

April 30, 2018

U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT

Political Appointees Must Do Better

By Matt A. Mayer

All too often, political appointees in both Republican and Democratic administrations get in trouble for using taxpayers funds unwisely (if not improperly) or abusing their positions. In the last few months, the media has covered Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson's expensive furniture decision (not improper, but certainly unwise), Environmental Protection Administration Administrator Scott Pruitt's soundproof phonebooth (likely improper), and travel arrangements of several Trump Administration officials (unwise). These irresponsible decisions tarnish hard-earned reputations and, more importantly, undermine the substantive policy work of the administration and president for whom they work.

From using private email accounts or servers to shield their work (improper) to lavish spending decisions such as Obama Administration General Services Administration head Martha Johnson spending over \$800,000 in Las Vegas (improper), political appointees regardless of party must stop doing things they technically can, but shouldn't do, and most definitely should stop doing things that are improper and/or illegal. They must remind themselves they are there to serve the people, not enrich themselves or live like Fortune 500 CEOs.

I have first-hand experience with this problem.

When I served in the Bush administration at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, I routinely saw fellow political appointees take advantage of every perquisite possible and then some. I vividly recall traveling with several appointees once who beckoned me to go with them at the airport. Apparently, they would connect with a Transportation Security Administration person who would take them around the security screening the public had to endure. I refused to partake in the practice stating that if my family and friends had to be subjected to the inefficient and needless TSA screening, then I should have to do it, too. I may have been motivated by ethics, but I was more motivated by the fear of being in a story in *The Washington Post*.

When I did have a perquisite, I tried to extend that advantage broadly. For example, a car and driver came with my position. Instead of letting the car sit idle when I didn't need it, I instituted a system based on seniority that made the car available to anyone in the office who needed to go to a meeting outside our office. I figured at least we could save taxpayer funds on taxis by leveraging the sunk cost of the car. Again, I didn't implement this policy because I was the model appointee; I did it because it seemed wasteful and stupid not to do it.

When public officials engage in unwise or improper decisions, it doesn't just harm those involved and the president, it further undermines the people's belief in government when that belief is already woefully low. If we want to restore America's faith in government, political appointees need to start by demonstrating they are there for the right reason; namely, to serve the president and the people by putting good policy actions ahead of perquisites and pampering.

It goes without saying that the pay isn't great to work in government, especially for non-career appointees who likely won't get the retirement benefits of lifelong government employment. Nonetheless, the opportunity to do great things to advance an agenda for America needs to be payment enough. If someone considering an appointment isn't willing to uphold the highest standard or, at a minimum, be willing to have every decision they make become a frontpage news story, then they should do themselves, the president and the public a favor and decline to serve.

Every president has enough pressure on him regarding decisions he has to make and defend, appointees shouldn't make it even harder by forcing him to defend their decisions, too. It isn't that hard to do the right thing, is it?

Matt A. Mayer is President of Opportunity Ohio and Contributor to U.S. News & World Report.