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Trump Confuses Telling Blatant Lies With a Straight Face With Competence



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We all know and expect that a president's top appointees are picked in large part because of their willingness to carry out a president's agenda. But usually these are people with some experience in the areas that they are overseeing. Insofar as this is not the case, they can generally rely on the high-level career officials in the departments or agencies under their control to make sure that necessary tasks get accomplished.

Unfortunately, this is not the case now. The main — and possibly only — qualification for Trump's top appointees is the ability to tell blatant lies with a straight face. He has picked people who not only have no background in the areas they oversee, they don't even have the most basic understanding of their responsibilities. And in many cases they have fired or marginalized the career people with expertise.

Starting at the top, Trump picked a former Fox talk show host with a drinking problem, Pete Hegseth, to be his Secretary of Defense. Secretary Hegseth apparently didn't know that he

shouldn't be making war plans on unsecured channels and without knowing who was included in the conversations. He apparently also didn't know that his wife should not be included in the discussions.

Trump has a Treasury Secretary, Scott Bessent, who claims he doesn't know that tariffs (import taxes) are taxes. Since tariffs are among the oldest form of taxes, long predating the income tax, this is a pretty elementary point that a Treasury Secretary would be expected to know.

Kristi Noem, Trump's Homeland Security Secretary, didn't know what habeas corpus is. Since that is basic right guaranteed by the Constitution, it would be rather important for the person controlling the largest federal police force to be familiar with the concept.

While knowledge of their areas may not be a strong point for top Trump officials, lying in front of TV cameras is an area of real expertise. We see this constantly.

We just saw Attorney General Pam Bondi tell us that there is no Jeffrey Epstein client list. This was after telling us back in February that the list was sitting on her desk and promising that it was soon to be released.

After Trump released his "Liberation Day" tariffs, which included a steep tariff on the uninhabited Heard and McDonald Islands, Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick insisted this was not a mistake and an indication of a rushed job. Instead, he said the tariffs were necessary to prevent transshipment from other countries to escape the taxes Trump was imposing.

This is obviously an absurd claim since there were many uninhabited islands that escaped taxation. In addition, while the problem of transshipment to avoid tariffs is real, it is not one that can be solved by putting a tariff on imports from islands inhabited by penguins and seals. China and other countries whose exports are subject to high tariffs can and will ship them through countries that face much lower import taxes. If our customs agents can't recognize that we are not actually importing cars and television sets from uninhabited islands, they surely will not be able to detect that the goods coming from Thailand or Indonesia were actually manufactured in China.

Trump appointees do have a remarkable ability to lie. RFK, Jr. can tell us that discouraging people from getting the measles vaccines has nothing to do with the largest measles outbreak in decades. They all tell us that we can reduce Medicaid spending by \$800 billion over the decade (roughly 10 percent), without throwing anyone off the program. And former DOGE boss Elon Musk told us 20 million dead people were getting Social Security benefits.

But it seems that none of them can do their jobs, and since they have fired or sidelined most of the high-level civil servants with expertise, these jobs are not getting done. Hundreds of people just died in Texas because of this failure, and we are virtually certain to see far worse in the future. As much as Trump might insist otherwise, incompetence is not a virtue.

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This first appeared on Dean Baker's [Beat the Press](#) blog.

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