

Letting the sun shine in – for a while: why (most) US presidents embrace openness

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Most US politicians with ambitions to shake up the status quo say they want more openness in government – though many of them go off the idea after they acquire power. Donald Trump, however, is not interested in either open government or the usual nods to transparency that presidential candidates offer. But as he is discovering, secrecy in politics attracts suspicion, writes **Ben Worthy**.*



Most US presidents that want to shake things up want to open them up too. From Woodrow Wilson to Barack Obama, those wanting to change the system have championed greater openness, whether by promoting [openness in international affairs](#) or [rebooting FOI and Open Data](#). ‘Sunlight’, they would almost always say, ‘is the best disinfectant’. Even LBJ, albeit reluctantly, became the father of the first US FOI law when he [sulkily signed the 1966 bill](#).

This is not to say that they stay open and ‘sunny’. Most radicals go off being open. Some do it quickly, some do it slowly, but go off they almost always do. Woodrow Wilson, for all his promises, introduced the 1917 Espionage Act and [hid his severe illness in 1919](#) from the public for two years (and his wife governed, giving the US a secret female president between 1919-1921). For all his promises, Obama also [clamped down hard](#) on leakers. As [Sissela Bok](#) put it:

‘How many leaders have come into office determined to work for more open government, only to end by fretting over leaks, seeking new ways to classify documents and questioning the loyalty of outspoken subordinates?’ (Bok 1986, 177).

Donald Trump seems to have skipped the ‘open government’ phase entirely and gone straight to the fretting. Greater transparency is not part of his big 100 day plans. Trump isn’t even transparent about the smaller things presidents are generally open about. In the US candidates and office holders regularly publish their tax returns as a matter of

course. Details of [Obama's falling income](#) were on the White House website and you can see Reagan's, Nixon's, Truman's and some of FDR's on the great [Tax History project site](#). Hillary Clinton's returns are [here](#) and Bernie Sanders' (possibly [incomplete](#)) ones [here](#). Presidents also release medical records. Except, of course, Donald Trump, who released a [rather brief statement](#) that his doctor later [confessed to have written 'in a few minutes'](#).

All these little Trumpian secrets seem rather tame in comparison with 'Russiagate' that we see unfolding before our eyes (see [this great piece](#) for a detailed analysis and [these 7 charts](#)). This week the [Senate hearings on Russian interference in the US election](#) began in earnest while Mike Flynn, Trump's former National Security Advisor, [looks to go public](#). Though it isn't clear what [sort of scandal it is](#) or where it may go, it is clear that all this secrecy is damaging the White House. Secrets almost always do three things: create suspicion, leaks and pressure to be open.

Problem one is that **secrets makes people suspicious**. Trump's non-release of tax returns, for example, appears odder and odder – even Wikileaks is interested in it. As John Dean said, putting pressure on the FBI is [not the behaviour of innocent people](#). And he should know: he was White House counsel for Richard Nixon 1970 until 1973.

This suspicion was encapsulated in Jeff Sessions' cover up and non-answers to Congress. If, as defenders asserted after, it was normal to meet the Russian ambassador, why not say it? Why hide it? As [Chris Hayes](#) put it 'there's this pattern...in which there's this kind of bizarre disassembling about the basic facts of the matter...do you understand why that reads to people as fishy?' As the [Onion put it](#), 'Heartbroken Russian Ambassador Thought Special Meetings with Jeff Sessions Were Very Memorable'.

Problem two is that **strident denial and clamping down kickstarts all sorts of informal openness**. 'The ship of state', as the saying goes, 'is the only known vessel that leaks from the top'. And Trump's White House is extraordinarily and [spectacularly leaky](#), as a result of factions, frustration and fear ([not because of Trump's phone](#)). Even the administration's [attempts to clamp down on leaks leak](#).

Problem three is that **secrecy attracts attention and motivates others to force you to be open**. Trump's supposed smokescreens and distractions via Twitter are spectacularly counterproductive. There are currently no less than three Congressional investigations ongoing (Senate intelligence, House intelligence and House oversight) all of whom will search, call witnesses and dig. Even Republicans in Congress, who have accepted his racism, sexism and mocking of the disabled, are beginning to want to know more. There's also a [joint intelligence services probe](#), run by many of the organisations Trump has outright insulted. On 20 March, the heads of the FBI and CIA, in Congressional hearings, contested Trump's wiretapping claims: as [one observer put it](#) 'two months after taking office, Trump has implicitly been branded a fantasist by the heads of America's largest law enforcement agency and its largest intelligence agency'. These investigations

...guarantee that the Russia cloud will hang over the Trump administration at least until the various investigations are over [this] could take months and possibly years to wrap up. All the while, speculation is likely to be fuelled by more leaks, and more embarrassing testimonies.

The media are pursuing Russia and, in a further echo of Watergate, are keeping the topic on the front pages. Meanwhile a [whole host of FOI requests](#) ask about Trump's conflicts of interest with more than 3000 followers of this [Trump FOI Slack channel](#) and at least [184 requests](#) on the requesting site muck rock (perhaps someone should invent a bot [like this one](#)).

As [I wrote in relation to Theresa May](#), some politicians are born to be open, some achieve openness by accident and some have openness thrust upon them. The combination of suspicion, leaking and pressure is shining a light on the new president. Russia is now coming to dominate everything Trump does and undermine everything else. Soon there will be an attempt to answer the most dangerous question in politics – why? There may never be a smoking

gun, but the glimpses and hints at a truth, and the drip of revelations, are likely to be deep, dangerous and damaging. Even in the very unlikely event there is no gun, just smoke, remember it's the smoke that normally kills. Trump will regret he wasn't more open from the start.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

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