

Our Security Clearance Gap
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We recently learned that President Trump insisted that his son-in-law and daughter, both of them senior advisors in the White House, be given security clearances despite denial by the Intelligence Services. This raised a red flag with Trump's former chief of Staff and chief White House lawyer, both of whom kept memos of this decision.

Our presidents do have the right to award security clearances to any members of their staffs and cabinet, but this president lied that he intervened, denying any knowledge of the issue. Which raises another issue: does the President himself have an official security clearance? Astonishingly, by current law this issue never arose before. We had better think about it now.

Governments have secrets, secrets that prevent disloyal citizens from giving information to foreign or hostile governments. During times of war, it is essential for the FBI to vet workers in defense industries, in sensitive military service jobs, and congressional staffs. There are several levels of clearances: confidential, secret, top secret, and compartmentalized (special access only).

One receives the most basic level of security clearance by being interviewed, by testifying that one has no financial concerns or debts, that one has no behavior that could invite blackmail, and the investigators interview family, friends, and neighbors. For more sensitive levels of clearance, the investigations are even more rigorous.

Of course, even the most careful vetting does not always root out a very bad actor or very good liar. The agencies themselves require repeated polygraph tests to ascertain that one's life or finances have not changed from the prior test. We have had more than a few spies among us who had clearances not rechecked if they had become alcoholics, embittered and greedy, or just swayed by a clever operative from another country.

What I did not know was that the President, Vice President, and cabinet officers do not go through an FBI check for a security clearance. Apparently we have never imagined that a person could rise to the rank of President of the United States who might not be able to pass an FBI vetting process.

In the past, political parties themselves selected the nominees for president from among people they knew well: governors, senators, or congressmen, all of them with known records and standards of behavior. With the advent of direct primary campaigns, anyone at all can run for president and if they have enough populist appeal, can get elected. Nobody is vetting this person for trustworthiness, upright character, financial security, and suitability for exposure to our nation's top secrets.

The shortcoming in our system has suddenly become clear. We have elected a man who could not pass the basic requirements for a security clearance. A basic lie detector test would reveal serious tendencies to lie about everything; his financial history shows multiple bankruptcies, unpaid debts, dubious sources of money from foreign powers; his sexual history shows three marriages and multiple reckless liaisons subjecting him to blackmail; and his behavior in office raises questions about his loyalty to country.

This unvetted President has appointed cabinet members who also do not require official security clearances, resulting in numerous appointees having to be booted from office for ethical financial offenses. Such appointments do require Senate hearings and approval, which compliant members of the President's party usually grant with little fuss. We now see the consequences.

His staff, down to the most junior aides, do require FBI clearances. His own family members, however, have operated for long periods without such clearances because the FBI finds problems with granting them. In the case of his son-in-law, the president demanded his clearance, overriding the FBI, and lying to journalists who asked about this decision.

Have we permitted this gaping hole in our security against hostile forces by assuming that we could not possibly have a president who might endanger us? We could have been spared all the grief of an impeachment and possible removal from office because of great damage to our democracy if we vetted final candidates before the election.

672 words

Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of *God's Law or Man's Law*. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.