

Life in Trump's Cabinet: Perks, pestering, power, putdowns

WASHINGTON (AP) — Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross came in for an Oval Office tongue-lashing after he used a mundane soup can as a TV prop. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis got overruled by President Donald Trump's announcement that a new "Space Force" is in the offing. Environmental Protection Agency head Scott Pruitt caught a sharp admonition from Trump to "knock it off" after his ethics problems dominated cable television — and he was gone within three months.

Welcome to the Trump Cabinet, where broad opportunities to reshape the government and advance a conservative agenda come with everyday doses of presidential adulation, humiliation, perks and pestering. Sometimes all at roughly the same time.

Members of the president's Cabinet have a measure of prestige and power. They can streak across the skies in Air Force One with Trump, act unilaterally to roll back regulations not to their liking and set policies with far-reaching implications for millions of Americans. But they also can quickly find themselves in a harsh spotlight when an administration policy comes under question.

With the issue of migrant children separated from their families dominating headlines, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar was so determined to get a better handle on the 12,000 migrant children under his department's care that he was up until 1 a.m. one night last week personally poring through cases in the operations center of the bunker-like HHS building at the foot of Capitol Hill.

The Cabinet members are lashed to a mercurial president who has been known to quickly sour on those working for him and who doesn't shy from subjecting subordinates — many of them formerly powerful figures in their own rights — to withering public humiliation. Think Attorney General Jeff Sessions, a former senator who was labeled "beleaguered" early on by presidential tweet and who has since been repeatedly subjected to public criticism.

For all his bad press, Pruitt managed to last longer than many in Washington had expected.



In this Nov. 20, 2017 file photo, President Donald Trump speaks during a cabinet meeting at the White House in Washington.

Trump's Cabinet, a collection of corporate heavyweights, decorated generals and influential conservatives, has been beset by regular bouts of turnover and scandal. A Cabinet member's standing with Trump — who's up, who's down; who's relevant, who's not — is closely tied to how that person or their issue is playing in the press, especially on cable TV.

Over the last 16 months, that dynamic has resulted in a Cabinet with varying tiers of influence with the president. Though all 24 Cabinet members, including the vice president, can have the president's ear at times, some have been able to consistently influence Trump behind the scenes and mostly retained his respect. Others have fended off — so far — a swarm of accusations of ethical violations and moved steadily forward enacting the president's agenda.

Trump, like many modern presidents, has consolidated power in the West Wing and largely judges his Cabinet members by how well they reflect upon him, according to nearly two dozen administration officials, outside advisers and lawmakers. Most of those interviewed for this account spoke on condition of anonymity.

One key measure of the effectiveness of Cabinet members has

been their ability to manage up to the president — and manage their disappointment when he ignores their counsel.

Mike Pompeo, first as Trump's CIA director and now as his secretary of state, has seemingly cracked that code.

During a classified briefing on economic assistance for one African nation, the then-CIA director whipped out an annotated map, pointing out where U.S. troops were located and showing how aid contributed to their counter-terrorism mission. One official in the room said Pompeo presented the map as though he had worked it up the night before, rather than as something produced by his teams of analysts, earning brownie points and a sympathetic response from the president.

Pompeo's stock with the president ran deep as an early supporter. But as CIA director, he worked with the national security team to try to steer the unconventional president toward more conventional approaches. Their personal relationship grew as Pompeo attended nearly every presidential daily intelligence briefing he could — always bringing visual aids.

His predecessor as secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, never clicked with the president and often voiced his objections in a passive-aggressive

manner that infuriated the president, delivering retorts like "if you say so" and "you know best, sir," according to the official. Tillerson was fired in March, months after word leaked that he had reportedly privately referred to Trump as "a moron."

Other officials have also remained in close orbit around Trump, in part by lavishing frequent praise on the president both publicly and privately. Trump has remained fond of hard-charging Budget Director Mick Mulvaney, praising his combative briefings with the press. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and Ross, whose spokeswoman on Thursday disputed the account that Trump spoke harshly to the secretary about the soup can appearance, also have remained in Trump's good graces.

Administration officials believe the Cabinet member who has been most successful in managing Trump has been Mattis. The retired Marine general, thought of as a warrior monk for his academic mindset, is soft-spoken in his interactions with the president — often passing up the chance to speak in meetings — but his advice carries outsized weight.

Mattis is a frequent guest at White House lunches and dinners, a sign of his elevated status. He frames his suggestions to the pres-

ident in terms of his expertise, and when Trump is leaning in a different direction calmly makes his case. White House officials have noticed that Trump sometimes later repeats historical military anecdotes that Mattis related to him — evidence the president was really listening.

But even Mattis has seen his influence wane in recent weeks — he opposed the Space Force plan before Trump announced it.

THE EMBATTLED

Pruitt was far from alone in drawing scrutiny for possible ethical violations. Ryan Zinke, the interior secretary, was accused of spending tens of thousands of dollars on office renovations and private flights. David Shulkin was fired from his post as veterans affairs secretary amid a mutiny from his own staff after an internal review found ethics violations related to his trip to Europe with his wife last summer.

Trump berated his first health and human services secretary, Tom Price, for a series of misstatements last year that the president felt was complicating the administration's push to repeal President Barack Obama's health care law, according to a former administration official. Price was later fired amid his own ethical scandal involving spending hundreds of thousands in taxpayer dollars on private travel.

All told, Trump has had more turnover of Cabinet-level positions than any president at this point in their tenure in the last 100 years.

But what has angered Trump more than the substance of the scandals are the bad images they produced, according to four White House officials and advisers. The president has complained to confidants that more members of his Cabinet "weren't good on TV." He fumed to one ally in the spring, at the height of the ethical questions surrounding Pruitt, Zinke and Housing and Urban Development head Ben Carson, that he was only seeing his Cabinet on TV for scandals and not for fulfilling campaign promises.

Trump has also complained that he wants to see more of them on cable television defending his administration and showcasing his accomplishments.

FRIDAY AFTERNOON & EVENING

Table with columns for time slots (12 PM to 11:30 PM) and rows for various TV channels (FOX, CBS, NBC, ABC, PBS, OPB) listing their respective programming.

JULY 6, 2018

Large table listing TV programs for July 6, 2018, including titles like 'Lethal Weapon 4', 'The Longest Yard', 'American Greed', 'The Bachelor', and 'The Bachelor: Couples'.

FRIDAY LATE NIGHT & SATURDAY MORNING

Table listing TV programs for Friday late night and Saturday morning, including shows like 'FIFA World Cup Tonight', 'The Late Show', 'The Tonight Show', and 'Saturday Morning'.