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Column: Trump's worst Cabinet picks aren't just unqualified, they're part of a bigger power grab



Donald Trump walks by Matt Gaetz, left, after a day in court during his criminal trial in New York this spring. Former Rep. Gaetz, Trump's nominee for attorney general, has vowed to purge the Justice Department and FBI of anyone who might get in the president-elect's way. (Mike Segar / Pool photo via Associated Press)

By **Doyle McManus**

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- President-elect Donald Trump's most controversial Cabinet nominees — Matt Gaetz, Pete

Hegseth, Tulsi Gabbard and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. — are ideologues and eccentrics chosen for loyalty.

- They are also foot soldiers in a power grab.
- Trump is aiming to concentrate more authority in his hands than any other president has had.

WASHINGTON — At first glance, [President-elect Donald Trump](#)'s most controversial [Cabinet nominees](#) — [Matt Gaetz](#), [Pete Hegseth](#), Tulsi Gabbard and [Robert F. Kennedy Jr.](#) — are an odd list of ideologues and eccentrics chosen for political loyalty more than any substantive qualifications.

But there's a more important and potentially more dangerous factor that ties their nominations together: They are foot soldiers in a power grab that, if it succeeds, would weaken the institutional guardrails that limit the president's powers and concentrate more authority in Trump's hands.

Former Rep. [Gaetz, Trump's nominee for attorney general](#), has promised to purge the Justice Department and FBI of anyone who might get in the president's way. Trump "is going to hit the Department of Justice with a blowtorch — and that torch is Matt Gaetz," former Trump aide Stephen K. Bannon said last week.

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[Hegseth](#), the [Fox News host who could become Defense secretary](#), has [proposed purging military officers](#) he sees as too committed to diversity, including Gen. C.Q. Brown Jr., the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "The Pentagon likes to say our diversity is our strength," Hegseth said on Fox News in June. "What a bunch of garbage." ("Pete's a leader," Bannon said. "He's kind of a madman — but hey, you need that.")

Former Rep. Gabbard, who as director of National Intelligence would oversee the CIA and 17 other agencies, has criticized the Biden administration's support for Ukraine so fervently that a Russian state television host once called her "our girlfriend."

And [Kennedy, the anti-vaccine activist](#) who is Trump's nominee for Health and Human Services, has said he wants to fire hundreds of senior officials in the Food and Drug Administration and the National Institutes of Health on "day one." Trump has encouraged him to "go wild."

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Their pledges are all in keeping with Trump's broader promise to dismantle much of the federal bureaucracy and bring what remains under his personal control.

"We will demolish the deep state," the president-elect often said at his campaign rallies, "We will throw off the sick political class that hates our country."

During his first term, Trump often expressed frustration at the legal and political limits on what he could do as president.

In 2018, he expressed [an expansive view](#) of his powers under the Constitution: "I have an Article II, where I have the right to do whatever I want."



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But in practice, he found himself hemmed in by experienced Cabinet officials, White House lawyers and military officers, some of whom dubbed themselves "the adults in the room."

His attorneys general, Jeff Sessions and Bill Barr, quietly sidelined his demands that they prosecute Hillary Clinton and other top Democrats.

His last Defense secretary, Mark Esper, and his appointee as chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Gen. Mark A. Milley, resisted his proposal in 2020 to [invoke the Insurrection Act](#) and [deploy active duty troops against demonstrators](#) in Washington and other cities.



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Trump also denounced the CIA and other intelligence agencies for their finding that Russia interfered in the 2016 election campaign to help him defeat Clinton — a judgment he seemed to consider partisan, rather than based on the evidence.

So it's no surprise that he wants to bring those national security agencies to heel.

But Trump's plans to expand his personal authority extend much further.

He has vowed to [weaken civil service rules](#) that protect federal bureaucrats from being fired if they disagree with their bosses' decisions. "We will pass critical reforms making every executive branch employee fireable by the president," he said last year, adding: "I will wield that power very aggressively."



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Robert Shea, a former top official in the George W. Bush administration, explained the real world impact. "If you told your boss that what he or she was proposing was illegal, impractical [or] unwise, they could brand you as disloyal and terminate you," he said.

The result would be what one expert called "transformation by intimidation."

Trump has also proposed weakening Congress' power to direct federal spending — one of the legislative branch's core functions.

He plans to revive the practice of "impounding" funds — blocking agencies from spending money that Congress has appropriated for programs he doesn't like.

That tactic could enable him, for example, to stop parts of President Biden's clean energy program from being implemented, even though Congress has already approved the expenditures.

A 1974 law made impoundment illegal, but Trump has suggested that he will ignore the prohibition and challenge it in court.



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And, of course, Trump warned the Senate last week that if it refuses to confirm any of his Cabinet nominees, he may put them in office anyway — [by using "recess appointments,"](#) which allow a president to fill top jobs when Congress isn't in session.

And if the Congress doesn't recess, Trump may have another norm-shattering gambit in reserve. In his first term, he threatened to adjourn both chambers under a presidential power laid out in the Constitution for "extraordinary

occasions.”

That wouldn’t just test the guardrails on a president’s powers, it would “crash through them,” wrote Michael Waldman of the Brennan Center for Justice.

That makes it all the more important that Republicans in the Senate, to preserve their constitutional powers, subject Trump’s nominees to searching scrutiny and reject any that are unqualified, dangerous or both.

Those controversial nominations will decide more than the future of the Justice Department, the Defense Department, the intelligence community and the vast Department of Health and Human Services — although those stakes are high enough.

They will help determine whether Trump can undo the checks and balances the founders wrote into the Constitution, and turn the executive branch into an instrument of a would-be autocrat’s will.

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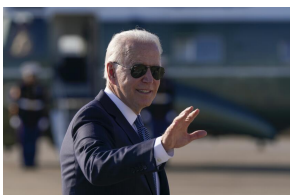


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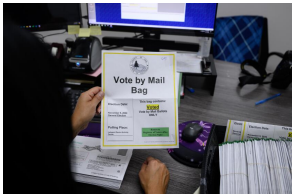
Doyle McManus has been a reporter for the Los Angeles Times in Washington, the Middle East and many other places for more than 40 years. Born in San Francisco, he's a graduate of Stanford University.

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