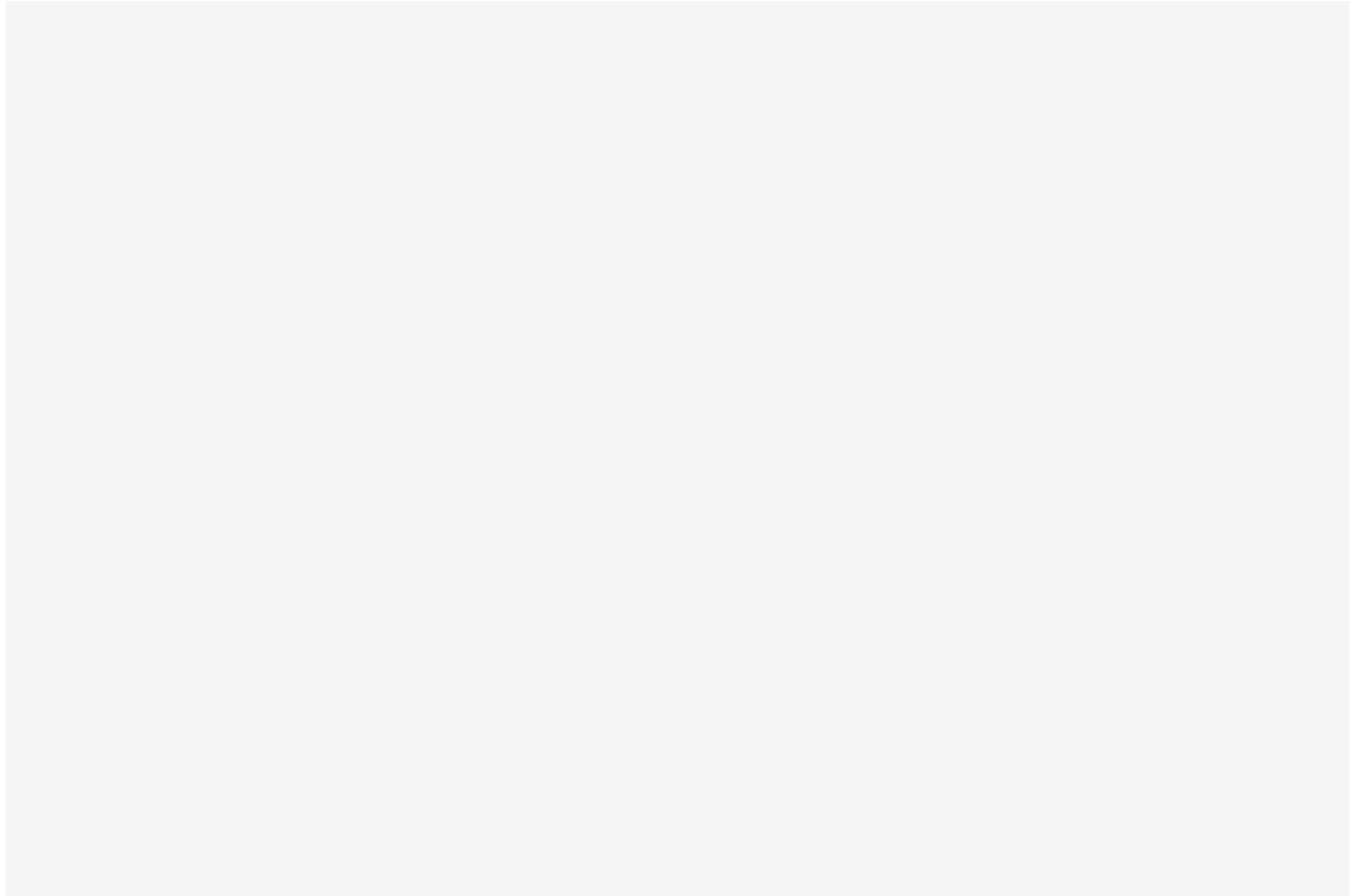


Trump Just Broke the Law. Blatantly. And He Might Get Away With It.

How is this not a major political scandal already? Hello, Democrats?



Andrew Hamik/Getty Images

Imagine that there were a particularly dirty NFL player—call him Thompson—who developed a habit of doing something new and possibly dangerous to opposing players. Penalty flags didn't deter him. On and on he went. Finally, the NFL passed the "Thompson rule" to make the act specifically illegal and to raise the stakes on punishment—ejection, say.

Now imagine that Thompson, rather than changing his ways, just keeps doing it. In fact, he comes up with something worse and keeps doing that. He just. Doesn't. Care.

That is roughly what Donald Trump did last week when he fired a slew of inspectors general in the executive branch. He broke a law that Congress passed as a reform *because of his own earlier behavior* as president. What he did flings the door wide open to run-of-the-mill corruption and potentially far worse. He doesn't care, and it seems unlikely that the broader public will care. And there's surely more of this kind of thing on the way.

The Washington Post [reported](#) Friday night that Trump had fired at least 12 inspectors general, who are independent watchdogs parked in agencies of the executive branch that are charged with monitoring waste and corruption. By Sunday, the number was up to at least 15. The White House didn't release the names of the terminated, but the *Post* and others found out. Justice and Homeland Security were the only Cabinet-level departments spared the ax. Some of the fired I.G.s were Trump's own appointees from his first term.

That's bad on its face. But once you know a little history, Trump's purge gets even worse than it seems. Inspectors general came into being in 1978 as a post-Nixon accountability reform intended to prevent—or at least discourage—a president from stacking agencies with cronies, steering contracts to friends, and so on. In other words, it's a guardrail against the abuse of executive power that was put into place because of the only other law-flouting Imperial President in this country's modern history besides Trump.

There were [12 inspectors general originally](#); now there are [73](#). Maybe that's too many. Maybe we could debate whether the Farm Credit Board or the Smithsonian Institution really needs an I.G. But that's not what's at issue here.

What's at issue here is this: Under the original law, presidents had to give Congress 30 days' notice about their intent to fire an I.G. and just supply some vague reason why. President Barack Obama's excuse for [firing](#) the I.G. of national service programs was simply a lack of confidence in the guy. Then came Trump. As Bob Bauer and Jack Goldsmith [wrote at Lawfare](#) in 2022, "More frequently than prior presidents, [Trump] manipulated vacancies and related laws to fire or dismiss disliked inspectors general and replace them, pursuant to the Federal Vacancies Reform Act of 1998 (FVRA), with a more like-minded or pliant official."

So Congress, through a larger defense bill, amended the I.G. law by replacing the word "reasons" with the phrase "substantive rationale, including detailed and case-specific reasons." In sum, Congress toughened this law because of Trump. And now, Trump has broken the provision that was added in response to his flouting of the original law!

That he broke the law is obvious. He didn't give 30 days' notice. He didn't provide any "substantive rationale." He didn't provide any reason at all. He just did it. And he told reporters Saturday that it was all fine. "It's a very common thing to do," he said. Once he says that, we know that basically every Republican, and Fox News and Sinclair and the rest of the propaganda chamber, are going to say the same thing. Lindsey Graham on Sunday hilariously admitted that "technically, yeah," Trump broke the law but Graham wasn't losing any sleep over it.

What might the consequences be down the road? It's hard to say. I.G.s monitor petty corruption in areas like rewarding of contracts, so maybe once Trump has his loyalists installed in those I.G. positions, they'll turn a blind eye to that.

But come on. That's small potatoes for Trump. He did this in his first week in office in the dead of Friday night without announcing it and without releasing names, so it seems clear that his people had been planning it for a long time. And it was done for a very specific reason. My guess is that it has something to do with the coming Project 2025-style purges of executive agencies. But that's just a guess. Not being an evil genius myself, I have trouble keeping up with these people.

The Democrats, meanwhile, have been their usual [wobbly selves](#) during these early days of Trump 2.0, with their mealy-mouthed vows to work with the administration and their failure (most of them, not all of them) to understand the situation we're in.

The situation is this. Trump takes up about 80 percent of the oxygen. His craven party and the right-wing media will applaud everything he does, legal or not, and invent some justification for it. The half of the country that voted for him will agree and approve. They assume, for example in the case of the inspectors general, that these people are corrupt deep-staters who are standing in Trump's way, so good riddance, law schmaw.

They don't need to be galvanized, in other words. As long as Trump's getting his way, they're in the game, and they're content.

The half that voted against Trump, however, does need to be galvanized. Some are still hurting from the election. Others don't want to engage. Many just feel there's no hope.

Well, someone needs to step up and lead the fight—and pick issues that will galvanize anti-Trump America. I don't know if this is one of them. Some will dismiss these firings as inside baseball. But I'm sorry, that's such a passive, Democratic way to look at this. There's always an excuse not to act, if not acting is what you want to do.

The president broke the law. Clearly and unambiguously. On his fifth day in office. In what democracy is that not an issue? I fear we know the answer.

[Michael Tomasky](#)

Michael Tomasky is the editor of *The New Republic* and the author of five books, including his latest and critically acclaimed [The Middle Out: The Rise of Progressive Economics and a Return to Shared Prosperity](#). With extensive experience as an editor, columnist, progressive commentator, and special correspondent for renowned publications such as *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, the Daily Beast, and many others, Tomasky has been a trusted voice in political journalism for more than three decades.

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