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ADMINISTRATION

Behind Trump's Alleged Loyalty Push, a Leadership Lesson

By Jack Stripling MAY 17, 2017



Andrew Harrer-Pool, Getty Images

Donald Trump reportedly asked for the loyalty of James Comey, the FBI director whom the president fired last week. College administrators say loyalty is a quality that must be given freely, not demanded.

Do I have your loyalty?

Reports that President Trump put that blunt query to James B. Comey Jr., the FBI director whom Mr. Trump fired last week, lend credence to a growing narrative that the president sandbagged an independent-minded investigator he feared he could not control. Paramount as the political and legal implications of the story may be for Mr. Trump, who disputes the report, the president's push for a subordinate's fealty invites broader questions about how leaders of any organization, including colleges and universities, inspire loyalty and whether they should ever ask for it outright.

When loyalty oaths are sought in higher education, a sector built on the spirit of free inquiry, they are seldom well-received. These sorts of pledges conjure up memories of the Red Scare of the 1940s and '50s, when [professors were fired](#) for refusing to pledge allegiance to the U.S. Constitution and to affirm they were not members of the Communist Party. This is not to say, however, that loyalty is a concept that finds no purchase in higher education. College leaders often hope, at least within the administrative ranks, to cultivate a sense of common purpose that implicitly, if not explicitly, deters lieutenants from undermining the president and his or her agenda.

But this sort of environment is not always so easily fostered, particularly when administrators are preoccupied with their own career advancement.

"You've got people around you who think they can do your job better than you and may even aspire to do your job," said Richard M. Freeland, president emeritus of Northeastern University. "That's a very tricky relationship. It's not at all unusual to see provosts subtly undermining presidents, particularly with the faculty. The consequence of that can be very destructive in an institution. It does have a corrosive effect on the stature of the leadership."

When loyalties get mixed or blurred in higher-education administration, it seldom ends well. It was not long after Teresa A. Sullivan was [forced out and then reinstated](#) as president of the University of Virginia, for example, that she accepted the [resignation of Michael Strine](#), a chief operating officer who had engaged in back-channel discussions with board members who wanted Ms. Sullivan out.

Graham B. Spanier, a former president of Pennsylvania State University, was stunned to learn that Penn State's general counsel, Cynthia Baldwin, believed that she represented the university — and not necessarily Mr. Spanier — during a grand jury investigation of Jerry Sandusky's [child sex abuse](#).

Some of the most-serious criminal charges made against Mr. Spanier in connection with the Sandusky case, including obstruction of justice, [were thrown out](#) because Ms. Baldwin had testified against him.

Demanding Obedience

Confused loyalties can be a problem, but forced loyalties carry risks of their own.

As governor of New Mexico, Bill Richardson, a Democrat, was criticized for the extreme lengths he went to in hopes of ensuring the loyalty of his appointees to the state's university governing

boards. As a requirement for service, Governor Richardson insisted that new regents [sign undated resignation letters](#), which he reserved the right to execute at any time.

In his first days as president of the University of Akron, Scott L. Scarborough raised eyebrows by requiring senior administrators to sign on to a highly prescriptive [list of management principles](#), which included promises to pick up trash and to be on time. The document did not require a specific pledge of loyalty to Mr. Scarborough, who [resigned](#) in less than two years amid heavy criticism, but it sought to institute a culture that was preoccupied, at least in part, with avoiding the president's pet peeves.

Mr. Freeland, who provides executive coaching as a senior consultant with Maguire Associates, said that it is easy for a leader to stifle creativity within an organization by forcing allegiance from subordinates.

"I've worked for bosses in higher education whose idea of loyalty was obedience," Mr. Freeland said. "I thought it was a terrible way to operate. It didn't bring out the best in people; it elicited compliance."

"You want them to be loyal to you because they choose to be loyal to you," he continued, "not because you demand it."

'Presidents Are Not Monarchs'

When President Trump pressed Mr. Comey for his loyalty, *The New York Times* reported, Mr. Comey made a counter offer: How about my honesty instead?

Lawrence S. Bacow, leader-in-residence at the Kennedy School Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University, said Mr. Comey's reported response sounds about right.

"From what I've read, I think Comey's answer was a good one: I promise to be honest," said Mr. Bacow, president emeritus of Tufts University. "Personal loyalty, I don't know what that means other than you're going to do what I'm going to tell you to do — even if it's not in the interest of the institution."

President Trump disputes that he asked Mr. Comey for his loyalty, and the White House has pushed back against reports that the president [leaned on the director](#) to scrap a federal investigation into Michael T. Flynn, Mr. Trump's former national security adviser.

Taken together, however, the allegations create a portrait of a president who is ill-accustomed to an environment, like academe, where leaders answer to a lot of different constituencies.

"He's relished the idea of telling people that they're fired," Mr. Bacow said. "In the end, I think he honestly believes that people are responsible to him and to him alone. That may have worked when he was running the Trump organization, but presidents are not monarchs."

Leaders best instill loyalty, Mr. Bacow said, by showing loyalty to those who serve them — even when mistakes are made.

"If you support people in those circumstances," he said, "they will run through brick walls for you in the future."

Jack Stripling covers college leadership, particularly presidents and governing boards. Follow him on Twitter [@jackstripling](#), or email him at jack.stripling@chronicle.com.