

Can an Administrator Lead in Trump's Washington?
Notes on Bridenstine of NASA
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Can an Administrator lead in Trump's Washington? Not easily! The Trump Administration has been notable for turnover within the White House and larger bureaucracy. James Comey, Andrew McCabe, Sean Spicer, Dr. Brenda Fitzgerald, H.R. McMaster, and Rex Tillerson are just a few examples of high-profile government officials who have either resigned or been fired since Trump took office. Scott Pruitt of the EPA is the latest casualty, and there are innumerable vacancies at high levels. Wholly aside from the merits or demerits of certain individuals – and Pruitt certainly deserved to leave – there is a generic issue of governmental dysfunction when leaders swiftly come and go, and many executive desks sit unoccupied. Nothing gets done, or done well.

Consider the situation of Jim Bridenstine. On April 23, 2018, Bridenstine was confirmed as NASA's new Administrator after a 15-month battle in the Senate and an unprecedented party-line vote of 50-49. Never before had it taken so long to get an Administrator in office at NASA. Never before had there even remotely been such a partisan struggle over the nominee. This is an agency typically above the fray. To make matters worse, Trump gave Bridenstine the following warning: "You better do a good job or you'll be fired in two minutes!"

A former Republican Oklahoma congressman, Bridenstine wanted the job and came to it with known views. He is the first elected politician in history to head this agency of scientists, engineers, technical managers, and astronauts. He will need all his political skills to survive and advance his agency's, and the country's, interests. Bridenstine faces four major challenges that will test his mettle: his own credibility; commercialization; internationalization; and climate change. In addressing these challenges, to whom or what will he be accountable?

Credibility

Space is a priority in the era of Trump because it is symbolic of his mantra: "Make America Great Again!" While that helps NASA, it creates special problems. A National Space Council (NSC) to advise the president has been created, headed by Vice President Mike Pence. The last time such a body

existed, under George H.W. Bush, the NSC and NASA Administrator clashed over who was in charge of space policy, and the Administrator was forced out.

Also, as a politician running a technical agency, Bridenstine will have to win credibility with the organization and congressional critics who wanted an apolitical “space professional” in the job. He has indicated he wishes to buttress his competence by choosing as his deputy a person who fits the “space professional” job description. History shows that such individuals can work together toward an interdisciplinary leadership. But it shows also that there can be competition at the top.

Commercialization

As a congressman, Bridenstine was a champion for commercializing space. That advocacy caused problems in his confirmation. NASA and many key legislative adherents fear that government work will be too cavalierly transferred to the private sector. Lives are at stake. An early example of commercialization lies with transport of astronauts to the International Space Station (ISS). With the shuttle gone, that task is being shifted to SpaceX and Boeing. This change is scheduled to take place in 2019, and was set in motion by President Obama.

Trump and the National Space Council want the ISS transferred to the private sector by 2025 so NASA can move resources to deep-space exploration. It will be back to the Moon and on to Mars, starting first with an outpost in lunar orbit. Powerful senators have said they will fight the ISS transfer if it means ending government support and control of ISS prematurely. The challenge for Bridenstine is to invent a cost-sharing, public-private partnership, as it does not exist at present, and there is not enough money to support both the new and the old.

Internationalization

In building the International Space Station, NASA led a partnership of five space agencies and 16 nations, including a former rival, Russia. ISS today represents an unparalleled collaboration in science and technology. The partnership resolved many technical problems and overcame challenges in management, policies, budgets, and the Columbia Shuttle disaster. ISS showed it is possible for the US to practice international leadership. Can Bridenstine build on ISS as he charts a strategy back to the Moon with an eye towards Mars? Can he keep existing partners aboard? What will he do about China, soon to be the world’s second great power in human space flight? Under present congressional law, NASA cannot partner with China in human space flight, and China is building a space station that could take ISS’s place if ISS goes too soon.

Climate Change

NASA is arguably the world's most critical science agency monitoring climate change, a substantial part of its Earth science program. Climate change is a planetary-scale problem, and NASA spends approximately \$2 billion a year studying the ills of planet Earth, far more than any other agency. Satellites provide essential technical information about rising seas, melting glaciers, the course of severe storms, ozone depletion, and atmospheric warming.

Climate change could be Bridenstine's political Achilles heel, given the split between scientists and Trump. Bridenstine, as a congressman, was a climate change skeptic. His climate change rhetoric was one reason Democrats united against his confirmation. As Administrator, he now declares he has evolved on the issue and will support NASA as a climate research agency. Can he defend NASA's role in this field against budget cutters in the White House and Congress? What if a NASA scientist draws policy implications from his or her research that the president does not like?

Conclusion

These are bitterly divided times. Trump is a symptom (as well as a cause) of a breakdown in institutional trust and governmental consensus. NASA cannot accomplish its missions without strong leadership. It cannot take the next step in exploration – back to the Moon with an eye to Mars – without domestic and international support. Bridenstine will need to pull the White House, Congress, industry, scientists, media, and international partners together around common interests. To be effective, he has to cope with the four issues discussed above, which are likely to dominate his tenure. He has multiple accountabilities, including his sense of place in history.

These remarks have focused on one Administrator in the Trump years. While certain problems Bridenstine faces are unique, most are not. All top Administrators function in a political environment, but the present one is especially toxic. To get anything accomplished, the leader of an agency has to survive a number of years and pull relevant stakeholders together into a force for implementation. Leaders also need competent deputies and other complementary associates. Hollowed government fails. It is possible that Bridenstine's political instincts – seen as a detriment by many – could wind up helping him and NASA in Trump's Washington! In any event, the answer to the question posed at the outset of this paper (can an Administrator lead in Trump's Washington?) is “Yes, with enough sagacity, cunning, and luck.”