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Termination by Design: A Modern Don Quixote in Federal Service

So, the federal government fired you—and you’re still wondering why you received such a special treatment.

Let me guess. Something small happened. You raised your hand and said, *“Excuse me—little help here, please.”* To your surprise, no help came. So, you documented it in an email, as any rational professional would. That’s when the environment shifted. Work became harder. Deadlines that were once flexible became impossible. Expectations changed without notice or explanation. Every action you took was scrutinized. Work that met requirements before was suddenly deemed unacceptable and rejected over formatting, phrasing, or process, never substance.

Employees who experience this pattern may encounter a troubling statistic: a disproportionate number of federal employees who file EEO complaints eventually leave their agencies, frequently through termination. The possibility that this outcome could occur to you appears implausible—until it does.

The answer, uncomfortable as it is, is yes. You will be terminated. It is the standard procedure!

The Path to Termination

You were not fired because termination is common. It isn’t. Agencies generally avoid it because it creates legal exposure, attracts scrutiny, and reflects poorly on management. Research on whistleblowing behavior consistently shows that organizations prefer informal containment strategies over formal removal (Miceli & Near, 2005).

Instead, institutions typically move through a familiar sequence:

1. Ignore the person
2. Marginalize or exclude them
3. Reassign or isolate them
4. Discredit them
5. Erase their contributions

6. Limit access to essential information
7. Pressure them to disengage or resign
8. Label them “difficult,” “unprofessional” or “unfit,” often framed as behavioral or medical, and disproportionately is applied to women

Termination comes only when these measures fail.

The Institutional Logic Behind Termination

You were fired because none of the earlier containment strategies worked. You did not disappear as you were expected to. You were supposed to disengage, transfer, go away quietly, or resign while accepting a reframing of the issue as a misunderstanding. You did not.

Instead, you documented what was happening—while the original issue was never addressed. You escalated vertically and horizontally, and you persisted. With each additional violation of law or procedure, you documented retaliation and continued to raise concerns through formal channels: EEO, grievance processes, the Office of Special Counsel, the Inspector General, MSPB, or congressional outreach.

You did not write, *“I feel mistreated.”*

You wrote, *“This violates law, regulation, and procedure.”*

That distinction matters. From an institutional perspective, this is not resolution; it is risk amplification.

Whistleblowing research consistently shows that when employees persist in reporting concerns—particularly through formal or external channels—organizations often interpret that persistence as a threat rather than as a corrective opportunity (Alford, 2001; Miceli & Near, 2005). Importantly, retaliation frequently occurs even when the reported concerns are accurate or substantiated.

You also did not accept the labels offered to contain the situation—misunderstanding, overreaction, personality conflict. You continued to assert your credentials, your role, your purpose, and your right to exist within the institution. As Alford (2001) documents, whistleblowers are rarely perceived as problematic because of poor performance; they are perceived as problematic because they refuse to disengage, accept reframing, or abandon procedural accountability.

At that point, what began as a “personnel issue” was reclassified internally as an institutional threat. From the institution’s perspective, compromise was no longer possible. Your legitimate

concerns forced a binary choice: acknowledge serious wrongdoing, or remove the person who would not stop pointing it out.

The Termination Phase

Institutions almost never admit wrongdoing. From an internal risk perspective, termination becomes the only remaining option. At this stage, a second standard operating procedure is often implemented—one designed to **justify removal within the existing legal framework**.

What follows is not chaos. It is process. This phase is highly structured and consistent across cases (Garrick & Buck, 2020).

Employees who reach this phase commonly experience a sequence that includes:

1. **Negative or misleading performance appraisals**, sometimes followed by a performance improvement plan, sometimes not. Standards may shift, and compliance with regulations may be treated as optional
2. **Denial of training and professional development**, limiting growth, forming alliances outside of your section to reinforce a narrative of stagnation.
3. **Restrictions on interaction with colleagues**, including isolation tactics such as exclusion from meetings, updates, or informal collaboration. Offers to work remotely may appear supportive while increasing isolation.
4. **Restricted access to systems or information** required to complete assigned tasks, followed by criticism for incomplete or delayed work.
5. **Lack of candor**, exclusion from meetings, decisions, and communications, resulting in loss of situational awareness and professional standing. At this stage instructions given to you by leadership are not received by you to support narrative of insubordination.
6. **Removal from tasks and responsibilities**, often framed as assistance or support, particularly from work the employee values. Projects may then stall or fail, with responsibility attributed to the removed employee.
7. **Reversal into a “hostile work environment” narrative against you.**
At this stage, the agency may assert that *you* created a hostile or disruptive work environment. Language you used earlier—often in good faith and in compliance with policy—is reinterpreted to fit this narrative. Words are stripped of context and assigned new meanings.

For example, statements intended to document process failures or request compliance or updates (“this does not follow procedure,” “this creates safety risk,” “this is not consistent with regulation,” (“Can you provide an updated budget?” “What are the current results?” “When can we expect completion?”) may later be reframed as aggressive, threatening, or destabilizing. Requests for clarification become “accusations.” Documentation becomes “harassment.” Requests for budget and results become “intimidation.”

In this reframing, the content of the question becomes irrelevant. What matters is how it can be reinterpreted to support a narrative that your communication created discomfort, even when the questions were appropriate, documented, and consistent with professional responsibility. Over time, this curated record forms the basis for formal action (Garrick & Buck, 2020).

8. **Accumulation of documentation framing misconduct.** At this stage, records may be created that frame alleged misconduct, sometimes including statements or events the employee does not recognize as having occurred, or attributing to the employee words spoken by others. Over time, this record becomes the basis for formal action.

For this reason, contemporaneous documentation matters. Time-stamped records of events, communications, decisions, and periods of non-response or exclusion become critical to preserving an accurate account.

At this point you should be experiencing some sort of mental breakdown. This is very good. Emotional distress that results from these conditions is then reframed as evidence of unsuitability for the work environment, rather than as a foreseeable and engineered response to prolonged isolation, character assassination, erasure of work and pressure.

9. **Solicitation of supporting statements from others**, reinforcing the developing record. Participation may be incentivized through favorable evaluations or career benefits.
10. **Administrative leave**, removing the employee from the workplace and cutting off informal access to colleagues and information. You might be escorted off the premises in front of your co-workers, banned from re-entry or accessing the network.
11. **Fitness-for-duty examinations**, introduced as neutral safeguards but often experienced as stigmatizing. This may include psychiatric evaluation.
12. **A proposal for termination**, typically framed as misconduct rather than as a breakdown in management or process.

13. **Final termination executed by a different office or department**, preserving the appearance of neutrality and procedural distance.
14. **Silence in the aftermath.** Communication ends. Professional relationships dissolve. The employee effectively ceases to exist within the organization.
15. **Litigation or appeal**, such as an MSPB claim, where settlement is uncommon because the perceived institutional risk of reinstatement outweighs the cost of continued defense. Keeping an employee in place is viewed as ongoing risk because it is expected that the employee will continue to document violations and submit claims.

Termination ends access, voice, internal standing, and—critically—the perceived legitimacy of the employee’s claims. This is why termination occurs only when an employee will not disengage.

This is not chaos. It is an engineered process to function within legal framework experienced by many people before you. Once the machinery of termination is initiated, it will not stop until you are destroyed, your work is erased and you are gone.

The aftermath can be equally difficult. Seeking new employment within the same field is often unattainable. Records, narratives, and informal reputations follow people quietly. Your career is over. Understanding this does not mean surrendering to it. It means recognizing the system you are dealing with, so you can make informed choices about what comes next.

Psychological and Identity Impact

Research increasingly recognizes that prolonged retaliation produces predictable psychological and identity-related harm. Garrick and Buck (2020) describe this as *workplace traumatic stress*—a response to sustained organizational hostility, isolation, and reputational damage.

Critically, this distress is often reframed as evidence of employee unsuitability. Emotional responses to prolonged stress are treated not as foreseeable outcomes of retaliation, but as justification for removal. Fitness-for-duty examinations, presented as neutral safeguards, are frequently experienced as stigmatizing and coercive (Garrick & Buck, 2020).

Alford (2001) documented similar effects decades earlier, noting that whistleblowers often experience loss of professional identity, social isolation, and long-term career disruption—outcomes unrelated to job competence but closely tied to organizational response.

Who Thrives in this Environment

Employees removed through this process are often described as competent, persistent, principled, and procedurally literate. These are precisely the traits institutions publicly claim to value, and in fact require for lawful, effective operation. In theory, they are assets. In systems optimized for short-term risk containment rather than long-term integrity, they become liabilities.

Over time, the quiet or forced departure of such employees concentrates power. Informal alliances harden. Oversight thins. Decision-making becomes insulated from challenge or even open disclosure within the organization. What remains can appear collegial, professional, and inclusive on the surface, while functioning as a closed ecosystem beneath—one built on loyalty, mutual protection, and aligned incentives rather than accountability.

Authority in these environments is rarely overt. It is exercised through charm, professionalism, and practiced friendliness. Conversations are calm. Language is measured. Everything appears reasonable. This is not incidental. Charm functions as cover. Professionalism becomes camouflage. Friendliness is deployed selectively—to reward compliance, to disarm skepticism, and to isolate those who do not align.

Control is maintained not through direct confrontation, but through manipulation of access, reputation, and obligation. Decisions are made informally, while responsibility is distributed downward or upward. “Friends” are selected to leadership positions for their compliance to sign off on actions they did not initiate, that is the only criterion for the job. This creates dependency.

Those acting as intermediaries often believe they are exercising independent judgment. In reality, they are executing someone else’s will while absorbing the consequences. The originator remains insulated—appearing reasonable, uninvolved, and above the conflict—while accountability is borne by others. Plausible deniability is preserved. The system can always say, “No single person decided this,” even as the outcome unfolds with precision; and this is how authentic power works.

Employees capable of recognizing this dynamic are often perceived as threats. Not because they are disruptive, but because comprehension itself is dangerous. Understanding how authority actually operates is the first step toward limiting it. What places someone on a path toward removal can be disturbingly small. It may be a single statement that punctures the narrative: *“This person is not being truthful.” “This is unacceptable.” “We cannot proceed on false representations.”* Such statements do not merely challenge behavior; they challenge control.

From that moment, internal machinery can and will engage. The response is not explosive. It is calculated. Pressure replaces dialogue. Reputation is chipped away slowly and quietly. Isolation

is reframed as protection. Records are curated. Allies close ranks. The objective is not correction—it is neutralization of a perceived threat.

Over time, as others before you withdrew for self-preservation, those at the center of these networks became more entrenched, more insulated, and less accountable. Power accumulated without oversight. Dissent narrowed. Diversity became performative— optional difference in appearance layered over uniformity of thought. What looked pluralistic functioned as an extension of a single will, executed through many hands.

Those who see through this arrangement are rarely forgiven. The capacity to understand the environment implies the capacity to change it. That alone is enough to mark someone as dangerous.

Retaliation does not always end with separation. Informal consequences—reputational, professional, relational persist quietly after departure. Not loudly. Not visibly. Efficiently.

The Paradox

You were fired because you followed the rules—the very regulations that form the social infrastructure of our institutions. That is the paradox.

These systems are designed, publicly and formally, to depend on people who understand law, procedure, and accountability. They advertise for this. They train for it. They rely on it to justify their authority and legitimacy. Yet when those same rules are applied in ways that expose inconsistency, error, or wrongdoing, the rule-followers themselves become the problem.

By adhering to law and procedure, you demonstrated something that could not be tolerated by the person with authentic power: that you could not be coerced, reframed, or managed into abandoning them. Compliance with rules became resistance to control. Research across disciplines confirms this pattern: whistleblowers are not punished for being wrong, but for persisting (Alford, 2001; Miceli & Near, 2005).

Each time this happens, institutions grow weaker. Competence is replaced with compliance. Expertise with loyalty. Leadership with containment. What was built to protect the public becomes optimized to protect itself. Over time, the damage extends beyond individual workplaces, eroding public trust and the integrity of public infrastructure itself.

None of this is inevitable. Much of it could be avoided—often with two simple questions asked early and in good faith:

What happened?

How do we fix it?

The Overlooked Cost

There is a pattern that is rarely acknowledged: employees removed through termination by design are often **highly qualified subject-matter experts**. Many hold doctoral degrees or equivalent technical credentials. These are not marginal performers. They are specialists trained to address complex, high-risk, and high-consequence problems—the very work public institutions exist to perform.

That expertise is not incidental, and it is not free. It is **publicly financed**. Education, advanced training, research experience, and professional development represent a long-term taxpayer investment intended to build human resource capacity. In my case, the cumulative public investment in education, training, and professional development—calculated in current cash value—approaches **\$2,000,000**.

That investment was not made for personal enrichment. It was made so that specialized knowledge could be applied in service of the public interest of our country. When an agency discards that expertise rather than deploys it—when trained minds are removed instead of utilized—the loss is not individual. **The loss is institutional and national**. It is a depletion of capacity, a reduction in competence, and a **misuse of taxpayer resources**.

Unlike many losses, this one is entirely avoidable. And what about the cost of filing claims and performing investigations?

A Simpler Alternative

Most experts subjected to this process are not seeking power, promotion, or control. They are seeking the opportunity to practice their craft, collaborate with peers, solve difficult problems and contribute in a positive way to our country and to our society.

Another option exists. If institutions find technical experts inconvenient—if adherence to law, regulation, and procedure is perceived as disruptive—then stop terminating them. Reassign them. Isolate the work, not the person. Place them, if necessary, on a metaphorical island away from internal politics, where they can apply expertise, and deliver value.

Discarding trained minds is not risk management.

It is waste.

And it is entirely avoidable.

Change does not happen overnight. The system did not arrive here all at once; it evolved gradually, through small compromises repeated over time. It can be corrected the same way—

deliberately, incrementally, and with intent. The first step is simple: choose correction over containment.

Conclusion

Termination by design is not chaos. It is a predictable outcome of risk-averse systems that prioritize containment over correction. Understanding this process does not imply inevitability, but it does provide clarity.

Correction begins with a choice: to treat accountability as a resource rather than as a threat.

This description reflects observed patterns, not legal advice, and not every agency, manager, or case follows this trajectory. Many employees prevail, transfer, or resolve disputes successfully. The analysis here addresses how risk-averse institutions behave when early correction fails, experienced by many and disclosed in interviewed by Jane Turner in her podcast "Whistleblower of the Week."

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