

# WSJ Print Edition

*The national-security communications snafu shows a government in the hands of immature bros.*



## A New Administration's Signal Failure

### DECLARATIONS

*By Peggy Noonan*

The Signal mess is a real mess, not something that will fade away quickly, because it's one of those scandals that give the world a picture of a new administration.

At just about this time in John F. Kennedy's presidency (April 17-20, 1961) came the Bay of Pigs disaster, the failed invasion of Cuba by U.S.-backed and trained exiles who had been assured of American air support but learned on the beach it wouldn't be forthcoming. It shadowed JFK for a long time. The Soviets concluded he was a dilettante and inferred from his actions an ambivalence about the use of force, which led Premier Nikita Khrushchev to rough him up at their first summit, that June in Vienna. JFK

wasn't prepared for such treatment. He confided to the journalist James Reston that it was "the worst thing in my life"; Khrushchev "savaged me."

In August the Soviets erected the Berlin Wall; a year later they put missiles in Cuba. Kennedy's mastery in the latter crisis, in October 1962, had a reordering effect on his international reputation. Good things followed, including his American University address in which he felt free, having proved himself, having established a more grounded relationship with the Soviet government, to unveil a new plea for nuclear arms control. His speechwriter, the great Ted Sorensen, told me years later that of all the speeches they worked on—the Inaugural Address, the announcement of the missile crisis—the one at American University was the most important.

An opposite example: It was at almost exactly this point in the new administration of Ronald Reagan, on March 30, 1981, that the president was shot outside the Washington Hilton. His aplomb, the warmth of his gallantry as he joked with doctors and nurses—"I hope you're all Republicans"—even though his wound was nearly fatal, also carried immense implications. Among world leaders: This cowboy star is both tough and lucky. (Some of them hated a lucky American president, but all saw the luck as a major factor: Politicians are among the most superstitious people on earth.) The shooting also cemented Reagan's relationship with the American people. Even Democratic House Speaker Tip O'Neill's Massachusetts voters were impressed: *Tip, don't be too tough on my Ronnie*. That was the beginning of serious bipartisan progress between the White House and Congress, when O'Neill realized you can't ignore this guy or try to roll him every day, you'd better play ball.



The Signal mess lacks the size and depth of both these events. But it too will have implications for the reputation of this White House because, again, it gives a picture that is not so forgettable.

Every government in the world, even those with the best intelligence services, has wondered exactly what it's like in there, how exactly it works. To see the transcripts of the now famous "Houthi PC small group" is to conclude it's pretty ad hoc. Pretty messy. The word jejune comes to mind. So does callow. There's a lot of freelancing. The vice president questions what appears to have been a presidential decision, and the debate is conducted on a publicly avail-

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able encrypted app. No one on the 19-person call said, "Guys, should we be doing this on Signal?"

They don't come across as steelyeyed pros, and often express themselves in ways that are emotional. JD Vance: "I just hate bailing Europe out again." It made me think of a 1950s housewife in a Rinso commercial: "I just hate those stubborn stains!" Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth: "I fully share your loathing of European free-loading. It's PATHETIC." There was also a lot of drama: "We are a GO for mission launch. . . . (1st strike package)," Mr. Hegseth texted. A Trump-supporting congressional veteran referred to this privately as the defense secretary's communicating "in his chesty, boastful way."

The effect will be to push tensions with Europe more toward estrangement. None of this will go unnoticed in any foreign capital. I found myself startled but not entirely disapproving of the use of emojis. I'm glad they're not above it all, that they're happy team America successfully moved on some serious bad guys. Then again I'm not sure Xi Jinping was impressed, or Vladimir Putin; I'm quite certain they're sprinkling their texts with clown emojis in Beijing and Moscow this week.

There was a real bro-culture feel to some of the texting. The young are constantly texting, with different threads going—the fraternity thread, the Vegas Buds texts, the groomsmen at the wedding threads. We just saw the government bros thread.

They should have admitted the blunder from the moment the first batch of texts were published in the Atlantic. Instead they denied the obvious and attacked the character of the reporter who unearthed it. What a mistake! They misread their position and misread what Jeffrey Goldberg would do if they challenged his accuracy or interpretations: He published the whole lot. Which made them look stupid twice. They didn't look like clever folk who are good strategists.

Sometimes the truthful path is also the practical and pragmatic one: Completely admit you did something stupid, take it in the face, absorb the abuse, and keep walking. This administration's character, in the aggregate, is too proud, and its personality too snot-nosed, to take that right route.

Everyone sounded like himself. Mr. Vance griped about Europe in a shallow way, Mr. Hegseth came across like an excitable morningnews anchor with a lot to prove. Chief of staff Susie Wiles was reticent, and had the good sense not to hold forth in front of 18 people. Stephen Miller, who tends to conduct himself with Saturnian authority, had the authority to shut down debate, and did. "As I heard it, the president was clear: green light, but we soon make clear to Egypt and Europe what we expect in return."

It's not a scandal of hypocrisy but of indiscretion, dumbness, and denial. They are obsessed with messaging. Every White House is. But the central conceit of this White House has been "he-men do what's right whatever the cost." The president acts as if he doesn't care. It was startling to see how much they care. Mr. Vance: "Let's just make sure our messaging is tight here." Mr. Hegseth: "I think messaging is going to be tough no matter what—nobody knows who the Houthis are—which is why we would need to stay focused on: 1) Biden failed & 2) Iran funded."

The semantic tap dance over "war plans" or "attack plans" is absurd. They were talking about the policy and operational aspects of a U.S. military attack on a terror haven in a sovereign nation halfway around the world. If that isn't classified, what is?

They should take it as a gift that this happened so early, and they can learn from the embarrassment. Advice? Stop acting like kids, like bros, like the last honest man. You are the top officials of the government of a great nation in a dramatic and crucial era. You can conduct yourselves the way John Fetterman wears clothes, loosely and sloppily, or you can grow up, control your mouth, and lean on forms and processes that have gotten this lost old ship through many gales.

*me p's only*