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Kakistocracy in America

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“What fills me with doubt and dismay is the degradation of the moral tone,” wrote the American poet James Russell Lowell in 1876, in a letter to his fellow poet Joel Benton. “Is it or is it not a result of democracy? Is ours a ‘government of the people by the people for the people’ or a kakistocracy rather, for the benefit of knaves at the cost of fools?”

Is there a better, more apt description of the incoming Trump administration than “kakistocracy”, which translates from the Greek literally as government by the worst people? The new US president, as Barack Obama remarked on the campaign trail, is “uniquely unqualified” to be commander-in-chief. There is no historical analogy for a President Trump. He combines in a single person some of the worst qualities of some of the worst US presidents: the Donald makes Nixon look honest, Clinton look chaste, Bush look smart.

While kakistocracy may be a term unfamiliar to most of us, this is what it looks like. Be prepared for four years of epic misgovernance and brazen corruption. Despite claiming in his convention speech, “I alone can fix it,” the former reality TV star won’t be governing on his own. He will be in charge of the richest, whitest, most male cabinet in living memory; a bizarre melange of the unqualified and the unhinged.

There has been much discussion about the lack of experience of many of Trump’s appointees. Yet what should equally worry the average American is that Trump has picked people who, in the words of the historian Meg Jacobs, “are downright hostile to the mission of the agency they are appointed to run”. With their new Republican president’s blessing, they want to roll back support for the poorest, most vulnerable members of society and do not care how much damage they do in the process.

Take Scott Pruitt, the Oklahoma attorney general is selected to head the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Pruitt describes himself on his LinkedIn page as “a leading advocate against the EPA’s activist agenda” and has claimed that the debate over climate change is “far from settled”.

The former neurosurgeon Ben Carson is Trump’s pick for housing and urban development, a department with a \$49bn budget that helps low-income families own homes and pay the rent. Carson has no background in housing policy, is an anti-welfare ideologue and ruled himself out of a cabinet job shortly after the election.

The fast-food mogul Andrew Puzder, who was selected to run the department of labour, does not like . . . well . . . labour. He prefers robots, telling *Business Insider* in March 2016: “They’re always polite . . . They never take a vacation, they never show up late, there’s never a slip-and-fall, or an age, sex or race discrimination case.”

The billionaire Republican donor Betsy DeVos, nominated to run the department of education, did not attend state school and neither did any of her four children. She has never been a teacher, has no background in education and is a champion of school vouchers and privatisation. To quote the education historian Diane Ravitch: “If confirmed, DeVos will be the first education secretary who is actively hostile to public education.”

The former Texas governor Rick Perry, nominated for the role of energy secretary by Trump, promised to abolish the department that he has been asked to run while trying to secure his party’s presidential nomination in 2011. Compare and contrast Perry, who has an undergraduate degree in animal science but failed a chemistry course in college, with his two predecessors under President Obama: Dr Ernest Moniz, the former head of MIT’s physics department, and Dr Steven Chu, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist from Berkeley. In many ways, Perry, who spent the latter half of 2016 as a contestant on *Dancing with the Stars*, is the ultimate kakistocratic appointment.

“Do Trump’s cabinet picks want to run the government – or dismantle it?” asked a headline in the *Chicago Tribune* in December. That is one rather polite way of putting it. Another would be to note, as the *Online Etymology Dictionary* does, that kakistocracy comes from kakistos, the Greek word for “worst”, which is a superlative of kakos, or “bad”.