THE CONSCIENCE OF A PUBLIC SERVANT THROUGH THE LENS OF HANNAH ARENDT[1]

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Abstract

This paper explores the moral dilemmas and choices confronting career civil servants in the face of surging autocracy, drawing on the wisdom and insights of Hannah Arendt. Arendt maintains that a healthy, democratic nation-state fundamentally relies on a well-functioning and apolitical administration manned by career public servants. When an authoritarian demands blind loyalty and unquestioning implementation of immoral and illegal policies, the civil servant must decide whether to quit, collaborate or just go along, setting his/her conscience aside. Arendt rejects the notion that civil servants can "work from the inside" to minimize the damage, that they only normalize an evil regime. Based on my experiences as a U.S. diplomat, I disagree and explain how insiders can mitigate excesses, temper policies, bear witness to the regime's crimes and, ultimately, help rebuild institutions. Arendt nonetheless remains a north star for moral action whose writings should be required reading in the training of civil servants.

Keywords: Arendt, civil servants, autocracy, conscience, banality of evil.

Introduction

For over a year I sat at a negotiating table opposite men who had perpetrated the third greatest genocide in human history. Khmer Rouge head of security Son Sen, who was the Heinrich Himmler of Cambodia, oversaw the killing machine responsible for up to two million deaths of his own countrymen.

Son Sen had the face of a merciless killer, stone cold and utterly devoid of humanity. His few attempts to smile came off as evil sneers. His eyes were lifeless. His body

[1] The opinions and characterizations in this article are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent official positions of the U.S. government.

language was reptilian. I once included in one of my regular dispatches to Washington, reporting on these United Nations-sponsored meetings in the 1990s to bring an end to Cambodia's long civil war, a paragraph on how Son Sen, always clad in finely tailored silk suits, had a habit of methodically picking apart caviar hors d'oeuvres with a toothpick, carefully separating each part and then crushing them into a blotchy mess. I thought that small act spoke much about this man. His cohorts, on the other hand, were faces in the crowd, pudgy French-educated nobodies from good families who more resembled small-time merchants than mass murderers. These men encapsulated, at least in appearance, what Hannah Arendt termed, the "banality of evil." Whenever I think of my proximity to them, I want to take a long shower. The same goes for some of the Cuban, Vietnamese and other security officials I had to deal with in my career as a U.S. diplomat.

Twelve years after I departed Cambodia, a tribunal was established with international support to try Khmer Rouge malefactors. The outcome was mixed. Despite indicting five individuals, the tribunal ultimately secured only three convictions due to the deaths or ill health of other defendants. Cambodia's prime minister at the time, Hun Sen, a man I had dealt with directly for over two years, ironically, had himself previously been a Khmer Rouge commander. He is still in power. Karma caught up with Son Sen in 1997, however, when he and his entire thirteen-member family, including grandchildren, were murdered and their bodies crushed on the order of dying Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot.

I have always been fascinated by the incongruity, frequent in history, of reigns of terror that were presided over by people more or less like me: highly educated professionals and intellectuals raised in good middle class families. What made them take the path of iniquity, of unhesitatingly inflicting death and suffering on their fellow human beings without their consciences intervening?

The core leadership of the Khmer Rouge consisted of a highly educated, French-trained intellectual elite known as the "Paris Student Group." The movement's leader, Pol Pot, studied radio technology in Paris; his wife, Khieu Ponnary, who held senior positions in the regime, studied linguistics in Paris and became the first Cambodian woman to graduate with a baccalaureate degree; head of state Khieu Samphan was a brilliant student who earned a doctorate in economics from the Sorbonne; foreign minister Ieng Sary stud-

ied political science at the Paris Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po); Son Sen studied education and philosophy in Paris before returning to Cambodia to work as a teacher. The roster of other leaders continues along the same lines.

Most leaders of the French Revolution, responsible for up to 50,000 executions during their Reign of Terror, belonged to the wealthy and educated middle class - largely lawyers, doctors, merchants, and scholars. Robespierre and Danton were lawyers.

The leaders of the Third Reich comprised a dual social class structure derived from the lower-middle class (Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels) and the traditional upper-middle/upper classes (Speer, Goering, Neurath). Under General Government chief Hans Frank, a trained lawyer who was the son of a lawyer, mass murder became deliberate policy; four out of six extermination camps fell under his jurisdiction in Poland.

Indefatigable Nuremberg war crimes prosecutor Benjamin Ferencz, who passed away three years ago at age 103, interviewed many of the 199 defendants who were tried, of whom 161 were convicted and 37 executed. He, too, was intrigued as to what drove these people to choose the path they did: "These men would never have been murderers had it not been for the war. These were people who could quote Goethe, who loved Wagner, who were polite… He's [any Nazi war criminal] a patriotic human being acting in the interest of his country, in his mind." But Ferencz was unsparing in his judgment: "Death was their tool and life their toy. If these men be immune, then law has lost its meaning and man must live in fear." (YouTube, 2021.)

The guiding principle of Nuremberg was that "following orders" has no validity as a defense. In my own career in government, I occasionally faced the dilemma of following or refusing to carry out orders I questioned. In one highly controversial area of foreign policy, I opted not to accept further assignments after working in it for one year because I could not in good conscience do so. On three other occasions, I chose to defy the orders (more later) given me, guided by Hannah Arendt's admonition: "Conscience is the anticipation of the fellow who awaits you if and when you come home." (Arendt 1978, 191.) In other words, one's actions should not be based on orders from on high or society's widely accepted norms at a given period of time, but rather on whether one will be able to live with oneself when contemplating one's words and deeds. Can you look at yourself in the mirror without shame?

Dozens of diplomats - neutrals, Allied and Axis - defied orders and risked their careers and lives to oppose fascist regimes or to save Jews from the Holocaust during World War II, guided by their consciences. A dozen or so German envoys were caught and executed.

Diplomats and other career civil servants serving in the increasingly authoritarian administration of President Donald J. Trump face this dilemma every day. Some have resigned rather than serve in what they deem an amoral or lawless regime. Others willingly support and collaborate with the administration. Most, however, try to keep a low profile, hoping to wait it out until the day the MAGA leadership is gone. Many have confided in me privately their sentiments; in Trump's second term, they display more fear in doing so. Arendt perceptively addressed the merits and dangers of apolitical, passively obedient and collaborationist civil servants.

With the above in mind, I write this from the perspective of a policy practitioner rather than a theorist, with particular focus on those who implement a government's national security policies abroad - diplomats.

1. Hannah Arendt's Views on Civil Servants

Hannah Arendt's views on civil servants are nuanced. She weighs a respect for their professional duties against a fear of what can happen when they become cogs in an unthinking machine. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she states,

> That the authority of the nation-state itself depended largely on the economic independence and political neutrality of its civil servants becomes obvious in our time; the decline of nations has invariably started with the corruption of its permanent administration and the general conviction that civil servants are in the pay, not of the state, but of the owning classes. At the close of the century the owning classes had become so dominant that it was almost ridiculous for a state employee to keep up the pretense of serving the nation. (Arendt 1973, 153.)

Her thinking on civil servants thus can be distilled into three key streams:

The Ideal: Authority and Impartiality: Arendt maintains that a healthy, democratic nation-state fundamentally relies on a well-functioning permanent administration. When functioning properly, civil servants constitute the structural foundation that allows a free public sphere to exist. As the above passage shows, she emphasizes that political neutrality of public servants is essential, as is their economic independence so as not to have to

rely on the largesse of masters. Systemic corruption, on the other hand, denotes national decline which can lead to national collapse. This occurs when citizens perceive that civil servants are serving the wealthy "owning classes" - in today's term, oligarchs - rather than the state itself and by extrapolation, the people.

In a healthy political system, Arendt maintains that impartial judgment by career government officials is a duty, arguing that civil servants must exercise a core political faculty of judgment. Because rules cannot possibly dictate every scenario, they must draw on the Kantian concept of "enlarged mentality," in other words, being able to conceive of multiple perspectives in order to make impartial, just decisions. "To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one's imagination to go visiting," as she puts it. (Arendt 1992, 43.) Continuing on this theme, she told a West German interviewer, "No one has the right to obey"; in other words, rational beings, drawing on their capacity to judge right from wrong, must think for themselves rather than submit blindly to authority. (Südwestrundfunk. 1964.)

The Threat - The "Rule by Nobody": Arendt's respect for competence is overshadowed by her warnings about modern bureaucracy, which she views as a potentially tyrannical force: "…if we identify tyranny as the government that is not held to give account of itself, rule by Nobody is clearly the most tyrannical of all, since there is no one left who could even be asked to answer for what is being done." (Arendt 1970, 38.) Bureaucratic mass disempowers both the public and the civil servants themselves, stripping individuals of their "ability not just to act, but to act in concert." (Arendt 1970, 44.)

The Ultimate Danger - Complicity: from her coverage of the 1961 trial of Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann, Arendt examines the dark side of official duty.

Arendt rejects the notion that civil servants can "work from the inside" to minimize the damage of an evil regime. She argues that by simply going to work and maintaining order, bureaucrats normalize an evil regime and lend it a veneer of legitimacy. She postulates two options for officials: 1) the "few" who decline to collaborate, simply withdraw from public life and refuse to serve the regime; and 2) those who remain in their official duties, believing they can "prevent worse things from happening" and "mitigate" damage to society, i.e., the lesser evil. In rejecting this defense, Arendt admonishes, "those who choose the lesser evil forget very quickly that they chose evil." (Arendt 2023.)

If the layman knows anything about Hannah Arendt, it is her observations on the "banality of evil," or how ordinary individuals can participate in horrific wrongdoing because they fail to think critically about what they are doing, conform to authority, and carry out their roles without genuine moral reflection. She termed this "thoughtlessness" (*Gedankenlosigkeit*). This was confirmed for her after attending the 1961 trial in Jerusalem of Adolf Eichmann and described in her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. "The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil," she writes. (Arendt 1963, 11.)

In my own experience, again, most of the Khmer Rouge leaders appeared banal. Head of State Khieu Samphan, who also sat opposite me at the negotiating table, was nondescript on the surface, a face in the crowd, quiet and unassuming. A journalist friend who interviewed Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot shortly before he died, described him as "strikingly charming with a gentle, soft voice, very charismatic; very likable." (Radio Free Asia 2023.) Another journalist, who interviewed "Comrade Duch," the notorious commandant of Tuol Sleng prison where up to 17,000 people were methodically tortured and executed, wrote, "I'd spent 10 years pursuing a 'monster,' and found instead a wizened old man who appeared to be contrite and displaying humanity." (Broughton 2010.) Validating Nuremberg prosecutor Ben Ferencz's observations on senior Nazi war criminals, Khmer Rouge leaders could carry on a discourse on Western philosophy, Theravada Buddhism or the forces of economic growth in fluent French while orchestrating the mass slaughter of "enemies of the state."

2. Conscience and Civil Servants During World War II

According to the Study of Rescue and Altruism in the Holocaust, between 1933 and 1945 more than 300 diplomats representing 27 countries rescued Jews in more than 35 geographic areas. (Rescue in the Holocaust. 2026.) These included diplomats of Axis nations as well of neutral and Allied countries. Japan's vice consul in Vilnius, Chiune Sugihara helped some 6,000 Jews flee Europe by issuing them visas to Japan. German diplomat Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz covertly helped arrange the mass flight to Sweden of almost the entire Danish Jewish population and other Nazi targets, totaling some 8,000,

in 1943. Swiss diplomat Carl Lutz saved the lives of thousands of Hungarian Jews, including 10,000 children. Swedish envoy Raoul Wallenberg saved thousands of Jews in occupied Hungary late in World War II. Acting boldly and courageously before Nazi and Hungarian fascist troops, he issued protection letters and sheltered Jews in buildings which he designated as Swedish territory. Italian, Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, American and other nations' diplomats likewise risked careers and freedom to rescue and protect persecuted Jews and others.

Recent research reveals that over a dozen American diplomats defied orders to rescue Jews before and after U.S. entry into the war. Their achievements were recently honored posthumously by the American Foreign Service Association, noting "their moral courage during the Holocaust exemplified the highest ideals of constructive dissent." (American Foreign Service Association. 2025.)

One of these was U.S. diplomat Hiram Bingham IV, posted in Marseille prior to America's entry in the war. Working with U.S. journalist Varian Fry, he arranged the emigration of artist Marc Chagall, writer Lion Feuchtwanger, Hannah Arendt, and many other distinguished refugees as well as ordinary people. In Feuchtwanger's case, Bingham spirited the writer out of an internment camp and sheltered him in his own home, in violation of both French law and U.S. regulations, until plans were finalized to smuggle him over the Pyrenees into neutral Spain. (Feuchtwanger 1942, 254.)

Bingham and Fry secured exit papers for Arendt, her husband, and her mother to travel by train in January 1941 through Spain to Lisbon, Portugal, wherefrom they arranged passage to New York. (Bernstein 2018, 72-73.) It is worth noting that in 1942, Vichy authorities hunted down foreign refugees, primarily Jews, and dispatched 41,951 to Germany. In the following two years, the regime deported 31,899 more. Out of the total of 75,721 deportees, fewer than 2,000 survived. (Webster. 2011.) Had the Americans Fry and Bingham not intervened, Hannah Arendt and her family members might well have perished in the Holocaust.

As with many other rescuer-diplomats at that time, Bingham's career suffered for having bucked orders and he left the Foreign Service early, his war exploits unrevealed until years after his death. "He is inclined to permit idealistic considerations to transcend

the letter of his instructions," wrote the U.S. consul general in his 1941 performance review on Bingham, who, with Fry, helped some 2500 Jews escape to freedom. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 2026.)

While the focus of attention on internal opposition to Hitler is on Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg and his circle of military officers who conspired in a failed assassination plot against the Führer, a group of German diplomats was also involved. The most interesting figure for me is Adam von Trott zu Solz. Born into Prussian aristocracy, von Trott, a devout Christian, saw Nazism for the evil it was. Determined to help bring the Third Reich down, he joined the Nazi party in order to gain access to the secrets and inner workings of the regime. At the same time, he served as a foreign policy advisor to a clandestine group of anti-Nazi intellectuals known as the Kreisau Circle, which coordinated with Stauffenberg. He met secretly with allied diplomats to pass on what he learned as well as the views of his fellow conspirators. After the bomb Stauffenberg placed in the Wolf's Lair failed to kill Hitler, von Trott and his fellow diplomats were rounded up along with the complicit Wehrmacht officers, given a kangaroo trial and hanged. At the gallows he reportedly said, "It's living that makes sense of dying." (Jones 2004, 185-186.)

In similar vein, *Abwehr* (military intelligence) lawyer Count Helmuth James von Moltke, also a devout Christian from an aristocratic family, helped anti-Nazi activists emigrate when he was in private practice, was a founding member of the Kreisau Circle, strove quixotically to persuade the military and security apparatus to act in accordance with humanitarian laws and covertly assisted the allies when serving in the *Abwehr* until his arrest in early 1944, and was hanged the following year. (Balfour and Frisby 1972.) Before his execution, he wrote his sons, "Since National Socialism came to power, I have striven to mitigate the consequences for its victims and to prepare the way for change. My conscience drove me to it – it's a man's duty, after all." (von Moltke 1986, 6.)

Around a dozen German diplomats were executed for treason under Hitler. Yet it is estimated well under 10 percent of those in service prior to 1933 participated in resistance activities or suffered persecution under the Third Reich.

Few diplomats resigned of their own will after the National Socialists came to power in 1933. Most notable was Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Prittwitz und Gaffron, Berlin's ambassador to the United States, on the grounds that he could not in good conscience serve the Nazi government. He had hosted German Jewish playwright Lion

Feuchtwanger at a dinner just before announcing his resignation at which the ambassador advised him not to return to Germany. He nonetheless did and, as noted above, ultimately managed to emigrate.

The *Auswärtiges Amt*, traditionally a bastion of conservative but principled aristocrats, underwent a radical transformation after the Nazis came to power. After becoming foreign minister in early 1938, Joachim von Ribbentrop nearly tripled the ministry's staff to 6,458 by 1943. Senior officials were appointed largely based on ideological grounds. Career diplomats resented the influx of these outsiders, many of whom fell short in requisite qualifications. By the late 1930s, diplomats who were Jewish or had Jewish wives, or who were suspected of democratic or leftist leanings, had been forced out of the ministry. By 1941, around three-quarters of the ministry's entire staff were party members or candidates, including 73 who were commissioned in the SS. The ministry defended and carried out Reich policies, including those targeting Jews. The transformation of the foreign office and all ministries was a concerted policy of *Gleichschaltung*, coordination or alignment, to subordinate them to the will of the Führer. (Messenger and Paehler 2015, 140-141.)

3. Conscience and Civil Servants in the Trump Administration

How civil servants reacted to the challenges facing them before and during World War II offers a timeless moral template for today. Sweden's V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) Institute warns that "U.S. democracy is currently in a much faster deterioration process than any other democracy in modern times." (Varieties of Democracy V-Dem 2026). As creeping authoritarianism erodes democratic freedoms, rule of law and human rights in the United States under the governance of President Donald Trump, contemporary public servants are compelled to choose how they will respond. As with their German counterparts of some nine decades ago, they face three options, as defined by Arendt: remain in their positions and attempt to carry out their duties impartially and lawfully as they have always done; become passive cogs in the wheel of bureaucratic "Rule by Nobody"; or become actively complicit in executing the regime's unethical and illegal policies. "Banality of Evil" could pertain whether one is consciously complicit or merely goes with the flow.

First, it is instructive to examine Arendt's analysis of how authoritarians and totalitarians attain power. Ultimately, usurpers of political power follow a familiar pattern: exploiting loneliness, undermining objective truth, and weaponizing propaganda.

Arendt argues that totalitarian movements thrive on widespread loneliness, i.e., the feeling of not belonging to a shared world.[2] Isolated individuals in an atomized society lose their sense of place in the world and become highly susceptible to extremist ideologies. Lonely or isolated individuals are more likely to seek certainty, identity, and community wherever they can find it:

> Loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government, and for ideology or logicality, the preparation of its executioners and victims, is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluousness which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our own time. To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all. (Arendt 1973, 475.)

German society was polarized between insiders and outsiders, or what German historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler describes as a "cartel of traditional power elites" vs "the onslaught of new forces," comprising those frozen out of political and economic power. (Wehler 1987, 366.) Proportional representation enabled extremist factions, notably the Nazi Party, to surge. Corporate and labor leaders, the landed aristocracy and other interest groups shortsightedly focused on their individual self-interests at the expense of the nation's. Wealth and income inequality grew. Hyperinflation and the Great Depression devastated Germans' lives, driving many to support political extremists. Church leaders were passive in the face of growing threats to German democracy and remained largely silent on the ugly racism that took hold in political discourse. In Germany, "the typical Nazi voter was a middle-class, self-employed Protestant who lived on a farm or in a small community," according to sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset (Lipset 1960, 149.)

In undermining objective truth, authoritarians employ what Arendt calls "the coercive force of logicality" (Arendt 1973, 471), which erodes independent, critical thinking with a form of unquestioned certitude as defined by the authoritarian. They use logicality

[2] To clarify, Arendt's use of the term, *Verlassenheit*, for which there is no exact English translation, literally means a sense of "abandonedness."

to build entirely fabricated, "alternative truths," marked by simple explanations for complex problems, clear enemies to blame, and a sense of common purpose leading to a strong group identity. Lonely, isolated individuals, such as the marginalized groups in Weimar Germany, find comfort in this confected belief system because it supplants the confusing complexities of the real world. The constant flood of propaganda causes them to be overwhelmed by epistemic nihilism accompanied by the elimination of ideological complexity. "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist," Arendt writes. (Arendt 1973, 473.)

Fabrication therefore is key to the success of authoritarian rule. Hannah Arendt argues that totalitarian movements weaponize propaganda to deceive the masses, but also, again, to replace reality with a fabricated, internally consistent construct that fulfills the yearning for psychological stability. External counterevidence is dismissed as malicious counter-propaganda ("fake news"). The goal is to neuter the ability to distinguish between fiction and reality (Arendt 1973, 385). Facts and reality become a matter of mere opinion, ultimate "truth" to be defined by the leader. According Arendt, "before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion, fact depends entirely on the power of the man who can fabricate it." (Arendt 1973, 348.) Propaganda thus shelters the movement from objective reality (Arendt 1973, 366), drawing in those deficient in critical thinking and thereby most susceptible to the "propaganda effect of infallibility" (Arendt 1973, 349).

Arendt's keen descriptions of how authoritarians/totalitarians exploit loneliness, undermine objective truth, and weaponize propaganda to consolidate power are presciently applicable to the United States today.

In 2023, the U.S. surgeon general cited loneliness as a public health risk. (Murthy 2023.) Researchers have found that loneliness makes people more likely to be angry and resentful (Cummins and Zaleski 2023), and more vulnerable to extremism. (Stulberg 2022.)

Recent public polling shows that 59 percent of U.S. voters agree that economic and political systems are stacked against ordinary people; up to 84 percent of Americans believe that the very rich and powerful are above the law and that ordinary citizens have

little in common with those holding power (Bowman 2026); 80 percent state that political institutions have been captured specifically by the rich and powerful (Orth 2025); and only 16 percent feel that average citizens have a considerable or meaningful influence on the political process (Zitner 2026).

President Trump's persistent claims that the 2020 election was "rigged" (what his opponents call "The Big Lie"), his denouncing investigative journalism as "fake news" and reporters as "enemies of the people," his constant weaponizing false propaganda loaded with "alternative facts," and charges that noncitizen immigrants vote by the hundreds of thousands directly challenge objective reality. In pushing these fallacies, he creates a closed epistemic loop in which his followers rely solely on his version of reality. His claim that "I alone can fix it" in his July 21, 2016 speech accepting the Republican presidential nomination aligns with Arendt's observation that "the chief qualification of a mass leader has become unending infallibility; he can never admit an error." (Arendt 1973, 347).

There are other valid comparisons between Trumpism and previous movements addressed by Arendt, including prioritizing "mass" over "class" action, employment of victimhood and scapegoating, the use of chaos, etc. that go beyond the scope of this paper, as well as the fact that Trumpism is an authoritarian populist movement with a fluid, *ad hoc* ideology vs. a totalitarian system with a defined political-economic doctrine. Scholars have examined these in depth in a wide array of excellent analyses, and will continue to do so long after Trump is gone and the MAGA movement has faded from history.

A tool for imposing political loyalty common to authoritarian systems is what the Nazis termed, *Gleichschaltung* - coordination or alignment of state and societal structures with the leader and his agenda. Trump and MAGA doctrinists have made this a core policy. Demanding absolute loyalty to carry out extreme, often illegal, policies is a key factor in replacing democratic governance with autocratic rule. It also challenges civil servants' embedded commitment to serve impartially and lawfully in accordance with their conscience and their sense of right versus wrong, as Arendt drives home.

"We will pass critical reforms making every executive branch employee fireable by the president of the United States," Trump promised in 2022. "The deep state must and will be brought to heel." Garcia. 2022.)

The MAGA tool to bring this about is Project 2025, a radical policy blueprint organized by the arch-conservative Heritage Foundation, to dismantle the traditional, nonpartisan U.S. civil service and replace it with political loyalists. It entails mass firings, stripping civil servants of labor protections, loyalty screening and targeting disfavored agencies like the U.S. State Department for ideological cleansing. It furthermore builds a massive database of thousands of pre-vetted conservative loyalists to be hired and establishes a training framework to prepare these personnel to implement unflinchingly the president's policies. To be an effective demagogue, you must command iron-clad loyalty from hand-picked henchmen who will exert firm control over all levels of government on your behalf. This includes political purges.

The Project 2025 purges started at the State Department in earnest a year ago when 1353 employees, 246 of them Foreign Service officers, were summarily fired. This was on top of more than 1,500 other State Department employees who took voluntary departures last year. They took with them, collectively, hundreds of years of specialized knowledge, from foreign languages to arms control to international development to conflict stabilization and much more.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio furthermore has ordered an overhaul of the rigorous Foreign Service entrance exam, e.g., excising questions related to diversity and inclusion, and training is being oriented toward what the administration calls "America First" foreign policy. (Green 2026.) Those purged are being replaced by younger recruits vetted under new rules, including "fidelity" to this president's agenda. Recruiters are reaching out to conservative universities and colleges as well as military veterans to encourage MAGA-friendly individuals to apply for State Department jobs. Traditionally, around 70 percent of ambassadorships went to career diplomats, the remaining going to political appointees, most often campaign donors and friends of the president. In Trump's second term, about 10 percent of ambassadorships are given to career people, with 102 ambassadorial posts sitting vacant as of this writing; 90 percent of nominees to fill those posts are noncareer political allies. (Taylor 2026.) The administration's clear preference is to fill all senior posts with trusted MAGA supporters who display enthusiastic advocacy of President Trump and his policies. Those senior Foreign Service officers who in normal times would compete for ambassadorships and other senior positions will be compelled

to retire soon under agency rules. All of this constitutes part of the Project 2025-inspired purge of government ranks.

Project 2025 Tracker assesses that the Trump administration has achieved 55 percent of its goals overall, and 82 percent for the Department of State. (Project 2025 Tracker. 2026.) Compare this with von Ribbentrop's having transformed Germany's *Auswärtiges Amt* into a pliant institution with three-quarters of the ministry's entire staff being Nazi party members by 1941. (Messenger and Paehler 2015, 140-141.)

In his first term, Donald Trump surrounded himself mainly with veterans of government service who often reined in his excesses. In his second term, he has chosen yes-men/women, few of whom have the requisite credentials and competence to run the agencies they head. These include health secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., FBI Director Kash Patel, Defense Secretary Peter Hegseth, Attorney General Todd Blanche and so on. Arendt's observation that "Totalitarianism in power invariably replaces all first-rate talents, regardless of their sympathies, with those crackpots and fools whose lack of intelligence and creativity is still the best guarantee of their loyalty" applies equally to a populist autocrat like Donald Trump. (Arendt 1973, 337.) These "crackpots" treat civil servants as expendable and suspect, to be dismissed on a whim as thousands have been. This kind of arbitrary, politically-driven management instills greater fear and caution in those who remain.

During Trump's first term, a retired U.S. ambassador who regularly visited the State Department, told me, "morale is totally in the toilet. There is no process or any systems in place that are respected at all. The cafeteria is really doing a great business. Usually by 6 pm, the hallways are nearly deserted." An active duty Foreign Service officer told me that "nobody knows what to do and everyone keeps their head low." Senior career diplomats have been blackballed from positions on flimsy political grounds. Others are ducking for cover in marginal roles, waiting for the Trump presidency to end. Several other active duty officers have confided that they are "sticking it out" with the aim of trying to maintain or salvage norms from within and to rebuild the department once the Trump storm has passed. One of these described an increasingly toxic work environment in which employees are afraid to speak frankly, even to friends, for fear of being exposed and punished. Another stated he felt like "the last of the Mohicans." A 17-year Foreign Service veteran who was among those purged in 2025 speaks of a "climate of fear" and

posted, "Cruelty was always the point. And it's working. We've seen mass waves of early resignations, and for those still on the inside, a mad scramble to prove fidelity in a performance evaluation system that is more hunger games than meritocracy." (Saifee 2026.)

The purpose of the purges and politicization of government agencies is to create a culture of fear which permeates the ranks to the extent that now very few of those still serving will take the risk of confiding in journalists such as myself. This extends as well to the other national security agencies. In a recent article, Julia Curlee, formerly a senior CIA analyst and director of intelligence matters at the National Security Council in the White House, describes politicization of the intelligence agencies, including arbitrary firings, revocation of security clearances and distorting intelligence, all of which "is teaching the intelligence community that silence is the only job security." (Curlee 2026.) This goes as well for the FBI, hundreds of whose special agents and other employees have been either arbitrarily fired or forced out. A group representing active duty and retired agents describes "an organization internally paralyzed by fear." (A National Alliance 2025, 14.)

These agencies are in crisis and, by extension, so is the nation's security. As with their earlier German counterparts, those State Department employees remaining in the diplomatic trenches are now being confronted with instructions to pursue policies that are legally or morally questionable. Will they merely follow orders, or act on their conscience? Would they, for example, defend the annexation of Canada, seizure of Greenland, or of the Panama Canal? An alliance with Putin's Russia? The abandonment of NATO? Coercion to overthrow the Cuban government? The mass expulsion of Gazans to other countries to enable the development of a "Trump Riviera" in the Middle East? More wars of choice by President Trump, he a convicted felon? State Department personnel are already involved in facilitating mass deportations of migrants, often to countries with which they have no ethnic or linguistic affinity, in principle not unlike German diplomats who actively enabled the expulsion of Jews to concentration camps in Poland and helped organize liquidation of Jews in the Balkans.

During the administration of President Joe Biden, I asked the Foreign Service Institute, which trains U.S. diplomats, whether they taught a course in ethics, as the military

does to its members (e.g., do not obey unlawful orders). I received a long response explaining that ethical behavior is implied and diffused throughout the course of training. In other words – No.

Compliant leaders and senior officers in the U.S. military and CIA may be committing war crimes as well as violating international humanitarian law and U.S. law with military strikes on fishing boats in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific, claiming those killed were "narco-terrorists," but offering no proof. Well over 200 fatalities have been documented by outside groups. There is one documented secondary strike off of Venezuela that killed shipwrecked survivors struggling in the water, a clear war crime (Isaacson and Walsh 2026).

The more Trump and his allies consolidate authoritarian control, the harder it becomes for career civil servants to carry out their duties impartially and in accordance with the law. The pressure is on to set aside one's moral compass and unthinkingly carry out orders as a proverbial cog in the wheel of power as did the mass of German bureaucrats during Nazi rule. This is what Arendt fears when she discusses "Rule by Nobody." Furthermore, as she states in *The Human Condition*, "It is, in fact, far easier to act under conditions of tyranny than it is to think." (Arendt, 1998, 324.)

The two other options for public servants are to oppose from within as did some underground dissenters in the Third Reich, or to willingly collaborate out of belief or opportunism.

I detract from Arendt's conviction that merely remaining inside the regime, i.e., choosing the "lesser evil" in the belief one might mitigate excesses or even sabotage policies, is still choosing evil - that "no one has the right to obey." I cannot say what made her arrive at this unforgiving, purist judgment which, in my view, is impractical and unnuanced and does not hold up in the highly complex social dynamics of a repressed society under totalitarian or authoritarian rule, though she does seem later in "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship" to qualify somewhat her earlier comments on this matter: "There is no such thing as obedience in political and moral matters" and "The question addressed to those who participated and obeyed orders should never be, 'Why did you obey?' but 'Why did you support?'" (Arendt 2023.) As a university-educated veteran civil servant, I am afraid that I find these statements, in contrast to her earlier ones on this

topic, under-defined and actually *overly* nuanced. I would have made little effort in trying to parse them out while serving in government, often in high-stress situations.

Examples of officials who defied their government based on their conscience abound. Helmuth James von Moltke and Adam von Trott zu Solz clandestinely assisted the Allies. Their cabal under Colonel von Stauffenberg's leadership nearly succeeded in killing Hitler. Moreover, their moral example shone a light to others of like mind, individuals who are in a position to continue to clandestinely help enemies of the regime or to take action against its leaders. Then there were Axis diplomats like Germany's Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, Japan's Chiune Sugihara and Italy's Luca Pietromarchi, among many others, who risked everything to actively save many thousands of Jewish lives. Had they opted to quit rather than serve their regimes, those lives would have been lost. Absent Arendt's "lesser evil" civil servants, ministries of autocratic regimes would be comprised solely of true believers and fanatics, thereby obviating any internal resistance or heroic humanitarian acts, not to mention enhancing the regime's power.

Finally, once an evil regime fails or is brought down, experienced and knowledgeable functionaries are needed to rebuild institutions - e.g., nearly two-thirds of upper grade Foreign Office officials under the post-war Adenauer government had been former Nazi Party members, many, if not most, having joined under pressure or for career requirements rather than out of ideological conviction. (New York Times 1953.) Witnesses to regime crimes also emerge from the ranks of those who remain in service. Their testimonies are key in exposing unlawful policies and prosecuting regime criminal leaders.

In the Trump era, a number of senior officials acted to reign in the president's excesses during his first term; others, more junior in rank, coordinated with colleagues to exert internal resistance, and leak information to the press on internal dynamics and decision-making; still others testified against Trump before congressional committees, court proceedings and the news media.

A salient example of internal resistance is that of whistleblower Miles Taylor, who, at 32, became chief of staff to the Secretary of Homeland Security in 2019. Alarmed at the draconian policies of the Trump administration, including separating children from parents in migrant roundups, Taylor published anonymously an explosive opinion piece in The New York Times titled "I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administra-

tion," detailing internal efforts, in coordination with other officials, to contain the president's erratic and extreme policies. (Anonymous 2018.) He subsequently revealed details of controversial and unlawful activities of the administration in his bestselling book, *A Warning*. Since revealing his identity in 2020, Taylor has been a target of vindictive legal action by Trump.

Other former insiders who have provided valuable information as whistleblowers in their testimonies against the president include Cassidy Hutchinson, Olivia Troye and Sarah Matthews, young women, the first two of whom are now targets of administration retribution as well. Former Justice Department lawyer Liz Oyer resigned last year over Trump's corrupting of the pardons system and since has been a fount of inside information and a vocal critic, as has Michael Feinberg, forced to resign from the FBI in 2025.

There are active collaborators in all authoritarian regimes as well. After World War II, for example, the French government stripped nearly 50,000 Vichy collaborators of their political, civil and professional rights in a process called, *dégradation nationale*, a stain that forever is attached to their names. Those who collaborate with, or implement the Trump administration's anti-constitutional policies number in the thousands. At least five high-profile attorneys involved in the efforts to subvert the 2020 election and the events surrounding the January 6, 2021 insurrection have been disbarred, while several others have had their law licenses suspended or face disciplinary rulings. Some civil groups have declared their intention to push for disbarment and other penalties against top Trump law officials, including attorneys general Pam Bondi and Todd Blanche, in the future.

In the State Department, a number of officials formed a pro-Trump group in 2024 called the Ben Franklin Fellowship (BFF). At the same time the administration has banned all other employee organizations and unions from operating in the department, it allows and supports BFF, which has received funding from the Heritage Foundation. The deputy secretary of state and many other senior officials are members; it is estimated that half of the members conceal their membership for fear of being publicly ostracized or penalized by a future administration. Critics say the invitation-only group plays a role in identifying and recruiting diplomats based on conservative ideology and are favored for promotions and high-ranking positions. BFF posts regular pro-Trump commentary on its website, including on mass deportations of migrants. The fellowship set up an anonymous

tip line encouraging employees to turn in colleagues suspected of being "leakers" to journalists. A former head of the now-banned American Foreign Service Association has described BFF as functioning "as the equivalent of a Communist Party cell in Soviet government ministries." (AFSA 2026.) Others dub BFF members "Vichy U.S. diplomats." Do they fit into Arendt's categorization of the Banality of Evil? History will judge.

German theologian Martin Niemöller expounded on the role of conscience after World War II in describing his evolution from Hitler supporter to resister. He crystallized his transformation into the iconic poem, "First They Came" ("*Als sie kamen*.") He argued that a true conscience requires an individual to speak out for oppressed groups, even - and especially - when one does not belong to any of those groups him- or herself.

All of the individuals cited here who acted, or spoke out, against authority at great risk acted on their conscience, as anti-Hitler diplomat Helmuth James von Moltke explicitly expressed to his sons just before his execution, "My conscience drove me to it - it's a man's duty, after all."

At the outset of this paper, I mentioned that for a year early in my diplomatic career I helped carry out a controversial foreign policy that I came to conclude was unjust, one in which I could no longer engage in good conscience. It was not an unlawful policy. I simply disagreed with it and opted to disengage, never to become involved in it again. Arendt may have influenced me subconsciously – I cannot say for sure these many years later.

At three other times during my 23-year diplomatic career I defied orders which I deemed wrong on moral grounds.

In the mid-1980s, as chief of one of our consulates in Thailand, taking my cue from Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, I issued scores of official letters in both English and Thai declaring {NAME} was "a person of interest to the United States government and therefore warranted protection under international law." I did this to try to save the lives of Cambodian and Lao refugees who were being forcibly repatriated by Thai authorities, many facing death by drowning or violence. The State Department did not instruct me to do this. In fact, U.S. policy was that Thailand and the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, must take responsibility for protecting these people. The Thai clearly were not and the UN was slow off the mark. The Thai respected my confected

letters, and I hoped lives indeed were being saved. I lodged some refugees in my official residence at times as well.

At another post, I refused to carry out an incredibly irresponsible order by the ambassador that put our personnel at great risk of losing their lives to a hostile foreign force, and then arranged for the State Department to countermand the order, much to the embarrassment of the ambassador.

As chargé d'affaires in Hanoi, Vietnam, I tore up an instruction from Washington not to become involved in taking action against scammers who were selling babies for adoption to American couples. I then met with officials at Vietnam's foreign ministry to urge them to crack down on these illicit activities – and they did, immediately and with vigor.

As with the military, a diplomatic service is not a debating club. Orders, once solidified within the bureaucracy, are to be carried out to the letter. At times, however, one may be confronted with a moral choice requiring very careful deliberation. Sometimes bureaucracies formulate stupid or unjust instructions, perhaps not tailored to the specific conditions in which one is operating. As Arendt teaches us, it is then incumbent upon an official to recall that "no one has the right to obey" and one must exercise an "enlarged mentality." In a democratic system, the need to question orders should happen rarely. In an authoritarian system, it may occur daily. In each case, the receiver of the orders must weigh what to do and how.

Why do some officials blindly carry through with orders that are unlawful or immoral while others question them or even refuse to carry them out? Here we get into the realm of human psychology, which is beyond the remit of this paper, not to mention my competence. In any case, an officer of the state would be wise to always keep in mind Arendt's perceptive reminder that "conscience is the anticipation of the fellow who awaits you if and when you come home."

Conclusion

The late UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said, "It is sometimes said that diplomats lack a moral compass, passively following the orders of bosses and regimes regardless of their political or ethical character - or lack thereof."

This can be true, or not. For those serving their country and are confused, Hannah Arendt is the ideal guide to help them sort out what to do when faced with a moral dilemma in the course of carrying out their official duties. It all boils down to whether they can look at themselves in the mirror with a free conscience at the end of a work day.

Having stared evil in the eye at the negotiating table with some of history's most notorious mass murderers sitting a mere two meters away clarified in my mind any lingering doubts about when to place conscience above duty. Years previously, in 1985, I had gotten my first close-up exposure to this particular evil as a captive of the Khmer Rouge for a brief time in one of their jungle redoubts along the Thai-Cambodian border. My diplomatic skills in securing my own release made me one of only two foreigners held captive exclusively by this radical Maoist movement to make it out alive following their eviction from power by Vietnam in 1979. (The other was a young American woman, whose release I subsequently helped negotiate.) About a dozen foreigners were murdered in KR captivity during my 30-month service in Cambodia in the 1990s as a member of the first U.S. diplomatic mission there since 1975; previously, during the Khmer Rouge's rule from 1975 to 1979, at least four Americans, three French citizens, two Australians, one Briton, and one New Zealander were murdered by their KR captors.

My close encounters with the genocidal Khmer Rouge, followed by two-and-a-half years witnessing how a society recovers from the loss of a quarter of its population, the destruction of its cultural heritage, foreign military occupation and over a decade of civil war were eye-opening, to say the least. I can barely try to imagine the emotions of those millions of innocents who were rounded up to be exterminated, be it in Ukraine under Stalin, Europe under the Nazis or in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. Having, however, studied closely the personalities and decision-making behind those crimes, as well as those who opposed them and acted on their conscience, helped me clarify early in my adulthood how I would deal with evil and moral dilemmas in the course of my own public career.

Recently, six members of Congress, all military and national security veterans, made a televised plea to military members serving under the Trump regime, urging them "not to follow illegal orders." For this anodyne act, the Trump administration sought to prosecute them on bogus charges, a hallmark of demagoguery. Since leaving government service and working as a journalist, I have become something of a barefoot evangelist for

Arendtian principles through my essays, directing my message particularly toward my colleagues still serving. Overwhelmingly dedicated and ethical people, they should be wrestling with the difficult choices facing them as our government continues its slide into authoritarianism. My hope is that more are reading up on Hannah Arendt and taking to heart that which she has to teach us.

As I outlined earlier, I disagree with Arendt primarily in one area - whether to remain serving inside a malevolent regime to resist it, temper policies, bear witness to its crimes and rebuild institutions once the regime implodes. Admittedly, my views on this reflect my bias as a policy practitioner and veteran civil servant.

Fifty-one years after her death, Hannah Arendt's reputation as a north star for moral action only grows, especially as far-right authoritarianism surges again. Those serving in such systems would be wise to take to heart Arendt's central message:

> Whatever the source of moral knowledge might be - divine commandments or moral reason – every sane man, it was assumed, carried within himself a voice that tells him what is right and what is wrong, and this regardless of the law of the land and regardless of the voices of his fellow men. (Arendt, 2003, 61.)

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