

Ryan Zinke's Troubling Remarks Undercut Dept. of Interior's Core Mission | 1

At a recent meeting of the [American Petroleum Institute](#) (the national oil company trade association), Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke made clear some of his plans for the Department of the Interior. [According to AP reporting](#), he called almost 1/3 of employees disloyal, said he plans to speed up oil and logging permits, and revealed a plan to remove agency staff and decisionmaking from Washington, DC. These statements and proposals misleadingly and inappropriately attack career civil service experts whose core work supports the agency's mission every day, and seek to undercut the agency's work by reorienting that mission. These comments and actions should concern all of us, regardless of our political orientation.

The [Department of the Interior's mission statement](#) is clear:

The Department of the Interior protects and manages the Nation's natural resources and cultural heritage; provides scientific and other information about those resources; and honors its trust responsibilities or special commitments to American Indians, Alaska Natives, and affiliated island communities.

Zinke said "he wants to speed up permits for oil drilling, logging and other energy development that now can take years." In his view, there's too much information and analysis, not enough extraction of resources for economic gain. Speeding up those permits for drilling, logging, and other activities will solve that "problem." But these actions would be at odds with the agency's mission and with federal laws, like the [National Environmental Policy Act](#) (NEPA), that require agencies to analyze and fully inform themselves and the public of environmental consequences, and to seek and consider expert input, before they take action. While extraction of resources is part of the "management" that is Interior's mission, it's notable that "protects" comes before "manages," while Zinke ignores entirely that part of the mission. His comments also undercut the agency's role in developing and applying sound science, and its duty to native peoples, who are affected by oil drilling and other resource extraction.

In the most remarkable comment reported by AP, Secretary Zinke said that 30% of Interior Dept staff aren't loyal "to the flag." This statement is extraordinary and troubling. Department staff are civil servants, most of whom have served multiple administrations. Most of them are also experts in their fields. Having worked with government staff, I know they - managers, scientists, lawyers, policy analysts, economists, engineers - are mission-oriented. They're professional; their job is to continue to bring their professional skills, experience & judgment regardless of politics. (Here's a [good article](#) about civil service and

the so-called "Deep State" by my colleague Jon Michaels for context.)

Zinke impugns civil servants' integrity by saying they're not "loyal" - even though the Department's mission is not to serve the oil industry, nor to serve the political whims of the President. Of course, federal agency policies change when administrations change, within the bounds of the law. But his rhetoric here turns that dynamic upside down, since the first duty of agency staff is to apply their skills expertise, and judgment while following the law, supporting the agency's mission.

He compared Interior to a pirate ship that captures "a prized ship at sea and only the captain and the first mate row over" to finish the mission. But the word "mission" is ironic here, since the agency's mission is not Zinke's mission. So he has it exactly backwards. The real "pirates" are the new captain and 1st mate (Trump and Zinke), serving another master. The crew is loyal to the ship's flag: the law, the people of the United States, and the agency mission to protect & manage public lands and keep its promises to Indian tribes. Zinke's comments confirm that he sees his role as serving extractive industries instead - a betrayal of the agency's mission and trust.

Finally, Secretary Zinke said he's "pursuing a major reorganization" that would move Interior agencies out of Washington, DC. This proposal makes no sense. Every federal agency works out of DC, for good reason. They have to coordinate with other agencies, and answer to Congress and the President. And Interior's agencies already have regional offices to bring their work closer to the resources they manage.

Why would he propose this reorganization? First, this statement, taken together with his accusation of disloyalty, is a transparent attempt to scare and demoralize agency staff in DC who must fear for their jobs and loathe what the agency is becoming under President Trump. Surely, some will start looking for other employment - including many who provide essential expertise, institutional knowledge, and sound judgment. Second, new staff in the mountain West likely would come directly out of oil, mining, and timber industries. Oil companies and others would be able to create a revolving door for their staff to do their bidding inside the agency.

Secretary Zinke already has a history of making false statements and working against the agency's mission. For example, he's been [untruthful](#) in his [review of National Monuments](#) and rationale for diminishing them. He's been [untruthful about the history of National Monuments](#). And he was [untruthful about tribal support for the Bears Ears monument](#), which is set to be reduced significantly in size or protection.

Now, Zinke presents a misleading portrayal of Interior's mission and its career staff. Unfortunately, he's likely telling the truth here about his intentions, though. Every American should understand what's at stake here: the legacy and heritage of our public lands. Among the agencies he oversees are the National Park Service, in addition to the Bureau of Land Management and Fish & Wildlife Service. The vast majority of BLM lands are open to at least some exploitation of resources. But that exploitation is subject to environmental safeguards to make sure impacts are understood and damage is minimized. The most important work the Department does is to support its work with science to ensure that resources on federal lands are well-understood before it makes decisions, and to ensure that it takes into account a range of values, including preservation, recreation, and compatibility with ecosystem health and tribal resources and needs, before it takes action.

What Zinke suggests is that his goal is to minimize those safeguards, making it likely that resources will be damaged irretrievably. This is not a partisan issue; liberals, conservatives, and everyone else should be concerned about this attack on the integrity of the agency's mission and on its professionals. Congress intended the agency to consider certain values that have always guided its work, and this is changing drastically. Every American should be concerned.