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How Hard Is It to Drain a Swamp?

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How Hard Is It to Drain a Swamp?

Abstract

Some humid, summer evening, go out and listen to the swamp. It chirps, it keens, it hoots, it chitters. It is both quiet and restless, serene and ominous. It is alive, full of bats' wings, copperheads, and clouds of insects. Imagine how it will respond when it learns you plan to drain it.

That thought has some political parallels as Donald Trump finds himself at odds with the bureaucracy of the federal government in an effort to “drain the swamp” of the so-called Deep State. Thomas Jefferson did a good deal of swamp-draining after his victory over Federalist John Adams in 1800. (*excerpt*)

Keywords

Donald Trump, federal government, government bureaucracy, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln

Disciplines

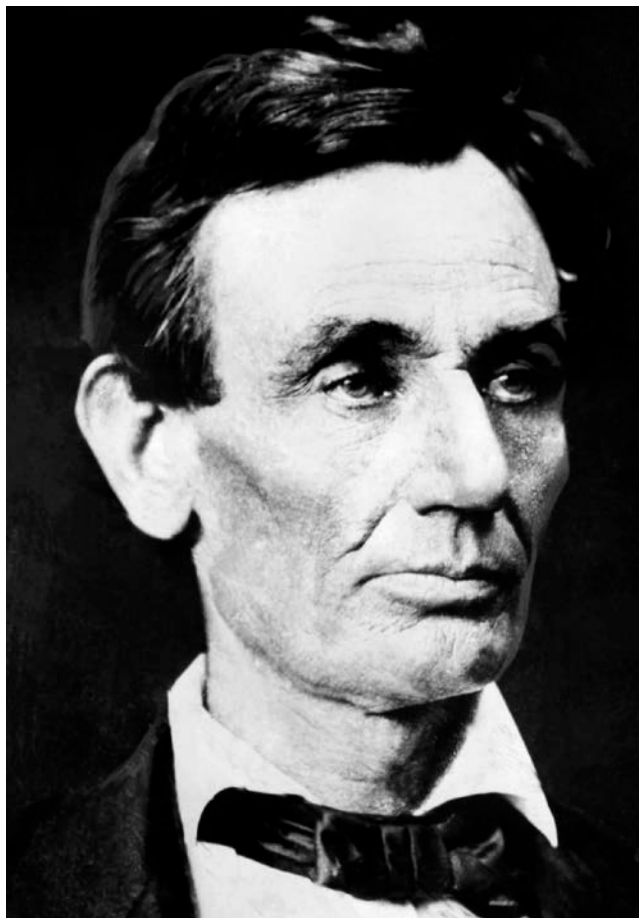
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Richmond Times-Dispatch

LINCOLN DID IT

Allen C. Guelzo column: How hard is it to drain a swamp?

By Allen C. Guelzo Jul 4, 2017



Abraham Lincoln is shown in a file photograph by Alex Hessler, Nov. 1860, shortly after he won election as president.

FILE, AP PHOTO/ALEX HESSLER

Some humid, summer evening, go out and listen to the swamp. It chirps, it keens, it hoots, it chitters. It is both quiet and restless, serene and ominous. It is alive, full of bats' wings, copperheads, and clouds of insects. Imagine how it will respond when it learns you plan to drain it.

That thought has some political parallels as Donald Trump finds himself at odds with the bureaucracy of the federal government in an effort to “drain the swamp” of the so-called Deep State. Thomas Jefferson did a good deal of swamp-draining after his victory over Federalist John Adams in 1800. Of the 316 federal offices under Jefferson’s direct appointment (this did not include postmasters, a much larger category usually left to the oversight of the postmaster-general), Jefferson forced out 146 incumbents — 46 percent — most, if not all, of whom were Federalists. Andrew Jackson made even more aggressive moves when he was inaugurated as the seventh president in 1829, firing more than 900 government office-holders.

But swamps are ecosystems. They resist drainage, and they find ways of fighting back. Despite Jackson’s warnings, his drainings amounted to only 10 percent of the federal workforce, and 423 of them were mere low-level postmasters. In the process, some of the survivors of this draining discovered how to resist. Jackson’s vice president, John Calhoun, was a veteran Washington insider and War Department bureaucrat who set out to tame Jackson, first by leaking rumors of the marital misbehavior of Jackson’s pick for the War Department, John Eaton, and then by encouraging resistance to federal tariff legislation in Calhoun’s home state of South Carolina.

No battle to drain the swamp was as epic as the one waged by Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War. By the time Lincoln was inaugurated, he found “the various Departments of the Government filled with unfaithful clerks and officers, whose sympathies were with the South, who had been placed in their positions for the purpose of paralyzing his administration.”

Lincoln took a hard stick to the denizens of the swamp. Lincoln’s White House staffer, William O. Stoddard, remembered that Lincoln hired and fired federal officeholders with dizzying energy. “I doubt if ever before there was so general displacement as at the beginning of Mr. Lincoln’s term.” Of the 1,520 executive branch positions immediately under Lincoln’s oversight, Lincoln dismissed 1,195 of their occupants, which amounted to “the most sweeping removal of federal officeholders in the country’s history up to that time.”

In the State Department, Lincoln replaced not only the secretary and assistant secretary, but the disbursing clerk and all five territorial governors; in the Treasury Department, he appointed not only a new secretary and assistant secretary, but the 1st comptroller, treasurer, register, solicitor, chief of the Bureau of Construction, and the director, treasurer and chief coinier of the U.S. Mint; the Interior Department also got a new secretary and assistant secretary, but also a new chief clerk, new administrators of the General Land Office, the Indian Office, the Pension Office, the superintendent of the Census and commissioner of Public Buildings.

Lincoln would find swamp-draining a much harder task today, as does President Trump. In 1883, the first civil service legislation — the Pendleton Act — was enacted by Congress to convert large numbers of federal jobs from political rewards to professional, merit-based appointments. Ironically, the long-term effect of the Pendleton Act was not to insulate the civil service from politics, but to insulate the politicians within the civil service. Federal jobs are protected by elaborate security nets — the Merit Systems Protection Board, Whistleblower Protection Act, the Uniformed Services Employment and Re-employment Rights Act, the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission — which make it almost impossible to fire federal employees and which punish those who actually expose misconduct by fellow employees. In fact, we barely

know how large the swamp is. Although, on record, the federal government employs 2.1 million workers (outside the Postal Service), congressional and regulatory mandates have led to the creation of a vast penumbra of contractors, many of whom use political contributions to get access and who have a vested interest in seeing the swamp thrive.

It is unlikely that we will ever see a return to the wide-ranging discretion Lincoln enjoyed in shaping his administration, nor is Congress likely to give Trump the leverage Lincoln used so freely. But we would make a serious mistake to imagine that Trump's campaign to drain the swamp is some form of mean-spirited declaration of war on a public-spirited civilian workforce. A permanent bureaucracy, Jackson believed, promotes "corruption in some and in others a perversion of correct feelings and principles" which will inevitably "divert government from its legitimate ends and make it an engine for the support of the few at the expense of the many." Jefferson, Jackson and Lincoln are not bad company to be with — especially during a night in the swamp.

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