

Trump is not the first president to fire Cabinet officials to bury news

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

There are no shortages of theories for why Donald Trump chose to schedule the most noteworthy ouster of his short presidential career, his surprise firing of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and revamping his national security team, last Tuesday.

Commentators have floated the ideas that it was Trump's desire for a more hawkish team for North Korea or Iran, Tillerson's comments on Russia's alleged assassination of a former agent in Britain, or Trump's personal pique at reportedly being called a "moron" by Tillerson. Some or all of these may be the reason, but the timing of the event and the discussion of other changes in the Cabinet team also coincided with an event that Trump may not have wanted people to dwell on: the high-profile congressional special election in Pennsylvania.

Trump has repeatedly shown a willingness to make a splashy announcement in order to change the subject of an unpleasant story. The Pennsylvania special election, in a district that Trump won by nearly 20 percent in 2016, was seen as potential ominous defeat for Republicans, one that Trump certainly doesn't want the press dwelling on. The Democratic candidate Conor Lamb claimed victory by a narrow margin. Trump's announcement certainly succeeded in knocking the Republican loss off the top story of the day.

But Trump wouldn't be the first president to view firing Cabinet members as a way of resetting the political narrative. The problem is that a high-profile firing does not usually help with the a president's popularity. In fact, the opposite is what usually occurs.

One of the most noteworthy moments of announcing a top Cabinet member's ouster as a sacrificial lamb was in 1992, when George H.W. Bush was losing his reelection race due to the recession. At the end of the campaign, Bush declared that he would be axing both his Secretary of Treasury Nick Brady and his White House budget director Richard Darman, who he hoped would instead get the blame for his backing away from his broken campaign promise of "no new taxes."

This move obviously didn't work, as the boss took the blame. Lyndon Johnson took a similar action, by pushing out Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara through an appointment as head of the World Bank. Similar to Tillerson, McNamara found out he was fired by reading a newspaper. Within a few months, Johnson's own reelection hopes were in tatters.

Unlike Trump and the first Bush, presidents usually like to wait until after an election to remove prominent Cabinet members. George W. Bush took such action with his ouster of the Secretary of Treasury Paul O'Neill in 2002, just after a successful midterm election, tossing Secretary of State Colin Powell overboard following his 2004 reelection, and axing of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld after a disastrous 2006 midterm that flipped both houses of Congress to the Democrats.

Some presidents have tried to make wholesales switches at once, such as Gerald Ford, with his Halloween Day Massacre in 1975, throwing out his defense secretary, national security adviser and CIA director, or Jimmy Carter with his 1979 defenestration of four Cabinet

secretaries. This “pull the bandaid off” approach may have been an attempt to seem bold, but instead it appeared to the public as if the presidents had made poor decision in their original choices for the Cabinet selection. Neither group of firings helped either of these presidents win a second term.

In addition to getting rid of Tillerson, Trump seems to be toying with the wholesale approach to deal with the rest of his cabinet, with discussions of the replacements of the attorney general, national security adviser, veterans affairs secretary and his chief of staff. But any such plan is unlikely to positively affect Trump’s own popularity for any length of time. Firing Cabinet members is not seen as move of strength, but rather one of weakness. As the news cycle turns at what seems an ever rapid pace, a Cabinet firing can only block out a bad news story for a brief time.

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