

15 Unicorns Pt. 1

Announcer: Welcome to Civil Discourse. This podcast will use government documents to illuminate the workings of the American government and offer context around the effects of government agencies in your everyday life. And now your hosts, Nia Rodgers, public affairs librarian, and Dr. John Augenbaugh, political science professor.

N. Rodgers: Welcome to the podcast. This week we're talking about Fifteen Unicorns, or what it is to be a Cabinet secretary. And we're going to start by mentioning that we have a special document that we're going to be looking at over this episode and maybe a couple of others, called "The Nomination of Michael Alex Azar II to be the Secretary of Health and Human Services," and it was done before the Committee on Finance and then the link for that will be on our research guide. But I want to start off by asking Aughie some questions about what it actually means to be a secretary. So, my first question is...who do I have to kill? Who do I have to know what do I have to know? Like, I hear there's positions open. If I wanted one, what do I have to do to get it?

J. Aughenbaugh: That's uh...In one sense it's a very easy question. On the other hand, it's a very difficult question.

N. Rodgers: Those are the best questions.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes, okay. On the surface, basically, if you want to become a Cabinet secretary...so, Nia, you're like, "I want to be the Cabinet secretary for..."

N. Rodgers: Defense! I hear it's open right now.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes. It is open.

N. Rodgers: I mean, does it hurt me that I haven't served in the military? And I don't understand any of those terms? And I'm not really a military person, although I like the military? I mean, is it just enough that I like them, or do I have to actually know stuff?

J. Aughenbaugh: You might need to know some stuff.

N. Rodgers: Aww. OK.

J. Aughenbaugh: Also, in the history of Secretaries of the Department of Defense, we've had people who their expertise was basically in the private sector. So, for instance, during the Kennedy administration, he picked McNamera, whose previous claim to fame was the CEO of Ford Motor.

N. Rodgers: Oh! Okay, if we need to build cars at war, we would have been good there. But also, at that point, I assume, he was running a multi-national company, with lots of employees, lots of money.

J. Aughenbaugh: And he had brought some changes to the Ford Motor Company that drew attention to those in government. And the thinking of the Kennedy administration was the Department of Defense needed different thinking, needed changes, if you will, to fight different kinds of wars during the Cold War. But basically, there are three or four main elements to become a Cabinet secretary.

N. Rodgers: I'm sorry to interrupt. I hate to interrupt you, but I want to ask. Did McNamara know Kennedy? Like, how did his name even come up for consideration? Before you even talk about - which I appreciate and I do want to hear about what the qualities are -- but I also want to understand how you get that person's name to start with. Is it just people you know? Is it people that say, "Pick me! Pick Me!?" I mean what is the...?

J. Aughenbaugh: Some of it is, "Who do you know?" I mean, a Cabinet secretary position is a policy position, so if a President is going to pick you, the President has to have a level of comfort or confidence that you, as the Cabinet secretary, will translate and implement the President's policy preferences. So McNamara was known in Democratic Party circles, and that's important. So, you know, that's one element. Another is it helps to be an expert in the field. So, though...

N. Rodgers: So me not so much with the military, having never served in the military. I mean, I've watched a lot of movies. I guess that probably doesn't make me an expert.

J. Aughenbaugh: Probably not.

N. Rodgers: OK, fine.

J. Aughenbaugh: So, you know, if you're talking the Department of Justice, the head of the Department of Justice is the Attorney General. We basically assume they are going to be 1) an attorney.

N. Rodgers: That's probably helpful.

J. Aughenbaugh: OK. But 2) somebody that is well-known within the legal community and / or the law enforcement community for implementing laws passed by legislative bodies, because that's what the Department of Justice does.

N. Rodgers: Oh, so this person has probably served as a prosecutor or something like that in previous.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah.

N. Rodgers: Oh, OK, so they're not just walking in there saying, "I'm an attorney; that's enough."

J. Aughenbaugh: Sure, no. Because.

N. Rodgers: They've done lower levels of the job.

J. Aughenbaugh: That's right.

N. Rodgers: OK.

J. Aughenbaugh: So you've got a level of knowledge, a level of expertise, you know, you are noted in that field. Another important quality to have, at times, is do you have previous government experience. Now sometimes Presidents want outsiders. You know, they believe that a particular agency needs to be cleaned up.

N. Rodgers: Or drained.

J. Aughenbaugh: Or drained, right.

N. Rodgers: To use current lingo.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes, current lingo, "Let's drain that swamp." OK. Kind of, sort of thinking that Washington, DC got drained centuries ago, but nevertheless...insert current debate about climate change now.

N. Rodgers: Exactly. (Parentheses, which we will discuss in a much later episode.) But, in fairness to President Trump, he is not the first person to think, "I will bring massive change to this governmental structure by changing who I put into the secretary positions or other positions of influence." That is not an uncommon to think, right, going in?

J. Aughenbaugh: Oh, correct. President Obama, when he was running for the office, he said, "I'm going to come to Washington, DC. I'm going to create a new culture." And part of creating a new culture is, I'm going to appoint people as department secretaries who are going to want to work across political party lines. It didn't work out all that well, but you know.

N. Rodgers: But it was a good attempt.

J. Aughenbaugh: It was a good attempt. Ronald Reagan said that. Jimmy Carter said that.

N. Rodgers: OK. So that's a pretty common. "I'm the new guy, and I'm going to bring change because clearly what's happening isn't working or you would have kept the other guy or the other guy's party."

J. Aughenbaugh: Party, yeah.

N. Rodgers: So if two Presidents who follow each other in the same party, is it likely that a secretary might stay longer or do a sort of a longer transition than they would if they were a different party?

J. Aughenbaugh: Um...

N. Rodgers: Do you get?

J. Aughenbaugh: No.

N. Rodgers: Can you keep those people, or do you boot them out? Is it an automatic... Wait, we're going to get to that! Sorry, I'm jumping ahead.

J. Aughenbaugh: That's quite alright. So, your initial question is, "What are the things that a person needs if they aspire to be a Cabinet secretary?"

N. Rodgers: Right.

J. Aughenbaugh: And I mentioned a couple of these. One, they're known either to the President or to important people within a political party. They typically are an expert in the field. If they're not an expert in the field, they're being brought in to change a culture or change a focus of that particular department. It helps to be a friend of the President. There was an expression during the Clinton administration, "a friend of Bill," OK. An F.O.B., OK.

N. Rodgers: I didn't know there was a name for it, OK.

J. Aughenbaugh: OK. In the Bush 2 administration, it was probably less important to be a friend of the President. It was probably more important to be a friend of the vice-President because that particular President delegated a lot of the selection of Cabinet secretaries to the vice-President, in part because Cheney was an established Washington insider. Cheney...

N. Rodgers: Very experienced, he had served in Congress.

J. Aughenbaugh: Served in Congress; served in the Ford administration. He had extensive experience working in Washington, DC, both in Congress, but also in the executive branch. And, you know, at some point, if you're nominated to be Cabinet secretary, you have to get approved by the Senate. So it's important to have somebody, or somebodies in the executive branch who can help you navigate that process.

N. Rodgers: Which we're gonna...we're going to navigate the specific process in the next couple of episodes. But I want to ask about the vetting process.

J. Aughenbaugh: OK.

N. Rodgers: So I...so I get put forward for Secretary of Defense. I know; it's laughable. Just work with me. I can see you grinning. So the first thing that happens is they say to me, "Have you ever done anything completely appalling that if it comes out in the paper, we're going to be humiliated?"

J. Aughenbaugh: Actually...

N. Rodgers: No?

J. Aughenbaugh: Actually there are a few preceding questions.

N. Rodgers: OK.

J. Aughenbaugh: First they're going to reach out to you. It'll probably be not the President himself, but...

N. Rodgers: Why not? Does that give him plausible deniability?

J. Aughenbaugh: Well, it's the kind of thing that, you know, hey, there's...

N. Rodgers: Is this like the fifth grade where I ask my friend to ask you if you would go with me to a dance rather than asking myself, in case you humiliate me by saying no? Is it like that?

J. Aughenbaugh: It's maybe a little bit more sophisticated than that.

N. Rodgers: I'm just saying that a lot of government machinations can come down to the fifth grade.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, that they can be rather juvenile. And I say that a lot to my classes.

N. Rodgers: And we say that with love! Just so the podcast knows, we say that with love. We love the government, but sometimes some stuff comes up that you think, "Wow, I think I learned in fifth grade, how not to do that."

J. Aughenbaugh: Right. Basically the first set of questions is the White House staff, so it will be either the chief of staff or one of the deputy chiefs of staff, will come up with a list of potential individuals to be the secretary of a particular department.

N. Rodgers: So I'm competing with somebody.

J. Aughenbaugh: Sure. Oh yes.

N. Rodgers: That's the first thing to know, that I'm not the only person on this list.

J. Aughenbaugh: Sure. I mean it would be highly unusual if ..

N. Rodgers ...there was just one clear candidate.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, the particular White House staff just said, "Oh, it's Nia!" Not to say that you're not...

N. Rodgers: I'm fabulous!

J. Aughenbaugh: You're fabulous, but,

NR / J. Aughenbaugh: OK.

J. Aughenbaugh: So they come up with a shortlist. And then there will be a debate within the White House. Some Presidents, again, like Bill Clinton, he wanted robust debate about who should be picked for cabinet secretary positions. Other Presidents, again I'll use the second President Bush, he basically wanted the White House staff, including the vice President to do that debate and then present, "Here's our recommendation," because he was more of a delegator. Alright. But once they come up with that list, then they will make -- they will reach out to the top person on the list and say, "Are you interested?" Because they know that once they start to reach out to the potential candidates to be a Cabinet secretary, some of the stuff is gonna leak.

N. Rodgers: OK.

J. Aughenbaugh: OK.

N. Rodgers: So that's just a fact of life is that somebody's going to go, "Holy cow! They've asked me to be Secretary of Defense."

J. Aughenbaugh: That's right.

N. Rodgers: Because I know I would do that. I would call you. That's the first thing I would do.

J. Aughenbaugh: Good!

N. Rodgers: Say, "Aughie, they've asked me to be Secretary of Defense. How bad is this going to be?"

J. Aughenbaugh: Right.

N. Rodgers: Probably before I said yes. And I assume this person is also going to, like, check with family. I mean...

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes.

N. Rodgers: One of the things that I think we were going to talk and I'd like to expand on later is this idea that this person is, is going to be working very hard, very long hours, so it's not something you would say, "Sure, I'd be happy to do that in my spare time."

J. Aughenbaugh: Time, yeah.

N. Rodgers: You're going to have to give up whatever job you have. You're going to have to give up all kinds of stuff.

J. Aughenbaugh: Your life changes. Yeah, your life changes

N. Rodgers: OK. So you have to really decide if this is something you want to do. This is not a casual. None of the people who are doing, who are willing to go through the nomination process are thinking of it as a lark. It is a serious...

J. Aughenbaugh: Oh, it's a serious commitment.

N. Rodgers: ...job interview.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yep. Yeah, yeah.

N. Rodgers: They've decided that they want to work for this company, the company known as the federal government.

J. Aughenbaugh: Government. So, once it is determined that this person is at the top of the White House list, is interested, then we do what you mentioned a few moments ago. There's a vetting. The vetting is...has multiple purposes. You know, part of it is done by the FBI. The FBI's going to go ahead and see if, you know, you've got tax problems. Do you have criminal, do you have criminal problems?

N. Rodgers: So the President can authorize that that?

J. Aughenbaugh: Sure.

N. Rodgers: He can authorize to look at you, an individual...

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes.

N. Rodgers: ...once they've given permission.

J. Aughenbaugh: Right.

N. Rodgers: I assume I have to give permission to do that.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes you do. And if you say...

N. Rodgers: So he can't have me looked into before they ask me. Because there's a grey area.

J. Aughenbaugh: Technically they should not.

N. Rodgers: Well, but, I mean, if they Google you, they can do a lot now.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, right.

N. Rodgers: Without -- it wouldn't involve the FBI. There's some of that you have to be careful of. "Remember kids, be careful what you put on Facebook."

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, on social media like that. Because you don't need the FBI to go ahead and find that.

N. Rodgers: You don't need... somebody's friend to find that, even before the FBI.

J. Aughenbaugh: So technically they should get your permission.

N. Rodgers: OK.

J. Aughenbaugh: Because it is a background check.

N. Rodgers: OK.

J. Aughenbaugh: So the FBI's going to look into you. On the political side, the White House staff will do a deep dive into your politics. You know. Who did you support? Did you write anything in your youth?

N. Rodgers: Ahh.

J. Aughenbaugh: Were you a member of organizations?

N. Rodgers: Did you perhaps make mistakes with your yearbook pages?

J. Aughenbaugh: Pages, for instance, right, yeah. Yes.

N. Rodgers: Just as a random example.

J. Aughenbaugh: Example, yes, exactly.

J. Aughenbaugh: Let's assume that that vetting comes back and you're relatively quote-unquote "clean".

N. Rodgers: Although, let us note for the record. No person...

J. Aughenbaugh: No.

N. Rodgers: ...has ever not made a mistake that they are going to be asked about in a Senate hearing later -- which we will talk about with the nomination process. But, I mean, there's never going to be somebody that's completely angelic.

J. Aughenbaugh: And even if you are, as the nominee, you have people in your life.

N. Rodgers: Probably. Probably you've talked to somebody at some point.

J. Aughenbaugh: Right.

N. Rodgers: My guess is.

J. Aughenbaugh: OK. You have a partner. You have kids. You have a brother, a sister, a mom or a dad, right.

N. Rodgers: You've been in corporations, that may or may not have done...

J. Aughenbaugh: ...bad stuff.

N. Rodgers: ...mysterious things.

J. Aughenbaugh: Right. So, you will get asked 'bout that. Because, in part, they are trying to go ahead and gauge your fit by the people in your life who you are...who are closest to you, who are your best friends, the people who molded you as parents, as brothers, sisters, family members. OK. They're going to want to know this because, in part, the seriousness of the position, the responsibility you have, the amount of money you will be in charge of, the amount of authority that Congress will delegate to your agency, and you are, technically, supposed to faithfully execute those laws. They're going to want to know all this stuff. Now, part of it is salacious. It's voyeuristic. Right.

N. Rodgers: Right.

J. Aughenbaugh: OK. Oh, my goodness!

N. Rodgers: If the National Enquirer got ahold of this, could they make a story out of it?

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah. Alright and can they...

N. Rodgers: And if they can, then probably no-go.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, right. But the other part of it is...

N. Rodgers: Although they're pretty talented. They can make stories about just about anything.

J. Aughenbaugh: Or they can extort you so that they don't publish it. No, I'm sorry. That's...

N. Rodgers: ...a separate issue. A separate issue and a different podcast.

J. Aughenbaugh: That's a different podcast. Right? But nevertheless these are serious positions. These are positions of authority, of responsibility, of trust. Another way to look this is, if you are confirmed, depending on the agency, you are responsible for directing, in some cases, thousands if not millions of government workers. We're going to want to know. Are they qualified to do this?

N. Rodgers: That you have some HR skills.

J. Aughenbaugh: HR skills, yeah, that you have some HR skills. Are you a person who will not abuse the authority and the trust that, even if we don't that the position exists, we are just very broadly conceived as a citizenry putting trust in you. So they're gonna wanna know this. And it's terribly invasive. I mean, it's a terribly invasive process, because, once the vetting is done at the executive branch side of government, then they're going to put forth your name to the United States Congress. And for some members of Congress, what your agency does might have a huge impact on their state, on their constituents. Yeah.

N. Rodgers: Oh, as a North Carolina native, the military is hugely involved in North Carolina local politics, in the specifics of what Senators and Congresspeople are supposed to bring back to North Carolina. We have Lejeune. We have Bragg. We have...right. There's a lot of military.

J. Aughenbaugh: Well. Just even think about here in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

N. Rodgers: Right.

J. Aughenbaugh: I mean, the entire Hampton Roads area OK and Northern Virginia OK. I mean.

N. Rodgers: Right so in a way the government employees here really matters to our Senators, to our Congresspeople.

J. Aughenbaugh: Et cetera.

N. Rodgers: Hence that's why our people were very vocal during the shutdown, because they were concerned about constituents not being paid. Right.

J. Aughenbaugh: That's right.

N. Rodgers: They were concerned. I mean that's a big concern...

J. Aughenbaugh: Because of the...

N. Rodgers: for the Virginia representatives, right.

J. Aughenbaugh: Representatives, right. Because if they're not being paid, then they can't pay their mortgages. They can't buy groceries. They can't pay utilities.

N. Rodgers: It has some economic carry-on effects, but it also has, I assume, political carry-on effects.

J. Aughenbaugh: Sure.

N. Rodgers: It's gotta fill you with just a little bit of resentment; I would think.

J. Aughenbaugh: So, these are important positions. And thus the vetting process is going to be an intensive one. It's going to be, as I mentioned a few moments ago, invasive of one's privacy. And you ought to think long and hard as a potential nominee, not just the nominee, but as a potential nominee. Do you want to do this? And some people say, "Nope. I'm not going to subject myself, my family, my friends to this level of scrutiny." Others, their desire for public service is so great that they're like, "Yes."

N. Rodgers: And that does seem to be a common thread that these nominees have, that's there's something that they want to accomplish, or there's something that they believe should be -- should be recrafted or done or carried through. They do seem to be motivated by a sense of service, as far as I can tell, regularly. Now that doesn't mean everybody. I'm sure some people are in it for some personal reason that we don't know anything about. But it is, you touched on something a minute ago. You said it can be life altering. And I think that's a fascinating to remember about the nominees is that it changes you, I assume, forever.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes.

N. Rodgers: It's going to change the way you live the rest of your life, not just the next one to four to eight years, depending on how long you are in service to a particular presidency. But, forever, you are going to be the former secretary of something.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yep.

N. Rodgers: After you are no longer that. Which, that still carries weight. I mean now in foreign affairs, people still ask Madeleine Albright. They still ask, you know, they asked Howard Baker for years after he was no longer.

J. Aughenbaugh: Condoleezza Rice

N. Rodgers: Condoleezza Rice, Senator Clinton. There's just a lot of

J. Aughenbaugh: John Kerry

N. Rodgers: Excuse me, Secretary Clinton.

J. Aughenbaugh: John Kerry.

N. Rodgers: John Kerry. There's a lot of people who still get asked and still get asked to weigh in because they have this experience. And then they have to be careful about how they present any argument they may have because they don't want to be disrespectful to the office of the President

J. Aughenbaugh: Sure.

N. Rodgers: And the other thing is these folks serve at the pleasure of the President. Right, so?

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes.

N. Rodgers: They can be asked to not serve anymore if they are no longer either, what, perceived as not being able to do the job or not being able to accomplish or not following the policy rules of the President?

J. Aughenbaugh: President, yes.

N. Rodgers: I assume you can be fired because he just doesn't like you anymore. I mean there's like a variety of reasons, but I assume most of it has to do with policy?

J. Aughenbaugh: Sure.

N. Rodgers: Right, I can't uphold this policy, or I can't, in good conscience...

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, so...

N. Rodgers: ...do these things.

J. Aughenbaugh: That's a very salient point, Nia. These are policy positions. So, and a good thing to remember here is a Cabinet secretary is a policy position. They're supposed to reflect, in large part, the will, the policy will or the policy preferences of the President. And most of them are picked, in part, because they've already made it very much clear to the White House, "Yes, you and I are on the same page. I will do, I will implement what you want to achieve," whether it be the Department of Defense, Health and Human Services, etc. If you no longer have the confidence of the President or if you weren't successful in doing what the President wants, the President can remove you. There's, you know, that's a Presidential authority. The Senate...

N. Rodgers: Is that the thing where they say to you, "It'd be really good if you resign right now."

J. Aughenbaugh: Sure, yes.

N. Rodgers: But they hardly ever just straight up fire somebody, right? Until this presidency, that was pretty uncommon.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, I mean it's...

N. Rodgers: They gave you the sort of, "You should find another job. It would be good for you to go now."

J. Aughenbaugh: "You have the choice."

N. Rodgers: With quotation marks around it.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah. Now sometimes Cabinet secretaries are asked to step down because Congress indicates to the White House that it doesn't have confidence.

N. Rodgers: Ah, and that counts.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, and well, I mean in part because if Congress, for instance, says to a President, "We don't like what's going on the Department of Veterans Affairs." That's occurred across a number of Presidents. Presidents then are kinda sorta given a very difficult choice. Even if they still believe in the Cabinet secretary, the Congress might go ahead and say, "We're going to hold extensive oversight hearings into what's going on in that department." Or, "If you don't clean house, you're not going to like the appropriations, what we give in the budget for that particular department."

N. Rodgers: So Congress will just make you miserable until you do what they want.

J. Aughenbaugh: Until you do what they want, yeah. And, so there's that. Occasionally, and we've seen this with a couple Cabinet secretaries with the current presidential administration, because there were allegations of criminality or fraud, either important stakeholders or members of Congress said to the President, "You've gotta get rid of them."

N. Rodgers: Can secretaries be sued, in their positions?

J. Aughenbaugh: Typically, no.

N. Rodgers: OK

J. Aughenbaugh: Because they have policy positions.

N. Rodgers: So this person has to be a policy person. This person has to be an administrator. This person has to be charismatic, right, because they're carrying a message for a President. This person has to be able to get along with the President and and able to get along with the Congress, which may or may not be the President's party.

J. Aughenbaugh: That's right.

N. Rodgers: OK.

J. Aughenbaugh: Good luck finding somebody.

N. Rodgers: Hence unicorns.

J. Aughenbaugh: Unicorns, yeah, because good luck finding somebody with...

N. Rodgers: All that skill set.

J. Aughenbaugh: With that combination of skill sets.

N. Rodgers: There's a lot of burnout in this job, isn't there.

J. Aughenbaugh: Oh, my goodness, yes. It is highly unusual to see a Cabinet secretary last through just one presidential term.

N. Rodgers: Wow!

J. Aughenbaugh: It's highly unusual.

N. Rodgers: So a President has not only to find...

J. Aughenbaugh: And, by the way, the burnout rate has gone up with recent Presidents.

N. Rodgers: Well, I assume that, in part, because...

J. Aughenbaugh: Oh, the heightened

N. Rodgers: ...everything just gets worse once there's a huge amount of press involved and a huge amount of social media and there's a lot of - not worse, but now there's a lot of in the sense of...

J. Aughenbaugh: There's more scrutiny.

N. Rodgers: You are now, right, there's more scrutiny, more transparency. You're now responsible to more people and to more people's opinions than you might have been in previous.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, I mean, as scholars have pointed out, changes in the media, changes in the level of scrutiny. Another element is the current, shall we say, political climate or culture in Washington, DC, which is very hyper-partisan. These have all contributed to Cabinet secretaries not lasting as long. And in government, just like in the private sector, the more you have turnover, the more difficult, you know, the greater the difficulty is in doing the job of that organization.

N. Rodgers: Because you have training, and you have, I mean, there's a slowdown in finding a new person and training them.

J. Aughenbaugh: And then the career civil servants. You know, think about a private sector corporation. When their CEO position is vacant, you don't know what is the direction. You don't know what the focus is. You know what you're supposed to do on a daily basis, but in terms of broad mission, broad purpose, okay, you start to have doubts. Likewise, if you're talking about a large bureaucracy, sure, you know the Social Security Administration knows that they have to make sure that the checks get deposited into grandma and grandpa's bank accounts every month. Right?

N. Rodgers: Right.

J. Aughenbaugh: But in terms of any new policy initiatives, things you might have just started because, hey, the new President came in and said, "Hey, we're going in this direction," and you're like, "OK." But President's person just stepped down, under fire perhaps. What are we supposed to be doing?

N. Rodgers: But there's an acting guy. Right?

J. Aughenbaugh: Sure.

N. Rodgers: There's never a...

J. Aughenbaugh: No, I mean there's never a...

N. Rodgers: ..."We just don't fill that position."

J. Aughenbaugh: Yep. No, because underneath each department secretary are under-secretaries or deputy secretaries. And many of them have been career people who have now moved into these more policy-oriented positions. So the agency still functions. But at the same time, in terms of having somebody who is the designated secretary? You start to have questions about that, OK.

N. Rodgers: And if you go enough turnover, I think it would scare you into perhaps considering a different...

J. Aughenbaugh: Sure.

N. Rodgers: A different job or a different agency.

J. Aughenbaugh: Different agency, sure.

N. Rodgers: A lot of government employees want to stay in government employment because their retirement is in it and all those other things are in it, but they don't have to stay with a certain agency. A lot of their jobs, their talents are transferable...

J. Aughenbaugh: Transferable, yeah.

N. Rodgers: ...to other agencies.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah.

N. Rodgers: So if your agency was constantly seeing a churn at the top, that would be, that could potentially be unnerving enough to make it hard to keep that workforce at its level.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah. I mean, think about the turnover in the Department of Veterans Affairs. I mean, they've had by my last count, since the second President Bush, five different Cabinet secretaries.

N. Rodgers: Wow. That's a lot.

J. Aughenbaugh: That is a lot. Right, and...

N. Rodgers: For people doing the math at home, that's only like ten years.

J. Aughenbaugh: That's right.

N. Rodgers: That's a lot of turnover.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, that's a lot of turnover. Also, Congress likes to establish relationships. And when there's constant turnover, then Congress is wondering, "Where's the leadership of this agency?"

N. Rodgers: So that lack of stability is just harmful all around.

J. Aughenbaugh: It's harmful.

N. Rodgers: So you're hoping that, when you find your unicorn, your unicorn stays with you.

J. Aughenbaugh: Sure.

N. Rodgers: But theoretically, Presidents are finding not just fifteen but like thirty or forty-five.

J. Aughenbaugh: Right. And with the current President, the situation is worse because he's got more of a private sector mentality in regards to unit heads. If he's not getting immediate results, he's getting rid of people. And right now, we...

N. Rodgers: Kind of like your first quarter earnings.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes.

N. Rodgers: If your earnings start dropping after first quarter,

J. Aughenbaugh: Bye-bye.

N. Rodgers: By third quarter, you're gone.

J. Aughenbaugh: You're gone. Yeah, right.

N. Rodgers: We can't sustain that for our stakeholders. From a business point of view, he's actually acting the way a business leader would act.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, it's very customary for what you see in the CEOs in the private sector. However, in government? This is significantly different, significantly different.

N. Rodgers: Well, and it must be very frustrating, in some ways, for him that the bureaucracy moves as slowly as it does. I mean the ship of state, as it were, is larger than any corporation, so trying to getting it to move in one direction or another must be very frustrating for pretty much everybody involved.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah. The current President is the only President in the history of the United States who never had previous government service or previous military experience. And the last President we had who didn't have previous, shall we say, civilian government experience, was President Eisenhower. And one of the more infamous [quotes](#) -- it's a paraphrase because I can't remember it word-for-word -- was Eisenhower's predecessor, Truman, went ahead and remarked when his two terms were up, 'Poor Ike. He's going to issue orders, and the bureaucracy is not going to respond.' Because in the military, you issue orders...

N. Rodgers: Yes sir!

J. Aughenbaugh: That's right, chain of command. But with the federal government,

N. Rodgers: Yes sir, next week. We'll get to that.

J. Aughenbaugh: Or it might be two, three years down the road. And that's one of the difficult things for many Cabinet secretaries is that when they come in the office, they get pressure from the President, maybe even Congress to change things around in their department. But to get policy change within departments, they have to follow some rather significant laws that focus on process, not outcome. So to change a regulation in an agency typically takes two, two and a half years, just a regulation. And many Cabinet secretaries are like, "That's not what happens in the private sector."

N. Rodgers: Right. If it took me two and a half years to change our product packaging, we'd be out of business.

J. Aughenbaugh: Or if they came from state or local government.

N. Rodgers: They have to be far more nimble.

J. Aughenbaugh: And if they came from state or local government, again, state and local governments are smaller. Change comes quicker.

N. Rodgers: Right.

J. Aughenbaugh: Or if they came from an interest group, well, interest groups, again, don't have to worry about federal law or the federal Constitution, in most instances. Right? So interest groups can go ahead change a focus. "Hey, we want to focus on this particular element of policy." Well, a particular bureaucracy, career civil servants, even if they want to go ahead and do your change...And remember career civil servants are experts in their field. We hire them because they're experts. They tend to push back at times against people who are the new Cabinet secretary, who says, "I'm going to bring in a new culture," or, "We're going to have a new focus." They kind of sort of push back. They're like, "Hey, we're the experts. We were hired because of our expertise." And we see this, for instance, in an agency like EPA all the time. It doesn't matter if it's a Democratic President or a Republican President. They'll come in and say, you know a Democratic President, "We're going to be more aggressive in using environmental laws." The career civil servants are like, "OK, but we have to go through the regulation process." Or conservatives say, "We're going to reduce regulation."

N. Rodgers: Right. We're going to deregulate.

J. Aughenbaugh: OK, because this has a cost on doing business. And the experts in the EPA are like, "Yeah, we might get to in two and a half, three years."

N. Rodgers: Well, and you have to tell Congress, because some of that has to be...

J. Aughenbaugh: ...reported to Congress.

N. Rodgers: And Congressionally changed. I mean some of those. You can't just say, "I'm going to abolish the EPA." It doesn't work that way.

J. Aughenbaugh: In regards to regulations...

N. Rodgers: Some candidates in the past have said, "I'm just going to abolish this department." I don't think you are. I think that Congress is going to say, "No thank you."

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah.

N. Rodgers: Like, "How nice for you, that you want to do that, but we're not interested in doing that." Right?

J. Aughenbaugh: Because Reagan, for instance, ran in 1980 and said, "I want to abolish the Department of Energy and the Department of Education," which, by the way, were created in his predecessor's tenure. Right. And the response of Congress was like, "Nah, no, you're not."

N. Rodgers: No. Goodbye.

J. Aughenbaugh: As President, you can go ahead and go slow on how you would implement the law. Or you could convince the career civil servants to change regulations.

N. Rodgers: Or you can alter the budget requests that you make for certain agencies.

J. Aughenbaugh: Oh, sure.

N. Rodgers: There are ways to, and I'm going to put this in quotes "punish," but there are ways to slow down agencies in that way.

J. Aughenbaugh: Oh, sure.

N. Rodgers: And then your nominees will quit, I mean your secretaries will quit, because that's just annoying. You're cutting my budget in half and not letting me do anything. "Hey, I'm going to hire you for this job and not have you do anything." Some people would think, "Great!" But not people who are getting into it 1) for this service level.

J. Aughenbaugh: And they want to make a difference.

N. Rodgers: And 2) they just went through this whole horrible vetting process. Not for nothing. Nobody wants to do that, because that would be annoying.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah.

N. Rodgers: Basically, I think what you're telling me is that I'm never going to be nominated for the Secretary of Defense, and that's probably a good thing.

J. Aughenbaugh: Perhaps.

N. Rodgers: OK. I'm going to cry some tears about that, but I'm not going to do it right now.

J. Aughenbaugh: OK, I understand.

N. Rodgers: OK.

J. Aughenbaugh: I'll get you a crying towel.

N. Rodgers: Thank you. Alright. So, thank you so much for listening to this episode. And if you would like to know more about the nomination process, we're going to be talking about that in the next episode.

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