

# KeizerOpinion

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## White House doctor down

By DEBRA J. SAUNDERS

When he ran for president, candidate Donald Trump promised to hire “the best people” and said he would look at potential cabinet members’ “track record, great confidence, love of what they’re doing, how they get along with people, references.”

In many ways, Dr. Ronny Jackson, Trump’s choice to be the next secretary of Veterans Affairs, fit Trump’s list—until the doctor pulled his name from consideration last week after enduring a torrent of ugly if unsubstantiated allegations, which he denied.

Track record, love of the work and references? The rear admiral had worked his way up from serving as a combat trauma doctor to the White House physician. He clearly loved his work, and could boast of glowing praise from President Barack Obama, who wrote, “Ronny does a great job—genuine enthusiasm, poised under pressure, incredible work ethic and follow-through. Ronny continues to inspire confidence with the care he provides to me, my family and my team. Continue to promote ahead of peers.”

Missing from Trump’s requirements was an important distinction—that his picks be qualified. That ought to top the list for a post that oversees the federal government’s second largest department—smaller only than the Department of Defense—with more than 360,000 employees.

In 2016, Trump didn’t say he’d pick people just because he likes them—but that seems to be the big motivator here.

Trump liked Jackson. He especially liked the way Jackson had the White House press corps stammering and too quick to reject good news during a January press conference about the president’s good health.

Trump recognized Jackson’s lack of experience during a press conference with French President Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday. “Now, I know there’s an experience problem because of lack of experience,” he said.

But Thursday on *Fox and Friends*, Trump suggested no one is qualified for the job. “You could take the head of the biggest hospital corporation of the world, and it’s peanuts compared to the VA,” Trump said by phone. “So nobody has experience. You know it’s a big monster.”

Of course, Jackson withdrew from consideration, not because he lacked CEO-type experience, but because of damaging stories about his handing out sleeping pills on foreign trips, alleged drunkenness on the job, including a car wreck, and a toxic management style.

Jackson denied the allegations as “completely false and fabricated. If they had any merit, I would not have been selected, promoted and entrusted to serve in such a sensitive and important role as physician to three presidents over the past 12 years.”

Trump has argued that there was a campaign to smear Jackson, and there is reason to believe the doctor had enemies.

A 2012 personnel assessment documented an intra-office rivalry between Jackson, then head of the White House Military Office, and the then-White House physician. News reports cited unprofessional behavior between the two officers and low morale—overall morale was rated as 2 on a scale of 1-10.

A year later, after corrective actions that supported Jackson, the inspector general found that staff rated the unit considerably higher. The White House suggested the toxic work environment was all on the other guy.

The same 2013 report also noted the perception among staff that Jackson “had blind ambitions to be the next physician to the president” and his actions were “purely politically driven for his self-advancement.”

Critics who believed Jackson had overstated Trump’s health in January just found another talking point.

Ditto those who believe Trump chose Jackson to head the VA because of the glowing health report delivered, as Brookings Institution senior fellow Kathryn Dunn Tenpas noted, with Trumpian “hyperbole.”

On a human level, the episode left a stain on the 23-year career of a one-time combat physician. “You can’t blame the man the way he was getting beat up by anonymous sources and innuendo,” said Joe Davis, communications director for the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Jackson’s personnel assessments address the toxic work environment issue, but charges that he mixed work with alcohol and was loose with controlled substances need more explanation from the White House. If they are false, the White House should document these reports as irresponsible.

The White House should respond, if not for Jackson, then as an act of self-protection. Jackson’s example serves as a warning to highly qualified people that Trump’s opposition will go to great lengths to destroy them.

Ergo, Tenpas argued, Trump cannot pick people mainly because he likes them and they passed an FBI check. He has to be more careful. He should find a VA head like his Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch, she said, who was “flawless” in terms of his credentials.

Hours after Jackson’s announcement, the Senate confirmed Mike Pompeo as secretary of state. Pompeo was a highly qualified nominee of the Gorsuch mold, and still the White House had to exert muscle to wrangle Republican votes to push him over the hurdle.

Note to the White House: Getting nominees through the Senate is not going to get easier, so up your game. (Creators Syndicate)

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## The steep price of the DC circus

By E.J. DIONNE JR.

One of the many costs of the Trump era is the dumbing down of our political discourse. The incoherent spoken and tweeted outpourings from President Trump and the daily outrages of his administration leave little time for serious debate about policy or meaningful dialogue about our larger purposes.

In a normal environment, the Republican Congress’ assault on food-stamp recipients, the administration’s waivers allowing states to erode Medicaid coverage, and Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson’s proposed rent increases for some of the country’s poorest people would be front and center in the news.

But poor people lack the media cache of Stormy Daniels, Michael Cohen or a president who rants uncontrollably over the telephone to his favorite Fox News show.

News outlets are entirely justified in lavishing coverage on the sensational and the personal, since developments in these areas are a part of a bigger story that could undermine the Trump presidency all together. Nonetheless, the circus that Trump has brought to town is nearly as much of a threat to a well-ordered political system as is Trump himself.

Nothing is significant for long, everything is episodic, and old scandals are regularly knocked out of the headlines by new ones. It’s a truly novel approach to damage control.

And governing? It seems almost beside the point. Thus does the unraveling of regulatory protections for workers, the environment and the users of financial services rush forward with little notice.

This is where the Trumpian circus benefits the Trumpian project. If there are too many scandals for any one of them to seize our attention for long, all of them taken together allow what are potentially very unpopular policies to take root without much scrutiny.

Yes, good journalists are on top of what’s happening. But their stories usually get buried beneath reports about the latest presidential statement contradicting an earlier presidential statement.

Also consider this: Budget Director Mick Mulvaney last week made a brash admission about his time in Congress. “If you were a lobbyist who never gave us money,” he said to an audience of banking executives, “I didn’t talk to you.”

In a more innocent age, this confession would have provoked sustained indignation over how our political money system fundamentally corrupts our politics. (And imagine if Hillary Clinton had said such a thing.) But Mulvaney’s words just seemed to slide by.

Mulvaney should write thank-you notes to Trump, Cohen and Daniels. Also to Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt, who had to justify his unjustifiable uses of public money before Congress, and Ronny Jackson, who withdrew from consideration to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs after allegations (which he denies) related to, among other things, his improperly dispensing drugs and his own use of alcohol.

But if the severity of every abuse is relativized, something less tangible but at least as important is lost as well. We are ignoring the imperative of shoring up the philosophical underpinnings of liberal democracy.

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Intellectual confusion and ambivalence now haunt the West. Older and once vital systems of thought—in Europe, Christian democracy and social democracy; in the United States, New Dealism and free market conservatism—have an ever-weaker hold on the popular imagination.

This vacuum is filled by strange concepts that hark back to the irrationalism of the 1930s. They include what to supporters of liberal democracy are oxymoronic ideas such as “il-liberal democracy” or “authoritarian democracy.”

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has the intellectual courage to raise the specter that lurks behind these terms in her new book, “Fascism: A Warning.” She notes that fascism arose at “a time of intellectual liveliness and resurgent nationalism coupled with widespread disappointment at the failure of representative parliaments to keep pace with a technology-driven Industrial Revolution.”

In the wake of World War I and the Great Depression, she adds, “the promises inherent in the Enlightenment and the French and American Revolutions had become hollow.”

Albright is not a catastrophist (and neither am I). But she doesn’t mind being called an alarmist. She notes “that for freedom to survive, it must be defended, and that if lies are to stop, they must be exposed.” We can’t just “close our eyes and wait for the worst to pass.”

Yet at a moment when we need politics to be thoughtful and engaging, we have a government whose profound swampiness only further deepens public doubts about democracy and encourages us to view public life as mere spectacle. It’s a very bad time to be distracted by a circus.

(Washington Post Writers Group)

## Today brought to you by visionaries

Two American fiction writers and movie producers who had a positive influence on my formative years were Stanley Kubrick and Gene Roddenberry. They both contributed expansively to the science fiction film genre that delighted and expanded my interests as a youth in outer space and its exploration. Incidentally, both were born in the 1920s and died in the 1990s while both inspired 20th century efforts at expanding human knowledge beyond the Earth-bound as well as inventions that have improved our human lives here.

*Star Trek* watchers will remember the mind-bending idea of a transporter beaming people from ground to spaceship Enterprise danger levels surpassed the ability of the crew to cope with them. “Beam us up, Scotty!” is not yet a reality although we humans have added to our repertoire of abilities to go from ground to airborne. Roddenberry’s greatest contribution to modern times, however, may be argued the reforms in social progress he displayed in *Star Trek* episodes. For just two examples, he had women serving in command roles on the Enterprise and he blended several races on the bridge to steer the spaceship through adventures in other worlds and galaxies during the 1960s.

It has been exactly 50 years since *2001: A Space Odyssey* was released to the world. Director Stanley Kubrick provided in visual form a vast array of technologies we enjoy today. These would include the iPad-like video screens, Skype-like phone service, Artificial Intelligence (AI) similar to HAL, the lunar lander, the space shuttle, and the space station. *2001* was breath-taking in sci-fi symphony format, pushing the limits of narrative and special effects toward what some considered a meditation on technology and humanity. It was the “ultimate trip” for members of America’s counter culture youth as well as those like me who enjoyed it as the best science fiction experience to that time.

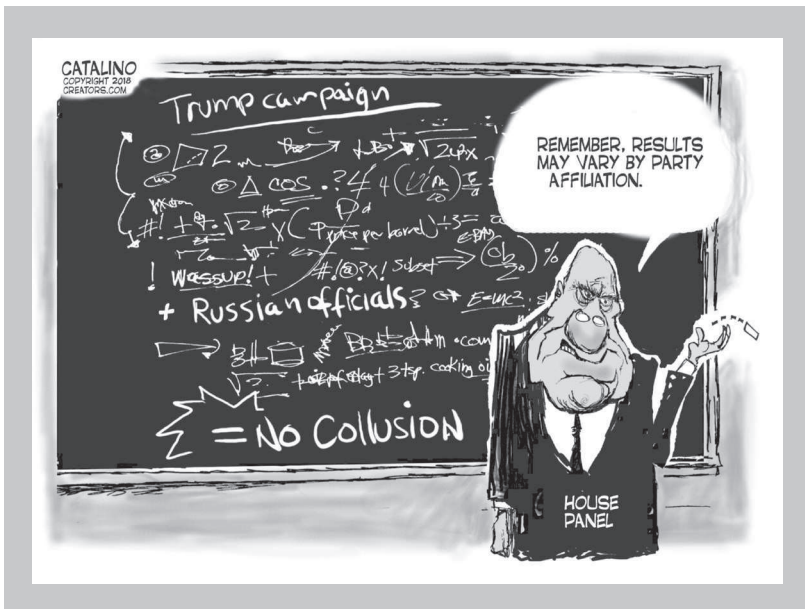
The April issue of *Smithsonian* magazine displays a photo of the room that’s a precise replica of the one in *2001* where the film’s hero, Dave Bowman, enters as an astronaut and departs, reborn as a star child. It’s just one of the scenes from the movie that left the viewer awe-struck; that one as an attempt to explain the question so often asked by humankind: “Where did we come from and how did we get here?”

Human ingenuity had been shaping a new technological future be-

fore the Kubrick and Roddenberry productions; yet, the work of these two men most certainly served to speed thing up: their efforts have inspired and accelerated man’s advances. Other transformative events such as immunotherapy on the verge of killing cancer by unleashing the human body’s natural defenses and AI, moving to a place where machines may outpace thinking humans, are well underway. Then, too, renewable energy stands on the precipice of saving us from exhausting the resources through conservation and re-application so the planet can be saved for the human race and all creatures great and small.

A personal interest in outer space was inspired by an event in the 1950s. A grassy knoll near my home as a child was a place where cardboard sleds could be used to enjoy a downhill ride. On one occasion, while sitting atop the knoll with half a dozen fellow sledding enthusiasts, our attention was suddenly focused on a round, saucer-shaped, shiny object with a small dome hovering motionless some 100 yards away. It hovered in place for a minute or two and then sped off at a speed so rapid, it was there one moment and gone the next. Didn’t see any little green men but later learned from testimonials and news accounts that other people had also seen what we saw and called them “flying saucers.”

(Gene H. McIntyre lives in Keizer.)

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