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Subject: Federal Insider: Many feds don't like Trump's program, but they're not revolting

Many feds don't like Trump's program, but they're not revolting

By Joe Davidson

President Trump meets with leaders of the pharmaceutical industry in the Oval Office at the White House on Tuesday. (AFP/Getty Images)

Responses to the question we raised in [Tuesday's Federal Insider](#) — when, if ever, do federal employees have the right to disregard a presidential order or administration policy — make one thing clear:

Federal employees have a strong sense of mission.

Those responses and others from federal workforce organizations demonstrate what has long been evident: the fidelity of federal employees to serving the public through the work of their agencies.

Questions about the attitude of feds developed following the massive outcry against President Trump's immigration executive order. It temporarily bans migrants from certain Muslim majority countries. The order is of [questionable legality](#), as indicated by a series of federal court rulings blocking its implementation.

Though Trump's order has upset many, there is no verifiable revolt by the workforce against him.

"I think federal workers are now extremely concerned about the consequences of President Trump's policies, but I would not call it a revolt," said Randy L. Erwin, president of the National Federation of Federal Employees. "Some of the things that President Trump is doing are unprecedented and I would not be surprised to see federal workers be more frustrated than they have ever been.

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Similarly, National Treasury Employees Union President Tony Reardon said “many federal employees are anxious and concerned due to the hiring freeze and reports of deep downsizing to come at some agencies. ... Having said that, I believe our members plan to continue to serve the American people and do their jobs to the best of their abilities.”

That goes for top level civil servants, too.

“There is no evidence we are seeing of a wide spread federal bureaucracy revolt,” said Bill Valdez, president of the Senior Executives Association. The Senior Executive Service members “I’ve talked to have told their direct reports to keep doing their day jobs until they hear otherwise. Don’t get involved in the drama happening elsewhere.”

Many federal employees and retirees who answered our questions would not recommend disobeying an order, even one that might not survive judicial review.

Here are a few of their emailed comments:

Megan Durham, retired Fish and Wildlife Service deputy assistant director for external affairs: “They [federal employees] are mission-oriented and for many, the agency is their family and the mission is central to their personal values. To them I say: the best civil servants learn how to soldier on in a hostile environment. Sometimes you have to suck it up, choose your battles, and do the best you can within the system to educate your political bosses and continue to perform your agency’s mission.”

James Drummond, retired from the Environmental Protection Agency: “Federal employees are obligated to carry out administration policies unless there is a clear conflict with the Constitution, a statute or regulation. Mere disagreement with the policy itself would not provide adequate grounds to disregard the policy. Having said that, Federal employees also have a responsibility to advise the administration that a policy is unwise, difficult to implement, or unfair as well as to preserve their objections for the record.”

But speaking against a policy can be hazardous to career health, especially under the Trump administration. Sally Yates, the sacked acting attorney general, learned that when she said the Justice Department would not defend Trump's immigration order in court. Witness the reaction of Sean Spicer, press secretary for a particularly thin-skinned White House, to State Department employees who criticized Trump's executive order in the department's [dissent channel](#).

"Either get with the program or they can go," [Spicer said](#), demonstrating an administration aversion to accepting divergent views from staffers.

His comments led two good government groups to request the Office of Special Counsel, which protects whistleblowers, launch "an investigation into Spicer's "potentially threatening statements ... against federal government employees for questioning President Trump's immigration executive order."

Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington and the Government Accountability Project said Spicer's "broadside attack" and "public threats" are "incompatible with the Whistleblower Protection Act."

Not surprisingly, the White House had no comment on the groups' letters.

What is surprising is the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA), the Foreign Service labor union, had no comment on Spicer's remarks. I expected it to come to the defense of its members, but AFSA did not provide a comment despite two requests.

For those who want to take action against bad management, Peter Boice, a Rockville resident who retired after 42 years of federal service, said there are many ways other than outright revolt to "subtly subvert stupid orders."

If feds need to stall stupidity, here's his guide to "useful tools for the Fed worker's toolbox":

- "Only provide minimal information requested"
- "Fail to find information"
- "Miss deadlines while 'doing your best' (after all, we were all overworked). That might get you a poor review next time, maybe, but it won't get you canned."
- "Keep two sets of data (requires some care!)"
- "Communicate with friendly Congress people ... through your personal email."

I particularly like this one: "Cultivate trusted media sources ... sure beats going through a PAO (public affairs officer)."

If you need the name of a trusted media source, I know one.

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