

NATIONAL SECURITY

# Trump's canceling of 50 security clearances is unprecedented and partisan, experts say

The move is meant to please Trump voters and punish perceived enemies, and it is “the most politically saturated security action since the Oppenheimer case in the 1950s.”



— President Donald Trump leaves CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., on Jan. 21, 2017.

Olivier Doulier / Pool/Getty Images file

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President Donald Trump's decision this week to [revoke the security clearances](#) of more than four dozen former intelligence officials is an unprecedented move, underscoring his willingness to break decades-old norms to please his supporters and punish his perceived opponents, legal experts say.



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“This is the most politically saturated security action since the Oppenheimer case in the 1950s,” said Dan Meyer, a Washington-based lawyer who specializes in security clearance cases.

Meyer was referring to Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist who oversaw the secret program to build the atomic bomb during World War II, whose security clearance was removed at the height of the McCarthy era over his prewar associations with the Communist Party.

Previous administrations have been accused of rescinding security clearances based on prejudice or political bias. Until 1995, for example, gay people often had their security clearances [removed](#) as officials claimed they could be subject to [blackmail](#). During the Vietnam War, officials or contractors perceived to be opponents of the war had their clearances canceled, said Meyer, a partner at the law firm Tully Rinckey.

But no president has ever waded directly into the clearance process so publicly and on such a large scale as Trump did when he rescinded security clearances for 50 people in one step, Meyer and other legal experts said. Nor has a commander in chief chosen to publicly rescind security clearances for former CIA directors, deputy directors and other former top-ranking intelligence officials, many of whom worked for administrations from both parties.

In an executive order issued hours after his inauguration on Monday, Trump stripped 49 former senior officials of their security clearances for signing a letter more than four years ago that Trump said showed “misleading and inappropriate political coordination” with Joe Biden’s 2020 presidential campaign.

The former senior officials have repeatedly denied Trump's claim. The 2020 open letter, endorsed by former senior intelligence and national security officials, suggested Russia might

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information that jeopardized national security.

The former intelligence officials say that Trump's mass scrapping of clearances is an attempt to punish, intimidate and silence those who challenge his claims.

Trump is "trying to censor the public statements of former government officials," said a former senior intelligence official who signed the letter and spoke on condition of anonymity, citing fears of retaliation. "None of us were working in government at the time. We were private citizens."



— John Bolton listens to Donald Trump at the White House on July 18, 2019.

Chip Somodevilla / Getty Images file

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“By abusing their previous positions in government, these individuals helped sell a public relations fraud to the American people,” Brian Hughes, a spokesperson for the White House National Security Council, said in an email. “They greatly damaged the credibility of the Intelligence Community by using their privileges to interfere in a presidential election. President Trump’s action is restoring the credibility of our nation’s institutions.”

Trump’s order also raised the possibility of additional punitive action related to the 2020 letter. The executive order requires the director of national intelligence to examine whether anyone else who held a security clearance engaged in “inappropriate activity” related to the letter and to submit a report on their findings within 90 days.

Kevin Carroll, a lawyer representing one of the letter's signatories, said the former officials were simply using their right as private citizens to express their opinion. He said their public statements should have no bearing on their security clearances.

“Retired intelligence officials maintain just as much of a right to offer unclassified opinions, correct or incorrect, on public matters as do retired diplomats, military officers, prosecutors – or politicians for the matter,” Carroll said. “It is wrong to revoke their clearances simply for doing so.”

Carroll added that the federal guidelines for granting access to classified information provide no grounds for revoking a security clearance because of opinions expressed publicly.

Former officials targeted by Trump’s executive order also noted that other retired officials or military officers often express pro-Trump political opinions during recent campaigns but not been punished.

In the 2020 campaign, more than 200 retired military officers [endorsed](#) Trump in an open letter, saying they feared that alleged “socialists and Marxists” in the Democratic Party posed a threat to the country’s way of life. None of their security clearances were revoked.

Mark Zaid, a lawyer representing multiple signatories of the letter, said he believed many of the former officials no longer had active security clearances. The action therefore carried little concrete effect and amounted to a political move, Zaid said.

~~“It was clearly meant to bolster his ideological base and to show that he’s doing what they want.”~~

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tend to favor the executive branch, which retains expansive authority over determining who should have access to classified material.

Former CIA directors and deputy directors are traditionally given security clearances during their retirement to allow their successors to consult them on issues that came up.

But Trump has long harbored distrust of the country's intelligence and national security agencies, dating to the 2016 election campaign. At that time, the FBI launched a counterintelligence investigation into possible links between Trump campaign associates and the Russian government. And U.S. spy agencies assessed that the Kremlin sought to covertly tip the election to Trump through information warfare.

Trump accused the intelligence agencies of plotting to undermine his first term, part of what he and his supporters call a "deep state" conspiracy. Throughout the 2024 election campaign, Trump vowed to overhaul the intelligence community and the Justice Department.

## A disputed letter

Titled "Holding Former Government Officials Accountable for Election Interference and Improper Disclosure of Sensitive Governmental Information," the president's order refers to the open letter signed by 51 former senior intelligence and national security officials in October 2020. (Two of the signatories are now deceased.)

The letter, which was sent to news outlets, addressed [a report in the New York Post](#) that cited emails the paper said came from a laptop belonging to Hunter Biden. The Post said it had obtained the hard drive of the laptop from Trump's lawyer and ally Rudy Giuliani and reported on emails related to Hunter Biden's consulting activities in Ukraine.

The emergence of the emails "has all the classic earmarks of a Russian information operation," the letter from the former officials stated.

"We want to emphasize that we do not know if the emails, provided to the New York Post by President Trump's personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani, are genuine or not," it said, "and that we do not have evidence of Russian involvement – just that our experience makes us deeply suspicious that the Russian government played a significant role in this case."

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Carroll said the former officials' suspicions were reasonable given "documented Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election."

For Trump and his allies, however, the letter was seen as an attempt by former officials using their association with U.S. intelligence agencies to suppress damaging information about the Biden family weeks before the 2020 election. They labeled the letter's signatories, who included many supporters of Biden's candidacy, "[spies who lie](#)."

"The signatories willfully weaponized the gravitas of the Intelligence Community to manipulate the political process and undermine our democratic institutions," Trump's executive order stated.

Material found on the hard drive of the laptop was later verified, and it became evidence in a Justice Department criminal investigation of Hunter Biden. Prosecutors did not accuse Hunter Biden of corrupt dealings in Ukraine, but he was convicted on federal gun charges and pleaded guilty to tax evasion last year.

Career officials in the intelligence agencies see themselves as nonpartisan professionals dedicated to helping inform the president's decision-making regarding threats facing the country. But Trump's executive order shows how a hyperpartisan political landscape can cause a president to not trust career intelligence officials who have served administrations from both parties.

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— CIA headquarters in Langley, Va. Kevin Wolf / AP file

Trump has “excluded the core leadership from the old Republican and current Democratic circles of trust,” Meyer said. “This is about information, and controlling who is in the conversation.”

Other presidents have chosen not to exercise their authority over security clearances in such a public, partisan manner, one of the former officials who signed the 2020 letter said. Trump’s action demonstrates how he ignores unwritten norms and rules that have largely governed the conduct of his predecessors.

“Our democratic system is dependent, at the end of the day, on goodwill and people trying to do the right thing, and there being moral opprobrium attached to not doing the right thing,” the ex-official said. “And that has fallen away.”

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In the executive order, Trump said his decision to revoke the clearance for John Bolton, who served as his national security adviser during his first term, was in response to Bolton's memoir, "The Room Where It Happened."

In the book, Bolton described Trump as "stunningly uninformed" on foreign policy and [wrote](#): "I am hard-pressed to identify any significant Trump decision during my tenure that wasn't driven by re-election calculations."

But Trump's executive order said, "The memoir's reckless treatment of sensitive information undermined the ability of future presidents to request and obtain candid advice on matters of national security from their staff."

Bolton and former Justice Department officials have said the book revealed no classified information and that he handled the matter appropriately and lawfully. And a judge [rejected](#) allegations that Bolton pressed ahead with publication without the completion of a government review to remove possible classified information.

Trump this week also canceled Secret Service protection for Bolton. The security detail was provided to Bolton because of an alleged assassination plot that was part of Tehran's bid to retaliate against Trump for his approval of the 2020 U.S. drone strike that killed top Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani.

The Justice Department in 2022 charged a member of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in an alleged scheme to pay \$300,000 to have Bolton killed.

When asked about the decision on Tuesday, Trump told reporters, "We are not going to have security on people for the rest of their lives." 

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— Dan De Luce

Dan De Luce is a reporter for the NBC News Investigative Unit.

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