said that “firing the director won't accomplish the goal.” There are “37,000 other people he would have to fire. It won't work.”

That doesn't mean that the president won't try. Nov. 4 will be a day, said one of the former senior intelligence officials, “when he'll want to match word with deed.” Key officials in several parts of the government told me how they thought the progression from the 3rd to the 4th might go down.

They are loath to give up too many precise details, but it's not hard to speculate from what we already know. Disruption would most likely begin on Election Day morning somewhere on the East Coast, where polls open first. Miami and Philadelphia (already convulsed this week after another police shooting), in big swing states, would be likely locations. It could be anything, maybe violent, maybe not, started by anyone, or something planned and executed by any number of organizations, almost all of them on the right fringe, many adoring of Mr. Trump. The options are vast and test the imagination. Activists could stage protests at a few of the more crowded polling places and draw those in long lines into conflict.

A Proud Boys rally in Portland, Ore. Diana Zeyneb Alhindawi for The New York Times

A group could just directly attack a polling place, injuring poll workers of both parties, and creating a powerful visual — an American polling place in flames, like the ballot box in Massachusetts that was burned earlier this week — that would immediately circle the globe. Some enthusiasts may simply enter the area around a polling location to root out voter fraud — as the president has directed his supporters to do — taking advantage of a 2018 court ruling that allows the Republican National Committee to pursue “ballot security” operations without court approval.

Would that mean that Mr. Trump caused any such planned activities or improvisations? No, not directly. He’s in an ongoing conversation — one to many, in a twisted *e pluribus unum* — with a vast population, which is in turn in conversations — many to many — among themselves. People are receiving messages, interpreting them and deciding to act, or not. If, say, the Proud Boys attack a polling location, is it because they were spurred on by Mr. Trump’s “stand back and stand by” instructions? Is Mr. Trump telling his most fervent supporters specifically what to do? No. But security officials are terrified by the dynamics of this volatile conversation. It can move in so many directions and very quickly become dangerous, as we have already seen several times this year.

The local police are already on-guard in those cities and others around the country for all sorts of possible incidents at polling places, including the possibility of gunfire. If something goes wrong, the media will pick this up in early morning reports and it will spread quickly, increasing tension at polling places across the country, where the setup is ripe for conflict.

Conservative media could then say the election was being stolen, summoning others to activate, maybe violently. This is the place where cybersecurity experts are on the lookout for foreign actors to amplify polling location incidents many times over, with bots and algorithms and stories written overseas that slip into the U.S. digital diet. News of even a few incidents could summon a violent segment of Mr. Trump’s supporters into action, giving foreign actors even more to amplify and distribute, spreading what is, after all, news of mayhem to the wider concentric circles of Mr. Trump’s loyalists. Groups from the left may engage as well, most likely as a counterpoint to those on the right. Those groups are less structured, more like an “ideology or movement,” as Mr. Wray described them in his September testimony. But, as a senior official told me, the numbers on the left are vast.

Violence and conflict throughout that day at the polls would surely affect turnout, allowing Mr. Trump to claim that the in-person vote had been corrupted, if that suits his purposes. There’s no do-over for Election Day.

Under the 12th Amendment, which Mr. Trump has alluded to on several occasions, the inability to determine a clear winner in the presidential election brings the final decision to the House of Representatives. The current composition of the House, in which Republicans control more state delegations even though Democrats are in the majority, favors Trump. But the state count could flip to the Democrats with this election.

There are many scenarios that might unfold from here, nearly all of them entailing weeks or even months of conflict, and giving an advantage to the person who already runs the U.S. government.

There will likely be some reckoning of the in-person vote drawn from vote tallies and exit polls. If Joe Biden is way ahead in these projections, and they are accepted as sound, Mr. Trump may find himself having to claim fraud or suppression that amounts to too large a share of votes to seem reasonable. Inside the Biden campaign they are calling this “too big to rig.”

Races tend to tighten at the end, but the question is not so much the difference between the candidates' vote totals, or projections of them, as it is what Mr. Trump can get his supporters to believe. Mr. Trump might fairly state, at this point, that he can get a significant slice of his base to believe anything.

But he could use all the help that he can summon to invalidate the in-person vote.

Senior intelligence officials are worried that a foreign power could finally manage a breach of the American voting architecture — or leave enough of a digital trail to be perceived to have breached it. There were enormous efforts to do so, largely but not exclusively by the Russians, in 2016, when election systems in every state were targeted. There is also concern that malware attacks could cripple state governments and their electronic voter registration data, something that could make swaths of voters unable to vote. A senior official told me that provisional ballots can then be passed out and “we keep all the receipts,” meaning that these votes would have a paper ballot trail that can be laboriously counted and rechecked. But a breach or an appearance of a breach, in any state's machinery, would, in a chaotic flow of events, be a well-timed gift to Mr. Trump.

The lie easily outruns truth — and the best “disinformation,” goes a longtime C.I.A. rule, “is actually truthful.” It all blends together. “Then the president then substantiates it, gives it credence, gives it authority from the highest office,” says the senior government official. “Then his acolytes mass-blast it out. Then it becomes the narrative, and fact, and no rational, reasonable explanation to the contrary will move” his supporters “an inch.”

No matter how the votes split, there's an expectation among officials that Mr. Trump will claim some kind of victory on Nov. 4, even if it's a victory he claims was hijacked by fraud — just as he falsely claimed that Hillary Clinton's three million-vote lead in the popular vote was the result of millions of votes from unauthorized immigrants. This could come in conjunction with statements, supported by carefully chosen “facts,” that the election was indeed “rigged,” as he's long been warning.

If the streets then fill with outraged people, he can easily summon, or prompt, or encourage troublemakers among his loyalists to turn a peaceful crowd into a sea of mayhem. They might improvise on their own in sparking violence, presuming it pleases their leader.

If the crowds are sufficiently large and volatile, he can claim to be justified in responding with federal powers to bring order. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mark Milley, have both said they are opposed to deploying armed forces on American soil.

A senior Pentagon official, though, laid out a back-door plan that he was worried about. It won't start, he thinks, with a sweeping move to federalize the National Guard, which is within the President's Article 2 powers; it'd be more of a state by state process. The head of the National Guard of some state “starts feeling uncomfortable with something and then calls up the Pentagon.”

The F.B.I., meanwhile, is bracing for huge challenges. “We are all-hands-on-deck for the foreseeable future,” the F.B.I. official I mentioned earlier told me. “We've been talking to our state and local counterparts and gearing up for the expectation that it's going to be a significant law-enforcement challenge for probably weeks or months,” this official said. “It feels pretty terrifying.”

In the final few weeks of the campaign, and during Mr. Trump's illness, he's done two things that seem contradictory: seeking votes from anyone who might still be swayed and consolidating and activating his army of most ardent followers. They are loyal to him as a person, several officials pointed out, not as president. That army Trump can direct in the difficult days ahead and take with him, wherever he goes. He may activate it. He may bargain with it, depending on how the electoral chips fall. It's his insurance policy.

The senior government official who discussed Mr. Trump's amplifying of messages spoke with great clarity about these codes of loyalty. The official was raised in, and regularly visits, what is now a Trump stronghold.

Anna Moneymaker for The New York Times

“They’re the reason he took off the damned mask when he got to the White House” from Walter Reed, the official said. “Those people eat that up, where any reasonable, rational person would be horrified. You are still actively shedding a deadly virus. You are lucky enough to have the best and brightest doctors, trial drugs, whatever. You get flown back to the White House, and you do a photo-op with a military salute to no one. You ask it to be refilmed, and you take off your mask, which, in my mind, has become a signal to his core base of supporters that are willing to put themselves at risk and danger to show loyalty to him.”

But across the government, another official — a senior intelligence official in a different department — argues that citizens may yet manage to rise to the challenge of this difficult election, in a time of division.

“The last line of defense in elections is the American voter,” he told me. “This is the most vulnerable phase,” now and the days immediately after Election Day, “where we’re so eager to have an outcome, that actors both foreign and domestic are going to exploit that interest, that thirst, that need for resolution to the drama.”

I asked him what he would say to American voters. “Look,” he said, softly, “just understand that you’re being manipulated. That’s politics, that’s foreign influence, they’re trying to manipulate you and drive you to a certain outcome.”

“Americans are, I think, hopefully, made of sterner stuff.”

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