

Analysis

## Trump sets a record for White House staff turnover in the first year

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### Casualties of the Trump administration

A running list of those who quit or were fired under President Trump

President Trump set a record for White House staff turnover in the first year. Here's an ongoing list of staff who have quit or been fired under trump. (Joyce Koh/Washington Post)

Every new president loses top staff during the administration's first year in office. Political scientists have long [noted](#) that the skills needed to campaign are strikingly different from those needed to govern. And adjusting to Washington, D.C., norms — and the press scrutiny that comes with presidential power — has a steep learning curve, especially for those without government experience.

Compared to President Trump's five predecessors, however, the Trump White House has seen a record level of staff turnover amid truly unusual circumstances.

Here's what we can conclude about White House turnover during Trump's first year in office.

#### **This is how I measured top-level staff turnover**

Between 1981 and 2015, National Journal writers compiled lists of presidential staffers deemed to be the most influential working within the executive office of the president and the White House for each presidential administration, with one each in 1981, 1989, 1993, 2001 and 2009 for a total of five.

Let's call these top staffers the "A Team." I used the old National Journal lists to compare Trump staff turnover to that of previous presidents. (Note: These are in print, not online.)

To generate the Trump A Team, I worked with Bloomberg Law journalist Madison Alder to record every job title from those five National Journal editions and determine the frequency with which each job title occurred. Every job title that was listed in every administration we called Tier 1 positions, comprised of 12 titles in all; these include, for example, the position of the chief of staff. Titles listed in four of the five editions we called Tier 2 positions and again included 12 titles, including the Office of Management and Budget director. Similarly, those titles that were listed in three of the five editions were called Tier 3 positions with a total of 14; those listed just twice were called Tier 4 positions, with 22.

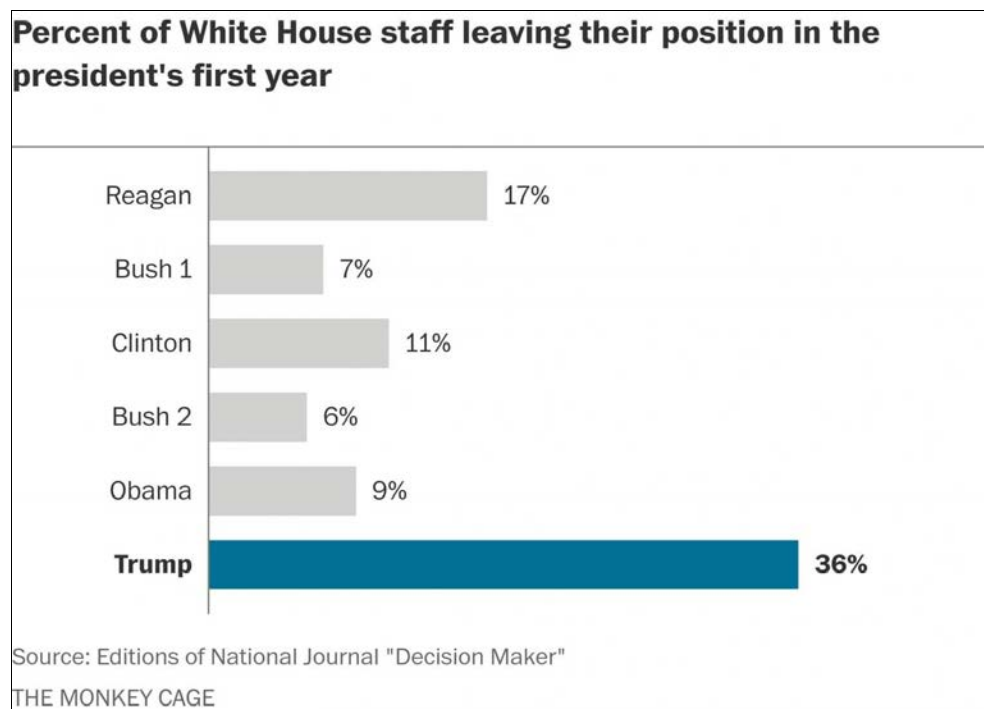
For all these titles, we identified all Trump staff members who have occupied any of these positions.

We then added new titles. In all five editions, the National Journal listed on average 19 new positions each year considered significant enough to count as influential. Based on Politico's January 2017 [listing](#) of White House staff, we identified 19 influential new positions in the Trump administration and added those to the Trump A Team. These included the most senior titles — assistants to the president and deputy assistants to the president — that had not previously been listed by National Journal, such as Stephen K. Bannon, chief strategist and senior counselor to the president.

From that list, I determined Trump staff turnover, defined as any staff movement — whether from resignation, promotion or firing.

### **There was a lot of churn in the Trump administration**

As shown in the figure below, the Trump administration witnessed record level turnover during Trump's first year in office.



We can easily see several noteworthy trends.

First, President Trump's A Team turnover is significantly higher than any of his five predecessors. As of Jan. 12, 2018, 36 percent of the staff has left or changed positions, more than double the turnover in President Ronald Reagan's first year and four times that in President Barack Obama's. Some Trump staffers, like [Reince Priebus](#) were forced out; others, like [Sarah Huckabee Sanders](#) were promoted; and a few, like [Paul Winfree](#), voluntarily resigned.

Second, much of the Trump turnover can be found in Tier 1. Of these 12 highest-level positions, Trump lost six, including chief of staff (Reince Priebus), deputy chief of staff, (Katie Walsh), press secretary (Sean Spicer), director of public liaison (George Sifakis), national security adviser (Michael Flynn) and deputy national security adviser (KT McFarland).

By contrast, Obama only lost one Tier 1 staff member: his White House counsel Gregory Craig. President George W. Bush did not lose any Tier 1 staff members during the first year. Tier 1 positions are the apex of the White House staff team. Replacing these top aides is typically far more difficult than finding other replacements, given that these jobs are both demanding and require substantive experience and expertise.

Third, turnover will likely increase in the months ahead. All five recent presidents saw a big bump in turnover during the second year in office, suggesting that Trump's record level staff churn could grow even higher in 2018. That's true in part because in the past, many top staff regarded their year of service as enough to move to more lucrative opportunities outside government. And in part, after midterm elections, a small number of aides often leave to begin preparing for the president's reelection campaign.

### **Three possible reasons for the high level of churn**

Several features probably account for the surge in Trump's A Team turnover. Those who accept White House positions are typically well aware of the long hours and the high level of stress. But Trump staffers may not have anticipated the chaos that comes after Trump's Twitter missives or suspicion that permeates the West Wing after countless leaks to the press.

Given Trump's unwillingness to hire Republicans who opposed his candidacy, it was likely harder to recruit top staff with commensurate governing experience. As a result, the A Team was probably ill prepared to learn early on that neither Congress nor the courts would rubber stamp the president's agenda.