

THE NEW YORKER

IN THIS WEEK'S ISSUE

How Sally Yates Stood Up to the President

In the May 29, 2017, issue of *The New Yorker*, in “Firing Back” (p. 20), **Ryan Lizza** profiles Sally Yates, whose nearly three-decade career at the Justice Department ended in January, after she refused to defend an executive order banning travellers from seven Muslim-majority countries. “I didn’t want to end my service with the Department of Justice by being fired,” she told Lizza. “Of course, I was temporary—I understand that. But, after twenty-seven years, that’s not how I expected it to end.” Lizza writes, “Before her firing, few people had heard of Sally Yates, but she became a hero to the Trump opposition.” Yates said, “I recognize that I may have a voice that I didn’t have before, and part of what I want to be able to do is to figure out how I can responsibly use that voice in a way to impact things that I think really matter.”

Before Jeff Sessions, whom Donald Trump chose to lead his Justice Department, took office, he made it clear that Trump wanted Yates to stay on as acting Attorney General. “I expected this to be an uneventful few weeks,” she told Lizza. Soon after, Yates reviewed an intelligence report which revealed that Michael Flynn, Trump’s designated national-security adviser, had spoken to Sergey Kislyak, the Russian Ambassador. Flynn’s conduct was “problematic,” as Yates said in her Senate testimony. On January 26th, Yates went to the office of the White House counsel, Don McGahn, and warned him about Flynn. Yates told Lizza that McGahn did not appear to know that the F.B.I. had interviewed Flynn two days earlier. On Friday, McGahn invited Yates back to the White House, and asked how likely it was that Flynn would be prosecuted. Yates recalled that she said, “That misses the point of why we’re telling you about all this. . . . We’re telling you this so you can act.”

Later that day, Yates’s deputy, Matt Axelrod, told her, “You’re not going to believe this, but I just read online that the President has executed this travel ban.” It was the first Yates had heard of the order. “I had been sitting in Don McGahn’s office an hour before that,” she said. “He didn’t tell me.” She later learned that lawyers in the Office of Legal Counsel, at the Justice Department, had reviewed the order, and that they had been instructed not to share it with Yates. That Monday, Yates told several Trump political appointees and senior career staff, “I’m troubled about this from a constitutional standpoint—really troubled about this—but I want to hear, O.K., here are the challenges, but what’s the defense to this?” She wasn’t impressed by the argument that the order had nothing to do with religion. Yates weighed her options: whether to resign or to refuse to defend the order. Yates told Lizza, “Resignation would have protected my own personal integrity, because I wouldn’t have been part of this, but I believed, and I still think, that I had an obligation to also protect the integrity of the Department of Justice.” Yates released a statement saying that the Department of Justice would not present arguments in defense of the executive order. A senior Trump appointee told Lizza that, as he read it, he thought, “Oh, my God, the President’s gonna fire you for this.” About four hours later, the Trump appointee was asked, by McGahn’s office, to print and deliver a letter to Yates, notifying her that she had been fired.

When Lizza sat down with Yates, it was the day after Trump fired James Comey. As with Yates’s dismissal, Comey’s raised questions about whether President Trump was trying to obstruct the F.B.I. investigation. Yates said, “The White House is not supposed to be involved in any investigations of the Department of Justice, which includes the F.B.I., and certainly not any investigations that involved the campaign of the President.” She added, “That’s just not who we are—or who we were, I guess.”

James Mattis Spent Four Decades on the Front Lines. How Will He Lead the Department of Defense?

In “The Warrior Monk” (p. 34), **Dexter Filkins** profiles Secretary of Defense James Mattis, who, given broad latitude by President Trump, could play an unusually large role in the United States’ foreign policy in the years ahead. Mattis, a Marine Corps general who retired in 2013, embodies the ascetic warrior-scholar ethos: he rarely drinks, has little in the way of a social life, and is a voracious student of history. Mattis is known almost universally among colleagues for his honesty. “Jim Mattis has more integrity in his little finger than almost anyone in Washington,” Michèle Flournoy, an UnderSecretary of Defense under President Obama, said. On the battlefield, Mattis became known for his supply of rousing epigrams—in a Marine base in Falluja, Filkins once saw a poster on the wall quoting Mattis’s advice on how to succeed in Iraq: “Be polite, be professional, but always have a plan to kill everyone you meet.”



Mattis believed from the start that invading Iraq was a bad idea, but he spent more than a decade embroiled in the chaos of the Iraq War. He told Filkins that the flaw in both Iraq and Afghanistan was that there was no “end-state”—the United States never knew exactly what it was fighting for. In 2010, Mattis, then the head of Central Command, began working closely with the Obama Administration. Former Obama aides told Filkins that they liked and admired Mattis, but in 2012 the relationship started to sour. According to former senior officials, Mattis was no longer regularly invited to meetings of the National Security Council. He was shut out of other foreign-policy efforts in the Middle East, including the raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound. In 2013, as Mattis neared the end of his term, Obama announced that he would be retiring five months ahead of schedule. “There was a perception among senior people that Mattis was particularly hard on the Iranians, that he didn’t necessarily see the need to engage them diplomatically,” a former senior White House official said, of the period in which the nuclear deal between the U.S. and Iran was being finalized. “There was a sense that things would be easier without his presence.”

For Trump, the choice of Mattis for Secretary of Defense seemed more emotional than deliberative. Filkins writes, “In embracing Mattis’s Mad Dog persona, Trump neglected a side of him that appealed to many others—that of the deeply read scholar-soldier and sophisticated analyst. In this view, Mattis is a kind of anti-Trump, a veteran of three wars who has been sobered by their brutalities, a guardian of the internationalist tradition in American foreign policy.” When Mattis asked Michèle Flournoy to consider becoming his deputy, she was torn between her admiration for Mattis and her discomfort with the Trump Administration. “I lost a lot of sleep and felt sick to my stomach,” she told Lizza. At Trump Tower, she was interviewed by a group of aides with no national-security experience. Among their first questions was “What would it take for you to resign?” Flournoy, alarmed, told Mattis that she couldn’t take the job. Three months into the new Administration, the Pentagon is being run by a skeleton crew. “I’m worried about a crisis,” Leon Panetta, the Secretary of Defense under Obama, said. “That requires a lot of thinking and a lot of smart people. Mattis is basically by himself.” Today, with the U.S. engaged in open-ended hostilities in at least five countries—and with military challenges looming from Eastern Europe to North Korea—some worry that the military will be left to determine foreign policy itself. “Mattis wants to win. He wants victory. He wants to kick ass,” a former defense official, who has known Mattis for years, told Filkins. “The White House is much looser now. They’re turning to the military and saying, ‘You do it. We trust you. You’re the pros.’ I’m worried the pendulum is swinging the other way, and that the military gets whatever the hell they want.”

The German Defense Minister, Ursula von der Leyen, who spoke with Mattis soon after Trump’s Inauguration, told Filkins, “He managed to distance himself from everything President Trump had said without appearing disloyal. . . . I was impressed.” Mattis believes that it is his job to restore America’s credibility. “We are having to reestablish our bona fides as a reliable security partner—from Brussels and Europe to Abu Dhabi and Cairo, from Tel Aviv to Tokyo,” he said. “There is not one of them that believed us anymore when we said, ‘We’re with you.’” When asked what worried him most in his new position, Mattis told Filkins, “The lack of political unity in America. The lack of a fundamental friendliness. It seems like an awful lot of people in Europe and America and Japan feel spiritually and personally alienated, whether it be from organized religion or from local community school districts or from their governments.”

Putin Wanted a Bridge to Crimea—To Build It, He Turned to an Old Friend

In “Oligarchy 2.0” (p. 46), **Joshua Yaffa**, reporting from Russia, investigates why Vladimir Putin’s childhood friend Arkady Rotenberg is leading the country’s most ambitious construction project, a bridge—nearly twelve miles long and costing more than three billion dollars—connecting Crimea, which Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014, to the Russian mainland. When completed, the bridge would symbolically cement Russia’s control over the territory and demonstrate the country’s reemergence as a geopolitical power willing to challenge the post-Cold War order. In 1963, at the age of twelve, Rotenberg joined the same judo club as Putin; the two became sparring partners and friends, and have remained close ever since. Now Rotenberg’s personal wealth is estimated at more than two and a half billion dollars, and the bulk of his income derives from infrastructure-related state contracts. “Rotenberg’s success is a prime example of a political and economic restructuring that has taken place during Putin’s seventeen years in office: the de-fanging of one oligarchic class and the creation of another,” Yaffa writes. In the nineties, Russia’s oligarchs appropriated state assets—industrial production, mining, and oil and gas deposits—and did what they wanted with them. The oligarchs of the Putin era, on the other hand, are themselves assets of the state, administering business fiefdoms that also happen to pay handsomely. Many have close personal ties with Putin. “If oligarchy 1.0 tried to grab pieces of the economy from the state, and use them for themselves, then oligarchy 2.0 tries to build themselves into the state system, in order to gain access to state contracts and budget money,” the political scientist Ekaterina Schulmann explained. Another political scientist, Evgeny Minchenko, said, “These are trusted people, who will stick with Putin until the end, to whom he can assign certain tasks, who won’t get frightened by external pressure.” Rotenberg is not expected to make much money from the Crimean bridge; still, it is a “totem of his service to the state and to its leader, Putin—and of their friendship, which has thrived at the intersection of state politics and big business,” Yaffa writes.

In March, 2014, the Obama Administration imposed sanctions on Russia for its interference in Ukraine; it included Rotenberg on its list of sanctioned individuals. “We wanted to make clear to the inner circle that Putin can’t protect them, that he can’t shield his cronies,” Daniel Fried, who was in charge of the sanctions policy in the State Department during the Obama Administration, told Yaffa. Rotenberg did experience some inconveniences, but, contrary to the Obama Administration’s hopes, he drew even closer to Putin. Like most economic activity connected to Crimea, the bridge is a target of U.S. sanctions. Fried said, “We never thought we

could prevent the bridge, but we could try and make it massively costly and radioactive, so that Crimea never pays for itself, that it turns out not to be a war prize but a liability.” Mikhail Blinkin, the director of the transport institute at the Higher School of Economics, in Moscow, said that the bridge wasn’t strictly necessary; Crimea could simply increase the number of ferries between the city of Kerch, in Crimea, and the Russian mainland. But, unlike a grand bridge, a ferry service doesn’t send a message about Russia’s status as a world power. “Is that worth such gigantic expense?” he asked. “In a strict economic sense, no. But, if you factor in the political component, then yes.”

It’s One of Our Most Widely Used Natural Resources, but It’s Scarcer Than You Think

In “The End of Sand” (p. 28), **David Owen** reports on one of our planet’s most exploited resources—sand—and why, as it quickly runs out, a global crisis looms. Sand is used for everything from wineglasses and cell-phone screens to water filtration. A typical American house requires more than a hundred tons of sand, gravel, and crushed stone—known as “aggregate”—for the foundation, basement, garage, and driveway, and more than two hundred tons if you include its share of the street that runs in front of it. Natural aggregate is the world’s second most heavily exploited natural resource, after water, and for many uses the right kind is scarce or inaccessible. “The whole Gulf Coast is starved for aggregate,” William Langer, a research geologist, told Owen. “So they import limestone from Mexico, from a quarry in the Yucatán, and haul it by freighter across the Caribbean.” In India, commercially useful sand is now so scarce that markets for it are dominated by “sand mafias”—criminal enterprises that sell material taken illegally from rivers and other sources, sometimes killing to safeguard their deposits.

In the United States, the fastest-growing uses for sand include the fortification of shorelines eroded by rising sea levels and more and more powerful ocean storms—efforts that, like many attempts to address environmental challenges, create environmental challenges of their own. Robert S. Young, a geology professor, told Owen, “When people first settled this country, nobody built on the barrier islands. They were too stormy, and they weren’t good places to live.” Today, however, many barrier islands are covered with houses. Following Hurricane Sandy, in 2012, Congress allocated more than five billion dollars for the Army Corps of Engineers, a lot of which has been spent on dredging sand from the seafloor and piling it up on shorelines between oceanfront real estate and the water. But offshore sand dredging kills organisms that live or feed on the seafloor, and it stirs up clouds of fine particles, which can suffocate fish. Last fall, Owen watched a crew from the country’s largest dredging company working on Long Beach Island, a densely developed barrier island. The company’s dredges operate around the clock, seven days a week, all year long. Owen writes, “The dredges I was watching were scheduled to move south, to Delaware, as soon as they’d finished on Long Beach Island, and then to begin working their way up the coast again. And then again, and then again after that—until either the money has run out or the ocean has risen too high to be held back by sand.”

Plus: In Comment, **Evan Osnos** reflects on recent turbulence in the Trump Administration, and considers the long tradition of staffers leaving a troubled White House; in the Financial Page, **Adam Davidson** considers how a capitation payment model—in which a medical provider is paid a fixed amount per patient whether that person needs expensive surgery or just a checkup—could lower health-care costs while improving the health of Americans (p. 19); in Shouts & Murmurs, **Hallie Cantor** describes the writer’s process (p. 27); **Peter Schjeldahl** attends a Robert Rauschenberg retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (p. 60); **Tobi Haslett** reads Natalie Robins’s new biography of Diana Trilling (p. 63); **Adam Kirsch** reads Andrzej Franaszek’s biography of the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz (p. 67); **Carrie Battan** listens to Lil Yachty’s debut album, “Teenage Emotions” (p. 70); **Anthony Lane** watches Ridley Scott’s “Alien: Covenant” (p. 72); poetry by **Mary Karr** (p. 39) and **Dora Malech** (p. 52); and new fiction by **Samanta Schwebelin** (p. 56).

Podcasts: **Dorothy Wickenden** speaks with **Ryan Lizza** about his recent interview with Sally Yates; **David Remnick** speaks with the MSNBC host Joy Reid, the Washington *Post* reporter David Fahrenthold, the Bloomberg View correspondent Eli Lake, and the Huffington Post editor-in-chief Lydia Polgreen about covering President Trump.

Digital Extras: A slide show of work by Robert Rauschenberg; poetry readings by **Mary Karr** and **Dora Malech**.

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