

## Intelligence Officers Won't Exit En Masse During the Trump Administration

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Former intelligence analyst Edward Price dramatically resigned from CIA last week in an op-ed in the *Washington Post*—complete with a video critique that has gone viral on social media. Is Mr. Price's departure the first crack in a dam of intelligence professionals flooding toward the exits? Or can he be viewed as a theatrical, but statistically insignificant, blip on the radar of service at CIA? Over the last few months, I've heard pundits speculating whether federal government employees will resign over President Donald Trump's policies, his policy process, or his controversial senior staff. *The New York Times* has run several articles suggesting that federal employees are "quietly gathering information about whistle-blower protections as they polish their resumes," and presumably Mr. Price is the harbinger of this prophecy coming true.

Other media outlets have suggested that various federal agencies will either slow-roll Trump Administration policies, or simply fail to comply with their directives. That's not the kind of attitude one usually associates with water-cooler chat at CIA's leafy compound across the Potomac River from Washington, DC. CIA's splendid—and intentional—isolation from Pennsylvania Avenue and Capitol Hill symbolizes the Agency's apolitical charter and mandate. In fact, the verdant CIA campus was originally intended to have the feel of a college campus where expert analysts and scholars could write intelligence estimates away from the policy process and political noise. However, could the *Times* be correct that even CIA officers are now considering resigning their positions during the Trump Administration, with Mr. Price as the prime exhibit?

Former Acting Director of CIA, Michael Morell, explained in an early January *New York Times* [op-ed](#) how disparagement of CIA hurts CIA itself as well as national security by extension. To quickly review, Mr. Morell argues that publicly questioning CIA's competence and accusing it of political bias is a "gut punch." Further, dismissing CIA's analysis will weaken its positions with its liaison partners and with its sensitive sources, who may wonder, "Why am I risking arrest or even death to provide secrets if they aren't valued?" He offered one further prediction: That from CIA will come a "wave of resignations" and "attrition will skyrocket". Although Mr. Morell's analysis is correct about the negative impact on CIA's morale, its sensitive sources, and its international liaison partners, America's intelligence officers won't leave in droves.

This isn't the first taste of political turmoil for CIA. In the mid-1970s, the Church Committee in the Senate and its House corollary, the Pike Committee, branded the CIA "Rogue Elephants" amidst the Agency's internal reporting about some activities that went over the line. CIA officers took it in stride, and the CIA softball team had new uniforms made with their new mascot across the chest: The Rogue Elephants.

This also isn't the first time CIA felt marginalized. When a small plane landed on the White House lawn in 1994, a popular quip was that it was actually the Director of Central Intelligence, Jim Woolsey, trying to meet with President Clinton.

When considering possible resignations due to political differences (or complaints about process, as cited by Mr. Price), it is useful to recall that—having grown out of the World War Two Office of Strategic Services—CIA retains a pseudo-military culture, especially in the Clandestine Service. The ranks, although they're civilian, do matter—as does the chain of command. This is notable because, as a reserve military officer, I don't hear my fellow military officers (active duty or reserve) talking about resigning their commissions over a Trump Presidency; I have yet to hear of any officers even considering such a move. Most of them are long past their initial service obligations, and are free to leave the service at any time. Given the

similarities between CIA's corporate culture and the military itself, the military's response to the Trump Administration is likely more indicative of CIA's reaction than responses among employees elsewhere in the civil service.

Still, the CIA isn't the military either. CIA has more officers who might be described as blue bloods from the Ivy League, though an increasing number are from more humble origins. But CIA reflects America, and this is how it should be. Beyond demographics and diversity, CIA officers can be generalized about to some degree. They see nuance, they care about detail and accuracy, and most of them don't see the world in binary terms of "good or evil"; they realize that countries act in their own national interest, which sometimes overlap with American interests, and sometimes doesn't. They are interested in current affairs, and they wouldn't use facile logic to conflate "understanding" terrorism with condoning it. They dislike Chelsea Manning and they loathe Edward Snowden. They have an innate distrust of the media, but then again, several journalists have legitimated this by unapologetically assuming the worst motives concerning critical national security activities. They take Congressional oversight seriously, even when it borders on the tendentious. Intelligence officers don't seek plaudits or praise; they don't need overweening recognition from their political masters, although some level of sincere appreciation for their sacrifices is always welcome.

But what if the First Customer eschews or delegates his daily intelligence briefing, citing past inaccurate assessments? Might one resign? At the root of the intelligence officer's creed is its ethic is to "speak truth to power." There is even a Bible verse inscribed on the wall of CIA's marble lobby: "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Recruiting foreign spies and stealing secrets to inform policy decisions probably wasn't what the Apostle John had in mind when he originally wrote those words, but it does represent CIA's mission to seek truth (factual, not divine) above all else. For CIA officers, it's about public service, a meaningful way to make a difference, and, thought it may sound trite, patriotism, but not the fragile kind. If they needed public praise and admiration, they wouldn't have joined up in the first place.

Given the importance of trying to provide policymakers with the best possible independent analysis, accusations of politicizing intelligence are taken seriously—there's even an ombudsman available, outside the analytical chain of command, to hear complaints of politicization if they arise. In a cynical world, it may seem quaint to believe that politics, agendas, or worldviews don't drive intelligence analysis, but it also happens to be true. This isn't to say that it hasn't happened before or could never happen. Many outside observers felt that CIA bowed under political pressure to support the Iraq war. I never saw that happen, even during the run up to the invasion in 2003, although clearly errors were made in the WMD assessment. Even the taint of massaging intelligence to support a political narrative undermines the Agency's relationship with its political consumers and,

through oversight mechanisms, the American public as well. The intelligence community has since added more explicit confidence levels for its analytical judgments as a way to continue to serve its customers better. The recent accusations that U.S. Central Command in Tampa massaged intelligence about the Islamic State was a stark reminder of how important analytical integrity is, and serves as the rare exception that proves the rule.

Intelligence officers take professionalism seriously, but it's always possible that they might decide that CIA isn't the place for them after all. The question is, do presidential preferences color these personal choices? The pay isn't great, at least in the Washington, D.C. metro area. A friend of mine once observed, after returning from a tour in the Middle East, "over there I lived like a king. I had a household staff. Now I can either live like a pauper in McLean or commute two hours each way." The federal retirement is decent, as is living overseas with no rent payments, and there is a sense of adventure and cache. The more family-minded among the CIA workforce often like being able to raise children who have a sense of the rich cultural diversity that the expatriate life has to offer. Being able to just pack the kids in the car for a long weekend and hit Venice, Casablanca, or Auckland is a welcome perk. Plus, the work is interesting and you'll never have the same day twice. It's hard to imagine that many working level intelligence officers would give up their profession (some even consider it a "calling") because of the early days of a new administration.

I've had friends resign to pursue private sector opportunities, and one even left in disgust after the new "modernization" (read: reorganization) scrambled the Agency's internal structure. People leave for family reasons when joint tours would not be accommodated; CIA can at times be tone-deaf to what they call "Tandem Couples" who meet at CIA and wish to serve together (Full disclosure: My wife and I fell into that category). Some resign for reasons that have nothing to do with CIA at all. Many Gen-X and younger officers never intended to make CIA a career. The younger officers want a myriad of experiences, they want adventure, and they want portable health insurance and 401(k) retirement plans that enable it. Langley becomes a stop along the journey. This stands in contrast to the older generation of mostly retired officers who seemed to feel that, after decades of putting service before family, someone from CIA would be there to sit with them on the veranda in retirement.

Despite the quip about the warm embrace of the military industrial complex—the "beltway bandits"—operations officers can't simply take a job in the private sector and do the same job for more money. That's not how it works. It's the same in the military: If you take life in legal war on behalf of your country, that's war. Otherwise it's murder. Intelligence analysts might be able to do the same job for more money outside of Langley, and certainly contractors do many tasks for the intelligence community, but those who engage in inherently governmental

activities, such as a case officer feeling the adrenaline of making off with a closely-guarded secret from an informant within a hostile government, will never do what they do “on the outside.”

None of this professionalism or commitment to duty means that intelligence officers would obey an order from the White House if it dealt with things that were either legally impermissible or left them open to being hung out to dry in the aftermath under a new legal interpretation by a future administration. CIA officers serve the White House, but they don’t do it blindly. Much has been made of former CIA Director Michael Hayden’s comment that if President Trump wanted somebody waterboarded, he should “bring his own bucket.” Many media commentators latched onto that to argue that Hayden was rejecting so-called “enhanced interrogation” methods. He was not. He was saying that criminal probes in the succeeding administration for things deemed legal during the preceding administration has had a chilling effect on CIA officers who saw what happened when the political winds changed. Irrespective of administration, this overcorrection toward caution and playing it safe is the efflux of Washington’s hyper-partisanship and take-no-prisoners approach to politics.

Although I resigned from CIA to pursue an academic career, I retained my commission as a Naval Reserve officer, and I recently was recalled to active duty and spent 11 months deployed to East Africa. I was again reminded about the importance—and cost—of national service no matter the resident at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Thankfully it wasn’t a particularly dangerous assignment, but I went places where I certainly wouldn’t bring my family. Danger aside, I missed a year of my son’s life— I left a toddler and returned to a little boy. I missed so many “firsts” and developmental milestones that my wife stopped telling me lest it make me sad. I wasn’t sure if it was better or worse to be skyped in on Christmas morning to watch my son unwrap his presents over a bad connection. It was hard on my wife, and harder on my son who spent months after I returned home fearing that every time I went to work I was leaving for a year. And again, like my days at CIA, seeking a sense of purpose in the mission, supporting one’s colleagues, and national service was what mattered most. I found the same level of commitment in my fellow military members and with those Department of Defense civilians who served with me. CIA doesn’t have the market cornered on patriotism or selfless service, and those in uniform are equally unlikely to leave due to their new Commander in Chief.

The CIA isn’t perfect. It has missed some big events, blown some big calls, and endless internal musical chairs doesn’t help. It struggles with public relations, and how to balance secrecy with transparency. But for all of its imperfections, my sense is that the mystique of CIA will always keep recruiting officers busy and the Trump Administration isn’t going to be the straw that broke the camel’s back for those who are considering the exit. They’ll either leave for reasons independent of

the administration, or they'll remain because they're public servants in important organization that has been through similar challenges before. Most will remain for the interesting and necessary work, and some may have more prosaic concerns forefront in their minds. The intelligence community's mission doesn't stop depending on who occupies the White House, and if history is any guide, it will rise to the occasion.

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