

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

5 on 45:
On administration leaks

Thursday, February 16, 2017

PARTICIPANTS:

Host:

ADRIANNA PITA

Contributor:

STEPHEN HESS
Senior Fellow Emeritus, Governance Studies
The Brookings Institution

PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network: analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

HESS: This is Stephen Hess, senior fellow emeritus in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution, and my subject is leaks, something I've been studying for a long time. In fact in 1984, I wrote a book called *The Government-Press Connection*, which had a whole chapter on leaks and other informal communications, in which I describe the topology of leaks: things like the ego leak in which you give information primarily to satisfy your self-importance, or the good-will leak in which you're playing for a future favor, or the policy leak which is a straightforward pitch for or against a proposal, the animus leak where you're trying to settle a grudge, the trial balloon leak which is obvious, or the whistleblower leak.

We are in a moment of leaks of which I have never seen before and which really doesn't quite fit in any of those categories. Because, to me, it describes almost a war between the permanent government and the president—the civil service who feel that the president is both inexperienced, amateurish, and dangerous. And this is particularly showing up in the U.S. intelligence community, and we're having an avalanche of leaks. The Wall Street Journal has a headline today, "Spies keep intelligence from Trump." The New York Times—front page—the New York Times has a headline, "Love for leaks quickly faded after election."

How Trump took to all of this? Trump's response to this is merely to attack that wicked, fake media who of course are exactly doing their job. They're finding information where they can find it, and they're verifying it and releasing it to the public.

Now, we're in a position that to me is quite dangerous, because we don't know where it's going. And so we're apt to be in for a very, very rough and serious period in the next two months, particularly as we see whether the Congress—the House, the Republicans in the House—can continue to fall in behind the president who, at least at this time, they need. But they are also looking over their shoulders to their own constituency and how we see—as these new committees that are going to look into the Flynn affair—how all of these statements that have now come out of the president's then-national security adviser talking to the Russians repeatedly through the campaign into the transition, and for which he was fired, then the point becomes very clearly, as it did in the Watergate case of Nixon, what did he know and when did he know it? Because if the President had merely asked Flynn, or Flynn had said to him “I spoke to the ambassador today,” and the president replied “tell him so and so,” wow, we're into an indictable offense.

So, button up tight, we are in for quite a storm coming out of Washington in the next few months.