POLITICS

THE MAN WHO WILL DO ANYTHING FOR TRUMP

Why Kash Patel is exactly the kind of person who would serve in a second Trump administration

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Illustration by Diego Mallo. Source: Mark Peterson / Redux.

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KASH PATEL WAS dangerous. On this both Trump appointees and career officials could agree.

A 40-year-old lawyer with little government experience, he joined the administration in 2019 and rose rapidly. Each new title set off new alarms.

When Patel was installed as chief of staff to the acting secretary of defense just after the 2020 election, Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, advised him not to break the law in order to keep President Donald Trump in power. "Life looks really shitty from behind bars," Milley reportedly told Patel. (Patel denies this.)

When Trump entertained naming Patel deputy director of the FBI, Attorney General Bill Barr confronted the White House chief of staff and said, "Over my dead body."

When, in the final weeks of the administration, Trump planned to name Patel deputy director of the CIA, Gina Haspel, the agency's head, threatened to resign. Trump

relented only after an intervention by Vice President Mike Pence and others.

Who was this man, and why did so many top officials fear him?

It wasn't a question of ideology. He wasn't a zealot like Stephen Miller, trying to make the bureaucracy yield to his agenda. Rather, Patel appeared singularly focused on pleasing Trump. Even in an administration full of loyalists, Patel was exceptional in his devotion.

This was what seemed to disturb many of his colleagues the most: Patel was dangerous, several of them told me, not because of a certain plan he would be poised to carry out if given control of the CIA or FBI, but because he appeared to have no plan at all—his priorities today always subject to a mercurial president's wishes tomorrow. (Patel disputes this characterization.)

What *wouldn't* a person like that do, if asked?

Most Americans had no idea Patel existed, yet rarely a day passed when administration leaders weren't reminded that he did. In a year and eight months, they had watched Patel leapfrog from the National Security Council, where he became senior counterterrorism director; to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, where he was principal deputy to the acting director; to the Department of Defense, where his influence rivaled that of the acting secretary himself.

But in the officials' warnings about the various catastrophic ways the rise of an inexperienced lackey to the highest levels of government might end, all Patel seemed to detect was the panic of a "deep state" about to be exposed. Such officials understood, as Patel later wrote, that he "wouldn't sit quietly and accept their actions to stonewall direct orders from the president."

Patel was ultimately denied a role at the pinnacle of the national-security establishment, but Trump has promised to learn from his mistakes. Should he return to the White House, there will be no Milleys, Haspels, or even Barrs to restrain him as he seeks revenge against his political enemies. Instead, there will be Patels—those whose true faith and allegiance belong not to a nation, but to one man.

"Get ready, Kash," Trump said before a gala of young Republicans this past December. "Get ready."

From the November 2023 issue: Jeffrey Goldberg on how General Mark Milley protected the Constitution from Donald Trump

A CURSORY APPRAISAL of Patel's activities since the Trump administration might suggest that his days as a senior official in the United States government are behind him—that Patel, like countless others on the right, has learned the art of commodifying his association with the former president.

There is, for example, merch: "the official K$h wine!" ($233.99 for six bottles) and the Fight With Kash Punisher Intarsia Reversible Scarf ($25), which Patel wore for his remarks at this year's Conservative Political Action Conference. There are TAKE A LAP RHINO tank tops ($35), JUSTICE FOR ALL #J6PC tees (also $35), and Kash Krew Golf Polos ($50–$53).

There are the books. *Government Gangsters: The Deep State, the Truth, and the Battle for Our Democracy* is Patel's account of his years fighting the "corrupt cabal" of federal officials trying to take down Trump. And in *The Plot Against the King*, a children's book, Patel tells the story of a wizard named Kash who sets out to save King Donald from the sinister machinations of Hillary Queenton and a "shifty knight." Head over to fightwithkash.com, and for a "special low offer" of $19.99, one can purchase playing cards ("the collector's item of the century") featuring the story's characters; the king card belongs to "Kash, the distinguished wizard and corruption combatant."

There is at least one song: Patel produced "Justice for All," a version of the national anthem sung by jailed January 6 defendants and played by Trump at his first 2024 campaign rally. Patel professes to make no money from the song or the merch—he says proceeds go to January 6 defendants and their families, or to the Kash Foundation. Few details are available about the charity, but according to Patel, it has funded meals for needy families and defamation lawsuits on behalf of Ric Grenell, Patel's friend and former boss at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence,

and Daniel Bostic, a "Stop the Steal" activist. (Just as this article was going to press, most of the merch was removed from Patel's online shop.)

All the while, Patel churns out promotional content on Truth Social—for a conservative cellphone carrier ("Freedom in cell phones, switch today") and a Christian payment processor ("Why not just give your money to the enemy, or switch now")—and hawks pills that he says "reverse" the effects of COVID vaccines ("Mrna detox, reverse the vaxx n get healthy").

He has also worked as a national security adviser to Trump (bringing in more than $300,000 over the past two years from the former president's Save America PAC, according to campaign-finance records) and as a consultant for Trump Media & Technology Group, the owner of Truth Social ($130,000 last year, according to a Securities and Exchange Commission filing). In addition, Patel has spoken of work abroad, though public paper trails are hard to come by—he has claimed, for example, that he worked as a security consultant for Qatar during the 2022 FIFA World Cup, in Doha.

Nevertheless, Patel has at times vented that he deserves more, according to two people I spoke with. "He complains about money all the time—like, he doesn't have any money, can't make any money, nobody will hire him," a longtime Trump adviser told me. "Anybody who was as big of a deal as he was in the past administration would come out and they'd be on the board of Raytheon and Boeing." (This person, like many of the nearly 40 Patel associates I spoke with for this story, requested anonymity for fear of retribution. Patel, who declined to be interviewed, denied this through a spokesperson.)

From the time Patel left the administration, he appeared committed to finding opportunities to reinforce his loyalty to Trump. In spring 2022, after the FBI opened a criminal investigation into Trump's handling of federal records at Mar-a-Lago, Patel insinuated himself into the story, telling *Breitbart News* that he witnessed Trump verbally declassify "whole sets of materials" before leaving the presidency. The claim ensured a starring role for Patel throughout the probe—ending with Patel testifying before a federal grand jury in exchange for a grant of limited immunity. More

crucially, Patel's assertion to *Breitbart* seemed to preview Trump's own approach to the case: In August, shortly after federal investigators executed a search on Mar-a-Lago, Trump's office claimed that, as president, he had a standing order that any materials moved from the Oval Office to Mar-a-Lago were considered declassified. It did not appear to bother Patel that numerous Trump officials flatly denied the existence of such an order.

That October, the far-right personality Benny Johnson asked Patel on his podcast how he would respond if Trump offered him the job of FBI director in a second term. Patel leaned back, laughed, and waved off the question, but a minute later he decided to chime in after all. "Yes, to answer your question, of course," he said. "Who would turn that down?" Some in Trump's orbit acknowledge that Senate confirmation is unlikely for Patel—that if he were to lead an agency, it would probably be in an acting capacity. On a podcast in November 2023, Donald Trump Jr. floated the idea of installing Patel as an "interim" attorney general at the outset "just to send that shot across the bow of the swamp."

"A lot of people say he's crazy," Trump once said of Patel, according to a longtime Trump adviser. "But sometimes you need a little crazy."

Such is the present dynamic of Kash Patel's life: marketing "Orange Man Bad" Punisher-skull license plates and dubious supplements while fielding questions about which major national-security or law-enforcement agency he might soon like to run. "Kash, I know you're probably going to be head of the CIA," Steve Bannon said on his podcast, *War Room*, this past December. "But do you believe that you can deliver the goods on this in pretty short order, the first couple of months, so we can get rolling on prosecutions?"

Bannon was talking here about "receipts," the supposedly incriminating documents and emails that a second Trump administration would use to bring cases against deep-state dwellers and members of the press. Patel expressed no doubt about his capacity to deliver the goods. "We will go out and find the conspirators, not just in government but in the media," he said. "Yes, we're going to come after the people in the media who lied about American citizens, who helped Joe Biden rig presidential elections—we're going to come after you."

"A lot of people say he's crazy," Trump once said of Patel, according to the longtime adviser. "*I* think he's kind of crazy. But sometimes you need a little crazy."

From the January/February 2024 issue: Twenty-four *Atlantic* contributors consider what Donald Trump could do if he were to return to the White House

IT WAS ONLY a matter of time before they found each other, is how Patel seemed to see it. Just a "couple of guys from Queens," he has said, trying to synonymize his brand with Trump's home borough, and the scrappy knuckle-crack caricature that comes with it. In *Government Gangsters*, Patel reminds readers of this piece of shared heritage four times.

Perhaps it makes sense, then, to go back to the beginning, to the affluent Nassau County village of Garden City, New York, where Kashyap Patel was actually born and raised. Just north of the Garden City Golf Club, one finds the charming corner-lot home to which he returned after school and football practice and hockey games and occasionally, yes, a father-son jaunt for butter chicken about an hour away in Queens. *Just a guy from Garden City*—it's true; it doesn't quite sing.

Patel, who is of Gujarati ancestry, has said that his parents both grew up in East Africa; in the 1970s, his father, Pramod, fled the despotic regime of Idi Amin in Uganda. The young couple immigrated to the United States and settled on Long Island. Children soon followed. Their first chapter in America began in close quarters, according to Patel, with his family and Pramod's eight siblings all sharing the same home.

Before long, Patel writes in his book, his family gained access to the thrills of "milquetoast Americana"—New York Islanders hockey games, annual sojourns to Disney World. It was the Reagan era, and in 1988, Patel's parents registered to vote for the first time in the U.S., as Republicans. But their conservatism, according to Patel, was "dispositional"—they valued hard work, fairness, personal responsibility. American opportunity, meanwhile, arrived just as advertised: Pramod ultimately became CFO at a global distributor of aircraft bearings.

Patel was raised Hindu, the family going to temple together and praying in their shrine room at home. It's difficult to envision many neighbors joining them. Of the roughly 22,000 residents recorded in Garden City in the 1990 census, 96 percent were white. Four years later, when Patel began his freshman year at Garden City High School, he was one of only a handful of people of color in his class.

His senior-yearbook quote came from the Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel: "Racism is man's gravest threat—the maximum of hatred for a minimum reason."

In Garden City, Patel caddied for "very wealthy" and "important" New Yorkers at the local country club, some of them defense attorneys, he writes in *Government Gangsters*; as they played, he listened to their stories about the drama of court. "I could be a first-generation immigrant lawyer at a white shoe firm making a ton of money," Patel thought. After he graduated from the University of Richmond and then Pace University's law school, however, his dreams of Big Law and high retainers were complicated when, by his account, no firm would hire him.

On the advice of a friend, he sent an application to the Miami-Dade County public defender's office in Florida, considered one of the best state defender's offices in the country. Many of the people I spoke with for this story were quick to highlight his time as a public defender—how incongruous it seems in the context of the revenge-driven exploits that now appear to consume him. Public records show that Patel moved into a condo in a new building in Coral Gables, which his parents bought in the summer of 2005. "He just was a normal, good lawyer; did a good job, never stood out," recalled Bennett Brummer, who was the Miami-Dade elected public defender

for 32 years. Patel writes that, by this time, he was shifting "more and more to the right." But even if he struck his colleagues as a little more conservative than the norm, as Todd Michaels, who was an attorney in the Miami-Dade office, put it to me, he was not overtly partisan.

State court was well suited to Patel's strengths as an attorney, his former colleagues told me. He was personable and quick on his feet, and adept at "marketing" and "presenting" himself. After a few years, however, Patel moved to the federal public defender's office in Miami. There, the work was more complex, more writing- and research-intensive. Despite some successes, he developed a reputation for "style over substance," a former colleague said—one he seemed aware of but not terribly motivated to change. "He always was like, 'Look, I'm really good at trial skill. But all of this reading and writing and arguing about, like, the intricacies of the law—I'm not really interested,'" a second former colleague recalled. (Patel disputed this characterization, referring to a complex drug-trafficking case he'd handled.)

"I'm not saying he wasn't capable of it," this person added. "But I think he always liked being the face."

Patel seemed caught between a brewing resentment of elites and an abiding desire to be seen as one.

Transcripts from Patel's cases reveal a lawyer comfortable before the bench, many of his presentations sharp and clever and peppered with flatteries for Your Honor. ("Judge, I think you hit it on the head last week.") They were also embroidered with performative modesties: "On my best day, I'm an average defense attorney"; "I'm not a mathematician, but …"; "I'm not saying I'm a Spanish expert, Judge, but …"; "I know I've been doing this by far the shortest time of any lawyer sitting here."

Many times, this worked. “There were certain judges that he kind of had magic in front of,” the second former colleague said.

This former colleague began to notice flashes of grievance in the young attorney, but they didn’t seem grounded in politics so much as insecurity. This person recalled that when Patel would ask for help on legal research, he would occasionally offer some version of *Well, thank God I talked to someone who is book smart and went to all the right schools and checked all the right boxes*. “He would always phrase it like a compliment, but there was an edge to it.”

It became clear that Patel “did kind of have a chip on his shoulder,” this former colleague said—that he seemed caught between a brewing resentment of elites and an abiding desire to be seen as one.

Illustration by Diego Mallo. Source: Justin Sullivan / Getty.

By early 2014, Patel had left Miami to become a federal prosecutor in Washington, D.C. He'd landed a job in the counterterrorism section of the Justice Department's National Security Division. Yet in Patel's telling, what

should have been a dream chapter in the career of a young lawyer fast became a study in the rot of bureaucracy—and the malicious repercussions for those who dared to challenge it.

This education began with Benghazi.

Patel was one of the attorneys from the main Justice Department office who assisted the U.S. Attorney's Office in Washington in pursuing foreign militants for the September 11, 2012, attacks that killed four Americans. In his book, Patel writes that as the Justice Department moved to bring the Benghazi terrorists to court, "I was leading the prosecution's efforts at Main Justice." He claims that he proceeded to watch firsthand as senior DOJ leadership and other Obama officials—"political gangsters, frauds, and hypocrites" such as Attorney General Eric Holder and his successor, Loretta Lynch—chose to "go soft" on the terrorists by prosecuting only one perpetrator. It was for this reason, Patel writes—a lack of trust in the prosecution's decisions—that when his supervisors asked him to join the trial team itself, he declined.

When I put this version of events to three people familiar with the prosecution, I was met with astonishment. One of these people said simply: "Good God."

Although Patel was Main Justice's representative on the case for a period, the U.S. Attorney's Office led the prosecution, they said. The department prosecuted a single suspect, they added, because he was the only one the government had been able to capture. (DOJ later prosecuted a second suspect, and reportedly brought charges against multiple others.) Patel was tasked with coordinating approvals for warrants and indictments, among other responsibilities. Moreover, he did not decline an invitation to join the team working on the actual trial; according to two of his former DOJ colleagues, he was never asked. After clashing with the U.S. Attorney's Office, he was removed from the case altogether. (Patel denied this, saying he was simply reassigned to a different position.)

What all parties seem to agree on is that the young attorney had grown bitter toward the system that had employed him for the better part of his career. And an unexpected

confrontation in Texas transformed the building friction into a personal declaration of war.

In January 2016, Patel traveled to Tajikistan to interview witnesses for an Islamic State–related case. While he was there, a federal judge in Houston scheduled a surprise hearing in another terrorism case Patel was involved in. He had less than 24 hours to make it to Texas, and having brought only slacks and a blazer on his trip, he contacted the local U.S. Attorney's Office asking for a tie. But when Patel finally arrived at the courthouse, for reasons that remain in dispute, there was no tie.

Judge Lynn Nettleton Hughes lost it. "If you want to be a lawyer, dress like a lawyer," Hughes snapped in chambers. "Act like a lawyer." Hughes proceeded to berate Patel as "just one more nonessential employee from Washington." "What is the utility to me and to the people of America to have you fly down here at their expense?" he said. "You don't add a bit of value, do you?" The judge dismissed Patel from chambers.

Patel's bosses were furious on his behalf. Hughes, then 74, had a history of eruptions in court, including disturbing remarks about race. Three years earlier, an Indian American plaintiff had tried but failed to have the judge removed from his discrimination case after Hughes held forth in a pretrial conference on "Adolf Hitler's use of swastikas, the origin of Caucasians and the futility of diversity programs at universities," the *Texas Observer* reported. DOJ officials' attempts to get a transcript of the Patel exchange only enraged Hughes further; the judge issued an "Order on Ineptitude" castigating the "pretentious lawyers" at Main Justice.

The Washington Post included all of this in a report on the incident. In the article, Patel comes across as a sympathetic figure. But the Justice Department chose not to comment, and for Patel, this was what counted. He writes in his book that, although his superiors privately praised him for keeping a level head, they "refused to say any of that publicly," standing by as the media "dragged my name through the mud."

Patel brought complaints again and again to the leadership of the department's National Security Division—adamant that something be done to hold the Texas prosecutors to account for not standing up for him in front of the judge, one of his

former DOJ colleagues recalled. It wasn't that his superiors had failed to understand his frustration; yes, they agreed, the judge was a "wack job," in the words of the second former DOJ colleague, and they had called the U.S. Attorney's Office to express their disappointment. "I finally said, 'I don't really know what else you want,'" the first former colleague recalled. "'The U.S. attorney is presidentially appointed, like, I—what do you want us to do?'"

"He just felt so aggrieved," this person added, "and this continued throughout the rest of his tenure. And I actually think it was part of why he left."

The lesson of the bench slap and its aftermath, as Patel explains in *Government Gangsters*, was this: Although he had tried "to do my best to serve my country," senior government officials had "refused to step up to the plate" for him in return. Patel decided to stop working for "cowards."

The next year, he met Devin Nunes.

In Patel's children's book *The Plot Against the King*, Duke Devin bursts into the home of Kash, the wizard. The duke is distressed because ever since Choosing Day, a "shifty knight" (otherwise known as Democratic Representative Adam Schiff) has been proclaiming that King Donald cheated his way past Hillary Queenton to the throne. He begs Kash, known throughout the Land of the Free as the "Distinguished Discoverer," to enlist in "the Quest for the Truth about the Plot against the King," and after some consideration, Kash agrees.

Patel tends to emphasize his reluctance when he recounts going to work for the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence in April 2017, whether he is a teal-caped wizard in the telling or just another 30-something civil servant looking for the next thing. He has said that when he first met with Nunes, the committee's Republican chair, about a staff opening on the committee's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election, he thought the job sounded boring; what Patel had really wanted, since Trump's election, was to work in the White House. But Nunes won him over, Patel writes in *Government Gangsters*, by promising to recommend him for a spot on Trump's National Security Council once the probe concluded.

Patel would devote the next several months to examining the FBI's rationale for wiretapping the former Trump-campaign adviser Carter Page, and to uncovering the origins of the infamous Steele dossier. In interviews, staffers and committee members recalled Patel as personable, hardworking, and not noticeably partisan. "He was instrumental in helping us understand what the FBI would have had in their possession," Mike Conaway, a Republican member of the committee at the time, said. A former Democratic committee staffer told me that Patel at first impressed even some in the minority as "exceedingly nice."

Some of the Republicans on the committee grew frustrated, however, by Patel's emerging tendency to go rogue. One of the more surprising examples of this came just a few months into his tenure, when Patel and a colleague turned up unannounced at the London office of Christopher Steele's lawyer, where Patel left his business card. ("We did everything by the book," Patel later wrote of the incident.) One Republican staffer, initially taken by Patel's charisma, came to view him as a "spotlight ranger."

In January 2018, as the committee's majority neared the completion of a report on its findings, Nunes and his staff, including Patel, met with then–Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein at the Justice Department. By all accounts, the conversation grew contentious as Nunes pressed Rosenstein to furnish more documents to the committee. According to a statement later issued by the Justice Department, Nunes warned that he would act to hold Rosenstein in contempt of Congress, and Rosenstein issued a warning of his own: Should Nunes pursue that route, Rosenstein was prepared to subpoena the committee's communications to defend himself.

Patel interpreted Rosenstein's warning as a "direct and personal threat against" him—one of the nation's top officials retaliating against a House staffer out of fear of the "corruption I was about to expose." As Patel tells it in his book, he immediately contacted senior staff to House Speaker Paul Ryan to share news of the attack on one of their own employees, and Ryan's office "flatly refused to have my back." A former Ryan aide described the exchange to me this way: "Kash seemed to think there was some magic wand the speaker had to stop people from saying things Kash didn't like."

Suddenly everything seemed to make sense to Patel. Different setting, different time, but same deep state, same story: Here, in new form, was the Justice Department refusing to defend him against "the unstable judge in Houston," he writes; here was Washington's dogmatic lack of interest in "defending what's right" made coldly manifest.

The majority's four-page report, of which Patel was a primary author, was ultimately found to have credibly identified errors and omissions in the FBI and DOJ's applications to surveil Carter Page, though an inspector general did not corroborate the memo's suggestion that the surveillance was politically motivated. When it was released, the so-called Nunes memo was framed by much of the media as politically charged fiction, and Patel was identified for his role in writing it. On February 2, 2018, *The New York Times* published an article headlined "Kashyap Patel, Main Author of Secret Memo, Is No Stranger to Quarrels."

The article cited Patel's run-in with the Houston judge as a key example of his history of "quarrels," offering a pared-down version of events that seemed to render Patel the irresponsible offender of a sober-minded judge. The incident, in other words, had been elevated to a defining place in the public narrative of Patel's career—just as he'd always seemed to fear. "He felt extraordinarily mistreated," another former Republican member of the House Intelligence Committee told me.

> Somewhere along the way, the plot against the king had turned into a plot against the wizard himself.

As Patel came to feature in more and more stories about the Russia investigation, he seemed to embrace the view that any criticism of him or his work—valid or not—was evidence of a coordinated smear campaign. "All their attacks only convinced me that we were on to something big," Patel writes in his book.

A few months later, by his own admission, he decided to leak intelligence-committee emails regarding Rosenstein's "chilling" and "sustained personal attack" against him to Fox News. Shortly after an article ran, according to Patel, Ryan approached him on the House floor and asked him to stop shopping stories to the press.

"Absolutely," Patel claims to have replied. "I would have no problem doing that the moment he, as the Speaker of the House, started having the backs of people falsely attacked for their work on behalf of the House." (A spokesperson for Ryan told me that neither Ryan nor his staff has "any recollection of this occurring.")

They'd given him no choice, Patel reasoned. Somewhere along the way, the plot against the king had turned into a plot against the wizard himself.

By the winter of 2018, Republicans had lost the House, and Schiff was set to take over the intelligence committee. Patel later wrote that Nunes, as promised, urged Trump to hire his protégé onto the National Security Council. According to Patel, when Trump realized just whom Nunes was referring to —the man who "had saved his presidency by revealing the unprecedented political hit job designed to take him down"—he ordered his chief of staff to onboard Patel at once.

Former administration officials told me that, from his first days as a staffer on the National Security Council, in February 2019, Patel was fixated on trying to get face time with Trump. He had a script, and it wasn't long before many of his colleagues could recite it themselves: "Mr. President, the deep state is out to get you," as the longtime Trump adviser paraphrased it, "and I'm going to save you from it." Five months into his tenure, Patel was made the senior director of the NSC's counterterrorism directorate.

Much has been written about Patel's year on the National Security Council, including the early suspicions among his colleagues that he was funneling information about Ukraine directly to Trump, outside official channels. In the former president's first impeachment inquiry, the NSC official Fiona Hill testified about learning from another colleague that Trump apparently viewed Patel as the council's director on

Ukraine policy, though his portfolio had nothing to do with Ukraine. Hill said she had been sufficiently alarmed to report the conversation to her superior and then warn her colleagues to be "very careful" in their communications with Patel. "Let's just say it's a red flag," she testified, "when somebody who you barely know is involved on one of your policy issues" and "clearly providing materials outside of the line"—particularly when she didn't know what those materials were.

Patel has repeatedly denied ever discussing Ukraine with Trump. In his rendering, his colleagues were jealous of his close relationship with the president and still hated him for the Russia investigation. Not only was the deep state's plot against him still in motion, Patel seemed to decide, but it had expanded.

For the most part, this is how he explains the rest of his time in the Trump administration, why it is that at virtually every turn—from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence to the Department of Defense to very nearly the FBI and CIA—there emerges yet another crop of officials who object to his accrual of power. It could not possibly be the case, for example, that Bill Barr harbored genuine concerns about Patel's qualifications to serve as deputy FBI director: In Patel's version of events, Barr was simply one more top bureaucrat bent on foiling Patel's success as payback for the "mess" he'd exposed in their agency. And if this narrative begins to feel less and less plausible, if Patel's latest detractors have to date seemed as reliably pro-Trump as Patel himself—well, that just goes to show their cunning.

Patel has a talent for casting himself as the ultimate hero or the unjustly persecuted. I have wondered if this is why he chose not to include in his book the events of October 30, 2020—if, in the end, not even he could figure out a way to make himself the martyr of the story.

On that Friday, according to multiple reported accounts, SEAL Team 6 was awaiting the Pentagon's green light on a rescue mission in West Africa. The day before, the administration had learned where gunmen were holding Philip Walton, a 27-year-old American who had been kidnapped that week from his farm near Niger's border with Nigeria. As multiple agencies now coordinated on final details for the evening operation, the State Department worked to resolve the last outstanding task—

securing airspace permission from Nigerian officials. Around noon, Patel called the Pentagon with an update: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, he said, had gotten the approval. The mission was a go.

The SEALs were close to landing in Nigeria when Defense Secretary Mark Esper discovered that the State Department had not, in fact, secured the overflight clearance, as Patel had claimed. The aircraft were quickly diverted, flying in circles for the next hour as officials scrambled to alert the Nigerian government to their position. With the operation window narrowing, Esper and Pompeo called the Situation Room to put the decision to the president: Either they abort the mission and risk their hostage being killed, or they proceed into foreign airspace and risk their soldiers being shot down.

But then, suddenly, the deputy secretary of state was on the line, Esper later wrote in his memoir: They'd been cleared.

Soon Walton was reunited with his family.

What had happened?

Celebratory feelings gave way to anger as officials tried to make sense of Patel's bad report. According to Esper, Pompeo claimed that at no point had he even spoken with Patel about the mission, much less told him he'd received the airspace rights. Esper wrote that his team suspected that Patel had simply "made the approval story up."

Anthony Tata, the Pentagon official and retired Army general to whom Patel had originally given the green light, confronted Patel in a rage. "You could've gotten these guys killed!" Tata shouted, according to two people familiar with the exchange. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

Patel's response was: "If nobody got hurt, who the fuck cares?"

Patel denies saying this, or making up the approval story. He "would never jeopardize an operation, American hostages or our soldiers," he said through his spokesperson. "In every situation, including this one, I followed the chain of command."

But three former senior administration officials independently cited the near catastrophe in West Africa as one of their foremost recollections from Patel's tenure. They remain unsettled by Patel's actions in large part because they still have no clue what motivated them. If Patel had in fact just invented the story, as Esper's team concluded, then why? Was it because the election was in four days, and Patel was simply that impatient to set in motion a final potential victory for Trump, whatever the risk—was it as darkly cynical as that? Did his lack of experience mean he just had no grasp of the consequences?

Some people close to the former president privately vent about Patel and whatever they last heard him say on a far-right podcast or at a fundraiser, particularly if it involves some overstatement of his administration activities. The longtime Trump adviser said he had been in Patel's presence, more than once, when he'd claimed he was the person who "gave the order" for U.S. forces to move in and kill the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019—an operation for which Patel, by his own admission, wasn't even in the Situation Room. (Asked about this, Patel said through his spokesperson: "Trump made that brave and courageous call.")

One of the former senior administration officials, meanwhile, sent me a photo of what he said was Patel's challenge coin, a small, customizable medallion for service members and government officials. In addition to a curious image of a drone illuminating (targeting?) a dollar sign in front of the White House, the coin features an assortment of national-security-adjacent terms, including DIRECT ACTION, SANCTIONS, HEZ/IRAN, and CYBER. "It's just random shit," the former official said. "Half of this stuff, he wasn't even involved in." (Through the spokesperson, Patel neither confirmed nor denied having such a coin.)

Yet the prevailing sentiment in Trump's inner circle, according to the longtime adviser, is that there is no upside to calling out Patel's exaggerations or lies. By now, this person explained, Trump is entrenched in his view of Patel as a "useful tool." The former president, the adviser said, understands that "Kash is the one you say to, 'Hey, I'm not *telling* you to go break into the DNC. *But* …'"

What Trump might also understand is this: For Patel, the urgency of victory in November is personal. He recently described Trump as the candidate "fighting for everybody else's right to have fame, to have money"—the central prongs of a prosperity that Patel, after nearly a decade in Washington, appears convinced is his due, and of which the leaders of a corrupt system have conspired to deprive him.

Little wonder, then, that Steve Bannon mused on his podcast that Patel, far from simply being the person most likely to oversee Trump's retributive plans in a second term, could have helped inspire them in the first place. "I think President Trump might've read *Government Gangsters*," Bannon said. "Yeah, look, he probably did," Patel responded, fetching a copy to display on camera. "That's probably why it's a best seller, and he keeps talking about it."

To the extent that Americans might struggle to grasp what any of this has to do with their own life—how a federal agenda of score-settling corresponds to their ability to be famous and make money—Patel has yet to offer a theory. He tends to frame political vengeance as an end in itself. In a second term, Trump's top law-enforcement and national-security officials would immediately focus on exposing and prosecuting those who "did Russiagate" and are already planning their next "election-rigging scam," he told Bannon—paying special attention, perhaps, to the 60 names in Patel's compendium of "Members of the Executive Branch Deep State," found in Appendix B of *Government Gangsters*.

And then—well, it's not altogether clear what then. But Patel's value to Trump has never revolved around precise plans. As Richard Nixon's plumbers understood, the hallmark of loyalty is a flexible constitution.

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