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With Bill Pulte, Trump Is Sending a Dangerous Message

di John Sipher

The law creating the job of director of national intelligence is not subtle about the requirements.

[It says that](#) nominees for the position shall “have extensive national security expertise,” and it says so for a reason. Intelligence is not simply the possession of secrets. It is a profession with well-honed standards, tradecraft, legal boundaries, analytical disciplines and ways to assess the risks of secret operations. It requires an understanding of how raw information becomes intelligence, how sources can mislead, how adversaries manipulate information and how analysts weigh uncertainty. The job of the D.N.I. is to provide facts, warning, context and uncomfortable judgments to policymakers who may not want to hear them.

President Trump’s decision to place Bill Pulte in line to lead the U.S. intelligence community, however briefly, is not just another poor personnel choice. It is a warning about how this administration views intelligence itself — not as a sober instrument of national security and a profession built on evidence, but as a warehouse of disconnected secrets that could potentially be cherry-picked, stripped of context and used against the president’s enemies.

As head of the Federal Housing Finance Agency, Mr. Pulte became known not as a neutral administrator but as an aggressive political actor. He referred multiple Trump critics for dubious mortgage fraud investigations, including prominent Democrats and other figures who had clashed with the president. Those actions generated widespread concern that a federal agency was being used to pursue political retribution.

From the first day of service, C.I.A. officers and intelligence analysts are taught that politicization is the cardinal sin. To withhold, shade, distort or selectively present

intelligence to fit a political preference is an assault on the purpose of the profession. Intelligence exists because presidents and policymakers need to know what is true, or at least what trained professionals judge to be most likely true, in a world full of deception and ambiguity.

Some of America's worst national security failures have involved intelligence shaped by political influence. The Iraq weapons-of-mass-destruction debacle remains the defining modern cautionary tale: When policymakers want a conclusion badly enough, and institutions fail to resist them, the result can be catastrophic. Putting an unqualified partisan atop the intelligence community weakens it precisely where it must be strongest. In the hands of a political operative, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence can become a platform for laundering partisan narratives through the authority of classified information.

A director determined to politicize intelligence does not need to overtly fabricate. A bad actor can do something more subtle, and often more effective — such as treating the intelligence community as a private detective agency for the president — and a few of Mr. Trump's previous directors have been willing to do just that. It is easy to declassify and publish one document but not another; highlight a raw report while burying the caveats; emphasize one dissenting view while concealing the broader consensus; strip context from reporting; and turn uncertainty into an accusation.

The post-1970s intelligence reforms were designed to prevent precisely this kind of abuse. After the Church Committee [exposed](#) misconduct by the C.I.A., the F.B.I. and other agencies, the United States built a system meant to impose legal limits, congressional oversight, internal accountability and professional norms. Despite critics' claims that these reforms would weaken intelligence, they instead legitimized and strengthened it. They allowed powerful secret agencies to operate in a democratic society and to be seen as instruments of national security rather than as the personal tools of presidents.

Mr. Trump's regular talk about the "deep state" — an amorphous and imaginary body of secretive actors whom he sees as either seeking to actively undermine him or refusing his political demands — erodes the professional foundation those reforms

helped build. It recasts professionalism as disloyalty and treats independent judgment as sabotage. It invites presidents to believe that any fact they dislike must have been produced by an enemy. Once that idea takes hold, the temptation grows to purge professionals, elevate loyalists and demand intelligence that serves the leader rather than the country. We have seen a similar pattern at the Justice Department and the F.B.I. during the second Trump administration. Neutering our intelligence apparatus at a time of serious national security challenges in Iran, China, Israel, Ukraine, Cuba and elsewhere is reckless.

Intelligence officers can tolerate demanding leaders. They can tolerate hard questions and presidents who are skeptical of their conclusions. What they cannot long abide is a system in which honest work is distorted or punished. When professionals conclude that their advancement depends less on rigor than on ideological obedience, the best people leave, the cautious self-censor, the ambitious learn the wrong lessons, and the sycophantic losers [rise to the top](#). The institution may endure, but the culture becomes less candid, less brave and less useful.

The president has said Mr. Pulte will remain only in an acting role. The danger of his appointment is not that one unqualified zealot will single-handedly destroy American intelligence overnight. The real danger is more insidious: It is another signal that expertise does not matter, truth is subordinate to loyalty, and intelligence and advice are valuable only when they can be made politically useful.

The United States spends enormous sums and takes enormous risks to learn what adversaries are hiding. It recruits sources in dangerous places. It builds technical systems of extraordinary sophistication. It depends on analysts who sift uncertainty for meaning. All of that work is degraded when the person at the top treats intelligence as a story line waiting to be edited for political effect. If presidents continue to place incompetent leaders in the position, it would be better for everyone if they [abolished the office altogether](#).

A serious national intelligence director must have experience, discipline, humility and respect for truth. Mr. Pulte does not meet that standard. Putting him in this job, even temporarily, is a mistake, not only because he is unqualified, but because it reveals a

contempt for the very idea of nonpartisan intelligence. And once a country teaches its intelligence services to serve power instead of truth, it should not be surprised when both democracy and security begin to fail.