



How the Trump administration erased centuries of Justice Department experience

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Michael Ben'Ary was driving one of his children to soccer practice on an October evening last year when he paused at a red light to check his work phone. He was in the middle of a counterterrorism prosecution so important that President Donald Trump highlighted it in his address to Congress.

Ben'Ary said he was shocked to see his phone had been disabled. He found the explanation later in his personal email account, a letter informing him he had been fired.

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A veteran prosecutor, Ben'Ary handled high-profile cases over two decades at the Justice Department, including the **murder of a Drug Enforcement Administration agent** and a suicide bomb plot targeting the U.S. Capitol. Most recently he was leading the case arising from a deadly attack on American service members in Afghanistan.

Yet the same credentials that enhanced Ben'Ary's résumé spelled the undoing of his government career.

His termination without explanation came hours after right-wing commentator Julie Kelly told hundreds of thousands of online followers that Ben'Ary had previously served as a senior counsel to Lisa Monaco, the No. 2 Justice Department official in Democratic President Joe Biden's administration. Kelly also suggested Ben'Ary was part of the "internal resistance" to prosecuting former FBI Director James Comey, even though Ben'Ary was never involved in the case.

As Trump's attorney general, Pam Bondi, approaches her first year on the job, the firings of lawyers such as Ben'Ary have defined her turbulent tenure. The terminations and a larger voluntary exodus of lawyers have erased centuries of combined experience and left the department with fewer career employees to act as a bulwark for the rule of law at a time when Trump, a Republican, is testing the limits of executive power by demanding prosecutions of his political enemies.

WATCH: Ex-DOJ official weighs in on Trump pressuring Bondi to prosecute political opponents

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Justice Connection, a network of department alums, estimates that more than 230 lawyers, agents and other employees from across the department were fired last year, apparently because of their work on cases they were assigned or past criticism of Trump, or seemingly no reason. More than 6,400 employees are estimated to have left a department that at the end of 2025 had roughly 108,000, the group says.

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The Justice Department says it has hired thousands of career attorneys over the past year. The Trump administration has characterized some of the fired and departed workers as out of step with its agenda.

Ben'Ary left with unfinished business, including the prosecution stemming from the airport bombing in Kabul, the Afghan capital, and the national security unit he led at the U.S. attorney's office for the Eastern District of Virginia.

Left to pack his belongings, he posted a typed note near his door that functioned as a distress call, reminding colleagues they had sworn an oath to follow the facts "without fear or favor" and "unhindered by political interference."

But, he warned, "In recent months, the political leadership of the Department have violated these principles, jeopardizing our national security and making American citizens less safe."

Unparalleled in scale, scope and motivation

Since its founding in 1870, the Justice Department has occupied elevated status in American democracy, sustained through transitions of power by reliance on facts, evidence and law.

To be sure, there has always been a political component to the department, with lawyers appointed by the president.

But even during turbulent times, when attorneys general have been pushed out by presidents or resigned rather than accede to White House demands — as in the Watergate-era "Saturday Night Massacre" — the department's rank and file have generally been insulated thanks to long-recognized civil service protections.

"This is completely unprecedented in both its scale and scope and underlying motivation," said Peter Keisler, a senior official in the George W. Bush Justice Department.

WATCH: DOJ prosecutors resign in protest over handling of ICE shooting investigation

In his first term, Trump pushed out one attorney general and accepted another's resignation, but the workforce remained largely intact. He returned to office in January 2025 seething over Biden-era prosecutions of him and vowing retribution.

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Two weeks after Maurene Comey completed a sex trafficking trial against Sean "Diddy" Combs, the New York prosecutor was fired, also without explanation. Like Ben'Ary, she wrote a pointed farewell, telling colleagues that "fear is the tool of a tyrant." Her father, the former FBI director who was a frequent Trump target, said those same words after being indicted in September in a case that has been dismissed.

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Among the most affected sections is the storied Civil Rights Division. A recent open letter of protest was signed by more than 200 employees who left in 2025, with several supervisors recently giving notice of plans to depart. The Public Integrity Section, which prosecutes sensitive public corruption cases, has also been hollowed out by resignations.

The Justice Department has disputed the accounts of some of those who have been fired or quit and has defended the termination of those who investigated Trump as "consistent with the mission of ending the weaponization of government."

"This is the most efficient Department of Justice in American history, and our attorneys will continue to deliver measurable results for the American people," the department said in a statement. More than 3,400 career attorneys have been hired since Trump took office, the department says.

The departures have caused backlogs and staff shortages, with senior leaders soliciting job applications. It has affected the department's daily business as well as efforts to fulfill Trump's desires to prosecute political opponents.

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Desperate for lawyers willing to file criminal cases against Comey and New York Attorney General Letitia James, the administration in September forced out the veteran U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, replacing him with Lindsey Halligan, a White House aide with no experience as a federal prosecutor.

Halligan secured the indictments but the win was short-lived.

One judge later identified grave missteps in how Halligan presented the Comey case to a grand jury. Another dismissed both prosecutions outright, calling Halligan's appointment unlawful.

Smith, the special counsel who investigated Trump but left before he could be fired, has himself lamented the losses. "These are not partisans," he recently told lawmakers.

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dinner one Friday evening, she received an email suggesting she had lost her own job.

Attached was a memo from then-acting Deputy Attorney General Emil Bove ordering the firings of prosecutors such as Khalidi who had been hired for temporary assignments but were moved into permanent roles after Trump's win, a maneuver Bove called "subversive personnel actions by the previous administration." Neither the email nor memo identified the fired prosecutors, leaving them to guess.

Khalidi grabbed a suitcase to collect family photos and other personal items she kept at work and rushed to the office, retreating with fellow shocked prosecutors to a bar where they received termination emails.

The group of 15 fired attorneys later assembled to surrender their computers and phones, entering the same room where they gathered on their first day in 2023.

"For a lot of us, our dream was to be federal prosecutors," Khalidi said. "And so we had happy memories of that room, of being excited on our first day. So it was just kind of surreal to be back there turning in our stuff."

The news came for Anam Petit, an immigration judge, during a break between hearings.

READ MORE: Justice Department pushed to prosecute Kilmar Abrego Garcia only after deportation mistake, judge's order says

Hired during the Biden administration, she said she felt a little uneasy when Trump won the election but also figured her position would probably be safe because immigration judges generally have job stability and because they bear responsibility for issuing removal orders for those who are in the United States illegally, a core presidential priority.

Petit arrived on Sept. 5 bracing for bad news because it was the Friday of the pay period before her two-year work anniversary, when her probationary appointment was poised to become permanent. Though she said she had received strong performance reviews and had already exceeded her case completion goal for the year, she had become anxious as colleagues were fired amid an administration push to accelerate deportations.

She was in the courtroom between hearings when she learned via email that she had been fired. She left to text her husband, then returned to the courtroom to render a decision in the case before her.

"I just put my phone back in my pocket and went into the courtroom and delivered my decision, with a very shaky voice and shaky hands, trying to center myself back to that decision just so that I could relay it," Petit said.

Joseph Tirrell was mindful of his job security from the very start of the Trump administration. As the department's chief ethics officer, he had affirmed that Smith, the special counsel, was entitled to a law firm's free legal services, a decision he sensed had the potential to rile incoming leaders

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"There's a great deal of fear there just because I was fired and just because so many others were summarily fired," Tirrell said. "Are you going to get fired because you provided ethics advice? Are you going to get fired because you have a pride flag on your desk?"

'Our country depends on you'

Trump was promoting his administration's commitment to counterterrorism during his address to Congress in March when he announced a success: the capture of a militant from the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate who was charged in the Kabul airport bombing that killed 13 American service members during the 2021 withdrawal from the country.

Mohammad Sharifullah arrived the following day in the United States, encountering Ben'Ary in an Alexandria, Virginia, courtroom.

Ben'Ary spent the next several months working on the case, but on Oct. 1, he was fired. It was the apparent result, he told colleagues, of a social media post he said contained "false information" — a reference to the one from Kelly, the commentator.

The termination was so abrupt that Ben'Ary could not tell his colleagues where he had saved important filings and notes. Another prosecutor listed on the case, James Comey's son-in-law, Troy Edwards, had resigned days earlier upon Comey's indictment. Once set for trial last month, the case has been postponed.

In his farewell note, Ben'Ary observed that he was not alone, that in "just a few short months" career employees like himself had been removed from U.S. attorneys offices, the FBI "and other critical parts of DOJ."

"While I am no longer your colleague, I ask that each of you continue to do the right thing, in the right way, for the right reasons," Ben'Ary wrote. "Follow the facts and the law. Stand up for what we all believe in — our Constitution and the rule of law. Our country depends on you."

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By — Eric Tucker, Ass

By — Alanna Durkin R

Justice Department's heavily redacted Epstein file release draws criticism from lawmakers

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