

# History is repeating itself at the FBI as agents resist a director's political agenda

Douglas M. Charles, Professor of History, Penn State

As a historian of the FBI, I recognize the FBI has had only one other overtly political director in the past 50 years: L. Patrick Gray, who served for a year under President Richard Nixon. Gray was held accountable after he tried to help Nixon end the FBI's Watergate investigation. Whether Trump's current director, Kash Patel, has more staying power is unclear.

## After Hoover

Ever since Hoover's death in 1972, presidents have typically nominated independent candidates with bipartisan support and law enforcement roots to run the FBI. Most nominees have been judges, senior prosecutors or former FBI or Justice Department officials.

While Hoover publicly proclaimed his FBI independent of politics, he sometimes did the bidding of presidents, including Nixon. Still, Nixon felt that Hoover had not been compliant enough, so in 1972 he selected Gray, a longtime friend and assistant attorney general, to be Hoover's successor.

Gray took steps to move the bureau out of Hoover's shadow. He relaxed strict dress codes for agents, recruited female agents and pointedly hired people from outside the agency – who were not indoctrinated in the Hoover culture – for administrative posts.

Gray asserted his authority with blunt force. FBI agents at field offices and at headquarters who resisted Gray's power were censured, fired or transferred. Other senior officials opted to leave, including the bureau's top fraud expert, cryptanalyst and skyjacking expert, and the head of its Crime Information Center.

Agents regarded these moves as a purge, and press reports claimed that bureau morale was at an all-time low, charges that Gray denied. According to FBI Associate Director Mark Felt, who became Gray's second in command, 10 of 16 top FBI officials chose to retire, most of them notable Hoover men.

Gray surrounded himself with what journalist Jack Anderson called “sharp, but inexperienced, modish, young aides.” FBI insiders called these new hires the “Mod Squad,” a reference to the counterculture TV police series.

## **Political from the start**

Campaigning in 2024, Donald Trump vowed to “root out” his political opponents from government. Realizing he was a target because of his investigation of the attack on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, FBI director Christopher Wray, whom Trump had nominated in 2017, resigned in December 2024 before Trump could fire him.

In Wray’s place Trump nominated loyalist Kash Patel, a lawyer who worked as a low-level federal prosecutor from 2013 to 2016 and then as a deputy national security appointee during Trump’s first term.

Patel publicly supported Trump’s vow to purge enemies and claimed the FBI was part of a “deep state” that was resistant to Trump. Patel promised to help dismantle this disloyal core and to “rebuild public trust” in the FBI.

Even before Patel was confirmed on Feb. 20, 2025, in an historically close 51-49 vote, the Justice Department began transferring thousands of agents away from national security matters to immigration duty, which was not a traditional FBI focus.

Hours after taking office, Patel shifted 1,500 agents and staff from FBI headquarters to field offices, claiming that he was streamlining operations.

Patel installed outsider Dan Bongino as deputy director. Bongino, another Trump loyalist, was a former New York City policeman and Secret Service agent who had become a full-time political commentator. He embraced a conspiracy theory positing the FBI was “irredeemably corrupt” and advocated “an absolute housecleaning.”

In February, New York City Special Agent in Charge James Dennehy told FBI staff “to dig in” and oppose expected and unprecedented political intrusions. He was forced out by March.

Patel then used lie-detector tests and carried out a string of high-profile firings of agents who had investigated either Trump or the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection. Some agents who were fired had been photographed kneeling during a 2020 racial justice protest in Washington, D.C. – an action they said they took to defuse tensions with protesters.

In response, three fired agents are suing Patel for what they call a political retribution campaign. Ex-NFL football player Charles Tillman, who became an FBI agent in 2017, resigned in September 2025 in protest of Trump policies. Once again, there are assertions of a purge.

## **Will Patel be held accountable?**

Patel's actions as director so far illustrate that he is willing to use his position to implement the president's political designs. When Gray tried to do this in the 1970s, accountability still held force, and Gray left office in disgrace. Gray participated in a cover-up of illegal behavior that became the subject of an impeachment proceeding. What Patel has done to date, at least what we know about, is not the equivalent – so far.

Today, Patel's tenure rests solely upon pleasing the president. If formal accountability – a key element of a democracy – is to survive, it will have to come from Congress, whose Republican majority has so far not exercised its power to hold Trump or his administration accountable. Short of that, perhaps internal resistance within the administration or pressure from the public and the media might serve the oversight function that Congress, over the past eight months, has abrogated.

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