

Season 2 Episode 1: The Fish Rots from the Head

HUNT: Jaci, have you ever wanted to be on The Price is Right?

KETTLER: Yes, I love The Price is Right.

HUNT: Okay, so I am no Bob Barker, but I will do my best imitation here because it is your lucky day. Jaci, you are now a contestant on The Price is Right Scandalized edition. Congratulations.

KETTLER: Yay! I'm so excited.

HUNT: I'm going to read off to you three real items that cabinet officials in Donald Trump's first presidential administration spent taxpayer money on. And you are going to give me your best guess at the price they paid for them with taxpayer money. It's Price is Right rules. So you're going to want to get as close as possible without going over. So don't get too crazy. Once your guess is in we will see how close you got. So full disclosure here you're not competing against anybody else and I have nothing to offer you if you win. But I know that you do this for the love of the game itself. So we're going to go for it anyway. Jaci, are you ready for your first item?

KETTLER: I think so.

HUNT: Let's find out. Our first item is a brand new dining room set. This beautiful collection features a mahogany table, ten chairs with velvet upholstery, a sideboard, and a hutch. Jaci, what is the price that you think Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Ben Carson paid for this dining room set?

KETTLER: I mean, it seems like it's pretty expansive. Got a few components here. Probably. Nice quality. Oh let's go \$10,000?

HUNT: So close. It was actually \$32,000. Ooh. This dining set was purchased by Ben Carson for his private dining room. So Secretary Carson should maybe check out Facebook Marketplace next time. Jaci, your next item is a brand new one person soundproof booth for your personal office at the Environmental Protection Agency. So that nobody can hear all the illicit phone calls you want to make about environmental protection, I guess. How much would you guess that taxpayers shelled out for this soundproof booth?

KETTLER: Oh, that's tough, because was it just for like installation of the soundproofing or were they building like a new office?

HUNT: It was the booth and the installation.

KETTLER: Okay. Um, well, I really have no idea on that one.

HUNT: You haven't bought any soundproof booths lately?

KETTLER: Yeah, I have not. I have absolutely no idea. I'm just gonna go with, like, \$13,000.

HUNT: Oh, unfortunately, you were. You were low. Again, the correct answer was \$43,000. The booth itself cost about 25,000, and then came with nearly 20,000 more in installation costs. It was part of a broader security upgrade that EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt personally ordered for his office. That also included biometric locks and a sweep for listening devices.

KETTLER: I mean, I have a lot of questions about if all of that was needed. I mean, I could see for some for some positions. I'm curious about his particular position.

HUNT: Yeah. This man again, this man was not the CIA director. He was the administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency, but c'est la vie. So all right, Jaci, your last item is not one, not two, but three brand new sets of double doors. These double doors were purchased for the office of Trump's Interior secretary, Ryan Zinke, during his first term. What is your guess for these three sets of double doors?

KETTLER: Doors are always more expensive than I think they should be, but I'm gonna guess that they're probably even more expensive than I could even guess. I'm just gonna guess \$30,000.

HUNT: Oh, so close again. But no. These three sets of double doors for Secretary Zinke's office cost the Interior Department \$139,000, which is more than twice the median American's yearly household income in 2017, which is when this purchase was made. Jaci these furniture items are all pretty expensive, but they cost very little compared to the headaches of a broken cabinet. From Boise State Public Radio. This is Scandalized. I'm Charlie Hunt.

KETTLER: And I'm Jaci Kettler. Today on the show, we dig into the many misdeeds of the high powered officials who have staffed President Trump's government.

HUNT: From the cabinet to our nation's top federal law enforcement officials. It looks like the boss's willingness to cross the line has rubbed off on them. But there are huge differences between Trump's first and second term governments, the officials who staffed them, and the seriousness and brazenness of the offenses. Let's get into it. So, Jaci, our listeners will recall that last season we did a recap of just a handful of the scandals that have engulfed the second Trump administration in its first six months or so. It's a year later where hopefully a year wiser. I am definitely at least six years older, and a lot of the personal issues of corruption around Trump and his family have, if anything, kicked up a notch. From cryptocurrency market manipulation to Mountain Dew green reflecting pools to that big, beautiful airplane they got from the nation of Qatar. It all continues to be pretty staggering. But today we're going to step back from the president himself and focus on the highest profile officials in the administration who are not Donald Trump, including his cabinet. So, Jaci, we often hear about the cabinet and these other high profile folks in a presidential administration. Who exactly are these people? How are they appointed and why exactly do they matter?

KETTLER: Well, the cabinet are heads of departments. And so these departments, these agencies are implementing the laws that Congress passes, as well as executive orders issued by the president. These agencies have large staff that make important decisions about the design of programs and then actually carry them out. In many ways, it is the executive branch agencies that many people are interacting with in your day to day life. That has a lot of effect on what's happening in terms of federal government programs. At the same time, you know, cabinet members, the head of these agencies have to do what the president wants. They are appointed by the president. But this can put them into conflict with Congress. Congress will still push back and have different mechanisms and maneuvers to try to force the agency to do what they want. This is perhaps particularly true since Congress has been very polarized and gridlock a major policy issues, meaning that the agencies are really doing a lot of the policy decisions. So it does matter who's running these agencies for sure.

HUNT: So, you know, the executive branch has been much more active in policy making in recent decades. But the president can't do everything themselves, right? So they appoint individuals to run these agencies. And you're right. It does matter who they choose. And the Constitution actually reflects this. These folks need to be confirmed by the Senate. This is that quote unquote advice and consent power that the Constitution lays out. And this process, this confirmation process, it's meant to catch or investigate

potentially bad behavior by these folks before they are placed into positions of power, because you don't want to discover this stuff after the fact. But for a number of top ranking officials in President Trump's first term, no amount of hearings or pointed questions from senators could really have anticipated the kinds of mishaps we saw during this presidency. First, we've got Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price, who lived up to his name by racking up nearly \$1 million in bills for private air travel and charter jets, in many cases for trips that had little or nothing to do with his job, but it's just as well because Price was actually forced to resign. You and I travel to academic conferences once or twice a year. I assume you've had to charter a private plane or 2 or 3. What have you reimbursed to Boise State for these hundreds of thousands of dollars of flights?

KETTLER: I mean, not even all the Boise State athletic teams get chartered flights. That's yeah. I think for those of us who are always requesting for just like the main air flight instead of the basic airfare. Yes. I think the idea of chartering all these flights, the bit beyond us also. I mean, why was Price worried about getting recognized or accosted? I mean, come on, does anyone know what the Health and Human Services Secretary looks like?

HUNT: Yeah, he's he's not he's not exactly Taylor Swift here. And believe it or not, Price is not the only Trump 1.0 cabinet official to have some growing pains in terms of private air travel. We've also got Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, who billed taxpayers over \$800,000 for travel on military jets to foreign and domestic destinations, including my favorite, a trip to Fort Knox with his wife during the solar eclipse. Maybe it was a great place to watch it. He also submitted a written request for a U.S. Air Force jet, which could cost roughly \$25,000 per hour to take him and his wife on his honeymoon in Scotland, France and Italy. Probably. Luckily for Mnuchin, that request was denied and the use of the Air Force jet deemed unnecessary.

KETTLER: I have a lot of questions about that, but also our Air Force jets comfortable?

HUNT: No, I picture them as like those big open spaces where, like you sit along the sides.

KETTLER: Right? It's not what I would think I'd want to take on my honeymoon.

HUNT: Maybe we can try to book one for our next conference. Um. We'll see. All this to say, plenty of issues with spending way too much on travel. But Jaci, the person I want us to spend the most time with here, is who I see as the undisputed silly government

purchases champion of the first Trump cabinet. The administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, Scott Pruitt. Pruitt, listeners will remember, was the honorable custodian of the soundproof booth that I mentioned at the beginning of this episode. But it turns out that the booth was just the tip of the iceberg. So first, he's doing all the greatest hits of the folks we've talked about so far and a lot of it with major price tags. So, for example, in his first year on the job, Pruitt spent more than \$105,000 on first class flights. And that's not even including his, again, use of military jets and helicopters. One 40 minute private flight he took cost \$5,719. Pruitt attempted to justify these expenses because of the threats he said he received, or obscenities that were shouted at him by the public when he was at airports. Pruitt also took a \$100,000 trip with staff to Morocco, a trip that was partly arranged by a lobbyist for industries that Pruitt regulated as the EPA administrator.

KETTLER: Hey, it's nice he brought some staff.

HUNT: He also took a trip to Italy again. We're in Italy. I would love to go too. This trip reportedly cost \$120,000 and which, according to the Guardian quote, included a private tour of the Vatican and dinner with Cardinal George Pell, a climate change denier. Again, he's the head of the EPA, who was also under investigation for sexual abuse. After these initial reports, Pruitt promised to move back to economy class. But like our other folks, Pruitt also had expensive tastes that went beyond air travel. So for one thing, in March of 2017, it came out that Pruitt lived for about six months in a Washington condo that was owned by an energy lobbyist at a cut rate price about \$50 a night, right on Capitol Hill. I can assure you, Capitol Hill Apartments cost way more than that. And he was still reportedly late with the rent. He also used his office to extend his personal influence, but in ways that left me a little bit bewildered.

NEWS CLIPS: This morning, the controversies keep coming for EPA Chief Scott Pruitt. Emails show that Pruitt had one of his aides reach out to Chick-fil-A. Scott Pruitt apparently tried to use his position as head of the Environmental Protection Agency to get his wife a franchise with Chick-fil-A. It's all in writing, in government emails.

HUNT: A spokesperson from Chick-fil-A said that Pruitt's wife, Marilyn, had started a franchise application but didn't complete it, and when asked about it by a reporter, Pruitt's response was pretty priceless.

Speaker 5: Look, my wife is an entrepreneur herself. Chick fil A is a franchise of faith, and it's one of the best in the country. And that's something we were very excited

about. And we need more of them in Tulsa, and we need more of them across the country. So anyway, it's it's an exciting time.

HUNT: Exciting times indeed. But now we have arrived at my personal favorite, which is that on his first day at the EPA, Pruitt asked for and was granted a 24-7 security detail that included around 20 people. The cost of this protection amounted to \$3.5 million in Pruitt's first year. I have to be honest, this seems pretty extravagant for an EPA administrator. But Jaci, it gets worse once we discover what Pruitt had these agents actually doing for him. These included personal errands like dropping off and picking up his dry cleaning, picking up protein bars and Greek yogurt for him, and two other personal errands that Pruitt had these aides doing for him. That, to me, are beyond parody.

NEWS CLIPS: And now we've learned that two of Pruitt's closest aides have resigned recently, came out that one of them did various non EPA errands for Pruitt, including house hunting and trying to get him an old mattress from the Trump International Hotel in Washington.

NEWS CLIPS: The Washington Post reporting that Pruitt directed agents of his security detail to drive him to multiple locations in search of a particular lotion on offer at Ritz-Carlton hotels. That must be some special lotion.

KETTLER: Honestly, I'd probably rather have someone helping run errands for me compared to chartered flights. But man, I, you know, not really wanting an old mattress from an existing hotel.

HUNT: Yeah, all this probably should go without saying, but government employees generally aren't allowed to deploy their own staff, especially this, like elite security detail that he probably didn't need to begin with for purely personal tasks like this, including old mattresses. But eventually, the drip drip of these petty scandals starts to pile up and the president is beginning to notice.

NEWS CLIPS: Finally, today, the president gave Pruitt something less than a full defense.

NEWS CLIPS: Scott Pruitt is doing a great job within the walls of the EPA. I mean, we're setting records outside. He's being attacked very viciously by the press. And I'm not saying that he's blameless, but we'll see what happens.

HUNT: William Riley, who was EPA administrator under George H.W. Bush, told the Guardian, quote, there is no precedent for this sort of behavior. It would have gotten him fired in any administration. But this one, it's new and unwelcome territory, end quote. Riley had a point here, but eventually, even Donald Trump has had enough of Pruitt's antics.

NEWS CLIPS: Tonight, for EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt, it's the political climate that got too hot. Facing mounting legal and ethics scandals, Pruitt, one of the most controversial original Trump cabinet level picks, is out.

HUNT: So plenty to unpack here, Jaci and I feel like we should get a little assist here from our old friend George Costanza.

MEDIA CLIP: Was that wrong? Should I not have done that? I tell you, I gotta plead ignorance on this thing, because if anyone had said anything to me at all when I first started here, that that sort of thing was frowned upon, you know, cause I've worked in a lot of offices and I tell you, people do that all the time.

HUNT: First, the obvious why maybe of this being a big deal, which is that, you know, if these guys really want to maintain this kind of luxurious lifestyle in their personal lives, they should have at it. Absolutely. But the problem is that they're using taxpayer money, right? Like this is the public's dime.

KETTLER: Exactly. This kind of thing totally contradicts the whole idea of public service, that you're there to improve the lives of the people you're meant to be serving, and not just improve your own personal situation.

HUNT: And there's an interesting irony to that even as well, right. Which is what Donald Trump spent a lot of his first campaign talking about it, this idea that like, oh, I have a ton of money, I don't need this job. And therefore, you can trust me not to use my public position to get rich because I'm already rich. Right? These folks sort of turned around and did exactly that. Right. And my sort of pet theory here is that, you know, these folks are just used to a certain level of luxury that maybe it's tough to give it up when you take these relatively thankless jobs.

KETTLER: Or there's some perspective of, I'm doing this difficult job, I'm deserving of, you know, some benefits or that I'm not going to suffer fully through this job. I don't know, but that is really interesting.

HUNT: Yeah, I think they, I think there's sort of a lack of perspective here clearly speaks to this same sense of entitlement, that wealth automatically should translate to political power. And I mean, this is just on full display, I think, across all these scandals. So obviously this is all a little ridiculous, Jaci, but devil's advocate for a minute, right? These are staffers at the end of the day, right? This is not the president himself. Should we actually care what these folks are up to? Like, why worry about the underlings here when, you know, it turns out, as we learned later, the president himself seemed to be engaged in some pretty significant corruption.

KETTLER: I think part of the concern here and beyond, just the misuse or wasteful use of public resources, is that other staff are being held to much stricter regulations and requirements and how they go about doing their job, while then these members of the cabinet are just spending money wildly.

HUNT: This gets to another big issue that we've talked about before on the show, but I think is worth noting here, which is staff turnover, right? You had, you know, Pruitt had to leave after just a few months; Price had to resign. There was record turnover in Trump's cabinet and his sub-cabinet in the first couple of years of this first administration. Lots of stories about how he really struggled to fill these vacancies and actually staff his government. Jaci, why does staff turnover like this matter even beyond like the public relations issues that we talked about here?

KETTLER: If you think about the effectiveness of an administration like a cabinet department, it's kind of like the effectiveness of a business. If you're constantly changing leadership, it's going to negatively impact productivity. It's disruptive and can also result in some wild swings kind of back and forth on different sorts of policies, or just a vacuum where nothing can happen for a while.

HUNT: Yeah, I think this was, you know, one of the tropes about the first Trump administration was that like, they're trying to be really corrupt, but they can't do it effectively because they don't have people serving in like long serving capacities in these really important offices, like the Environmental Protection Agency, where you can make really big policy change, like directing these huge bureaucracies is hard enough as it is, even when there's no corruption and turnover. Like these cabinet departments, especially some of these agencies are huge. They have lots of long serving civil servants, like professionals and experts who staff these agencies and who are responsible for the nuts and bolts of actually getting these policies out. And so when you add in this extra layer of turnover at the top, it creates a ton of uncertainty and kind of grinds these already slow bureaucracies to a halt.

KETTLER: Charlie, do you think it can also be indicative of larger systemic problems in the culture of the office or the administration?

HUNT: Oh, yeah. When like I study Congress mainly. And one of the main indicators that a lot of folks use for offices, congressional offices that are least effective, or that have cultures that are abusive to staff or that are like leading indicators of big problems. They're almost always the offices that see a ton of turnover where you've got like new chief of staff's every year, lots of staff assistants quitting and going to other offices. It's an indicator that it's not a great place to work, that it's not an effective office, and that they can't really do their job as effectively as other offices where you have this stability of purpose and of leadership across time.

KETTLER: Charlie, do you think it mattered that Trump was coming to the presidency without much previous experience serving in political office, running for office?

HUNT: I think it absolutely did. And I think this is one of the main differences between the first term and the second term, which we're going to get into in the next segment, which is that Trump was a I mean, he was well known, but he was a political novice. He didn't have a tight relationship with the party. He didn't have a tight relationship with like, establishment folks in D.C. and so in this case, he relied, I think, a lot on the party to put folks into these cabinet positions that he did not necessarily have a close personal relationship with, which these were folks where there wasn't a lot of trust between them and their boss. So, for example, Scott Pruitt, the EPA administrator we were talking about, was actually an adviser to Jeb Bush's presidential campaign. Bush was one of Trump's opponents in 2016 and the Republican primary. And this clip that came out later, from February of 2016, I think, lays bare some of the lack of trust that was there between Trump and his cabinet.

MEDIA CLIP: I'm going to say that you're probably not a big Trump supporter.

MEDIA CLIP: No, no. And I would say, you know, you say that, Pat. But you know what's interesting, I believe that Donald Trump and the white House would be more abusive to the Constitution than Barack Obama. And that's saying a lot.

HUNT: And on top of this, Tom Price, who we also talked about earlier, the HHS secretary, said as recently as March of 2016 that Trump would be, quote, dangerous for politics and the economy, end quote. So not a ton of trust built up between him and the party. After the break, the cabinet level corruption gets more brazen and more serious

as we fast forward to Trump's second term in office. Stay with us. So we've had Jaci a little fun at the expense of President Trump's cabinet in his first term. But I think you'll find that soundproof booths and Chick-fil-A franchising are downright quaint compared to what Trump's closest confidants are getting up to in his second term. There are probably some good explanations for why this is, which we'll get into a little bit in our next segment. Compared to Trump's first set of appointments, this is a series of individuals who have even less experience in politics and government, and maybe, as a result, are even more prone to even bigger scandals. But in the interests of not having a six hour podcast, I'm going to focus in on one individual who I think serves as kind of the perfect metaphor for Trump's second term, the director of the FBI, Kash Patel.

KETTLER: You know, the FBI is an interesting choice to focus on here, since they're not typically included in the cabinet. We don't think of them as political appointees. Right, Charlie? Right. But they are confirmed by the Senate, like other cabinet members, and they usually serve across multiple administrations and political parties.

HUNT: Yeah. In fact, you know, maybe the best known FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover, served for 36 years across six different presidencies. After Hoover retired, Congress decided that this was a little excessive and established a ten year term into law for the FBI director.

KETTLER: And more recently, before he became really well known as the special counsel investigating Trump and his first term, Robert Mueller served as FBI director under Bush and Obama presidencies.

HUNT: And knowing that history makes what comes next with Kash Patel all more than a little ironic. See, the ten year term was specifically established by Congress to protect the director of the FBI from political pressure by the White House. The feeling was that if a new president just appointed their own personal FBI director when they took office, then they might just put in politically motivated loyalists who might, say, investigate the president's personal or political enemies, rather than investigate federal crimes fairly, regardless of who's in power during the Trump era. However, FBI directors have been treated much more like traditional political appointees rather than consistent law enforcement officers. Listeners may remember that in Trump's first year in office, he fired the FBI director at the time, James Comey, ostensibly for refusing to formally charge Hillary Clinton in the investigation of Clinton's email practices while she was secretary of state under President Obama. Comey, of course, is currently under investigation by the Department of Justice for taking a photograph of a bunch of seashells on a beach in North Carolina. Trump replaced Comey with Christopher Wray, a

former assistant attorney general, during the Bush administration. Wray served for seven years, including all four years of the Biden administration, before Trump threatened to fire him and replace him with Kash Patel, who had publicly promised to purge the FBI of anybody involved in the investigation connecting Trump's 2016 election win with interference on the part of Russia. Wray eventually resigned on his own terms prior to Trump retaking office, clearing the way for Kash, who had regularly referred to his future boss as a juggernaut of justice.

KETTLER: It sounds like in many ways, Patel was kind of auditioning for this job prior to Trump retaking the White House. You know, that's probably not too uncommon for this to happen for major cabinet posts, although to your point, it doesn't seem typical for a law enforcement position like the FBI director. You mentioned Trump's second term has featured appointees with more varied backgrounds. What was Kash Patel known for before he became FBI director?

HUNT: Well, in Kash's defense, it's not as if he had no background in the law or in law enforcement. He did serve for about a decade in the Department of Justice, first as a public defender and then as a low level staffer, and then eventually as a junior prosecutor in the National Security Division until he left the DOJ in 2017. But it's what Patel did after this stint at the DOJ that makes his more recent scandals make a little bit more sense. Once Trump took office for the first time in 2017, Patel got a job as a congressional staffer working for the Republican majority in the House Select Committee on Intelligence. While there, Patel played a starring role in authoring a memo alleging what he called a deep state conspiracy to fabricate connections between the Trump campaign and the Russian government, which we should say the intelligence community largely dismissed as cherry picked and lacking real evidence. Kash lost his staffer position after Democrats took over the House in 2019, but he secured a spot on Trump's National Security Council, where he continued to wage a relentless campaign against this so-called deep state plot against the president, one that involved DOJ staff, well-placed members of the intelligence community and Ukrainian government officials, to name just a few of Kash's perceived enemies.

HUNT: While he was at the white House, Patel was increasingly working to brandish his public image by making appearances on right wing podcasts or at political fundraisers more than once in these settings, Patel reportedly made increasingly wild claims about his influence at the white House, for example, that he was the person who, quote, gave the order for U.S. forces to take out the ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019. Patel later acknowledged that he wasn't even in the Situation Room during this operation. He also started giving out specially made challenge coins, a small, customizable medallion

for service members and government officials. The Atlantic reported on this coin saying that, quote, in addition to a curious image of a drone illuminating a dollar sign in front of the white House, the coin featured an assortment of national security adjacent terms, including direct action, sanctions, haziran and cyber.

KETTLER: I like cyber.

HUNT: Cyber, according to one. Well, according to one Trump national security official to whom Patel had given one of these coins. Quote. It's just random shit. Half of this stuff he wasn't even involved in. By the time the administration was winding down after Trump had lost the 2020 election, the president had noticed Patel's public loyalty and was considering naming Kash as deputy FBI director, according to The Atlantic. The attorney general at the time, Bill Barr, confronted the white House chief of staff and said, quote, over my dead body. Trump then planned to name Patel as deputy director of the CIA. Maybe a consolation prize. But Gina Haspel, the agency's head, reportedly threatened to resign over it; only after a direct intervention by Vice President Pence and others did Trump give up on elevating Kash even further.

KETTLER: Wow. Okay, well, it sounds like a guy trying to advance his own agenda and elevate his public profile, but it's also playing into some of President Trump's pre-established beliefs about how he's been wronged by the deep state. When we say the deep state, we're talking about a not so flattering term that the right uses for what political scientists would call the federal bureaucracy. In this case, Trump and his loyalists clearly believe that this deep state, particularly in the intelligence community, was out to get him and slowed down his agenda.

HUNT: And Kash Patel clearly was ready to give him reinforcement on those beliefs, which continued even after Trump left the White House in 2021. While Trump was in a sort of political exile as an ex-president, Kash Patel was making moves and taking his increasingly public persona as a ride or die defender of the president to the next level, building what one profile called a multimedia brand. Kash wrote a book in 2023 called Government Gangsters, in which he lays out his deep state conspiracy theory in detail, including a list of 60 specific federal officials he identified as enemies. He hosted a podcast called Kash's Corner on the Epoch Times Network and developed his own Kash. That's K dollar sign H brand, which marketed lifestyle products like Kash branded wine, tank tops and children's books. He also produced the song Justice for All, which you might remember as the version of the national anthem sung by jailed January 6th defendants. Kash Patel's increasingly public reputation preceded him when he was announced as Christopher Ray's successor at the FBI shortly after Trump won the 2024

election. For reference Jaci, Ray had been confirmed by the Senate in 2017 by a 92 to 5 margin. James Comey, Ray's predecessor, was confirmed 93 to 1. And in fact, in the post-J. Edgar Hoover era. So that's like the last 50 years. Every single FBI director before Comey, including Robert Mueller, Comey's predecessor, was confirmed unanimously by the Senate. In other words, these are not traditionally very controversial votes. But in February of 2025, the Senate confirmed Patel as the new director by the slimmest possible margin, 51 to 49.

KETTLER: That's really, really close. We see this with Supreme Court justices over time, with ideology and partisanship now playing bigger roles. But I have to believe that this was also close because of the frankly explicit promises to politicize the FBI prior to his taking office, along with the fact that Patel's qualifications for the job were not quite what you would expect for someone being nominated as the top law enforcement officer in the country.

HUNT: I think all of this is definitely at play here. But nearly two years into Kash's term as FBI director, I have to wonder whether any of those 51 senators who gave him their support might have a regret or two about their votes. When Kash gets into the director's chair. The trouble begins immediately. Just a couple of couple weeks after his confirmation, the New York Times runs a story about Director Patel's first weekly FBI wide briefing call with agents across the country. According to a half dozen sources who were on this 30 minute call, the FBI director disregarded his briefing book, reportedly saying that he, quote, did not like to read them. Patel also made a point to say that he, quote was not big on meetings or wearing suits.

KETTLER: I mean, I'm not either.

HUNT: I suppose that's that's true. So maybe we're with him. So far. According to those on the call, Patel also used words like intelligence and counterintelligence interchangeably, suggesting that he was confusing them. Oops. Oops. But most of this call, it turns out, ended up centering around sports. Director Patel used this opportunity to make a pitch for the FBI to partner with Ultimate Fighting Championship, which did eventually happen in March of 2026. A variety of UFC fighters visited the FBI's Quantico, Virginia, headquarters and led a training seminar on hand to hand combat. Also on that initial call, Patel let agents know his intention to revamp the bureau's fitness test and that he was eager to join the FBI's official hockey team. I particularly enjoyed this editorial note from the New York Times reporter quote, it is not clear if he would make the cut. Former agents say the team is very good. I can't speak with authority on whether cash is good enough to play on the FBI's hockey team, but what we do know

from the exhaustive reporting on Patel's tenure as director is that for someone whose job is to catch federal lawbreakers, the head of the FBI sure seems to spend a lot of time at sporting events. For example, on August 12th of 2025, Patel traveled to Miami with President Trump to watch a UFC match, having already attended a UFC fight a few weeks earlier in Las Vegas, where he spent time with actor Mel Gibson. That same month, cash was spotted in New York with hockey legend Wayne Gretzky. On the night, Washington Capitals star Alex Ovechkin broke Gretzky's record for career goals. Then there's the appearance many listeners will remember where cash showed up unexpectedly in the locker room of the U.S. men's hockey team. Moments after the team won gold at the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan, Italy.

NEWS CLIPS: Then a wild scene in the locker room with FBI director Kash Patel even spotted celebrating with the team appearing to chug a beer before raising the bottle in the air, spraying it across the locker room.

KETTLER: Okay, Charlie, I know you're not a big sports guy, but maybe cut the guy a break. Sports are fun. Maybe he just really loves hockey. He's having a good time. What's the big crime?

HUNT: Well, one problem, jacki, is the issue of exactly how cash is getting to a lot of these and other events. What seems to be happening is that Patel wants to continue the lifestyle he enjoyed prior to his new job, but this time while flying on government funded aircraft. According to flight records reviewed by NBC news, Patel appears to have made at least three flights on FBI planes to Nashville, Tennessee, for example, where his girlfriend, the country singer Alexis Wilkins, lives. A trip to State College, Pennsylvania, for a pro wrestling event where it just so happens Wilkins was performing the national anthem and that flight to New York, where he met up with Wayne Gretzky.

KETTLER: Ah, okay. So the concern here is that taxpayer dollars are subsidizing this travel, which certainly seems to have very little to do with his job as FBI director. None of this really sounds all that great. So, Charlie, is this actually against the law?

HUNT: So it turns out that FBI directors are required to use the Bureau jet for all travel, including personal travel, due to security and communications needs. When the director does undertake personal travel, they're then required to reimburse the government at the cost of commercial airline tickets. In fact, this is what Cash's predecessors did, including Christopher Wray, who, we should add, was pressed repeatedly about the same kind of travel by Republican members of Congress.

KETTLER: Another element that does seem a little different here is the high profile nature of these trips, with Patel kind of inserting himself into these major cultural events. The problem is, his job isn't to be a cultural ambassador, or even the vice president who doesn't have a ton of responsibilities and is often tapped to represent the U.S. at events like this. Instead, Patel is the director of the FBI.

HUNT: Yeah, this is the moment in the episode Jaci, where I can't wait any longer to share this clip of Kash Patel from a podcast interview he did back in 2023 during his influencer era. For context, Kash is commenting on one particular instance in which his predecessor, Christopher Wray, had used the same secure air travel to go to a family vacation.

MEDIA CLIP: Chris Rea doesn't need a government funded G5 jet to go to vacation. Maybe we ground that plane 15,000 every time it takes off. Just a thought. Don't take their money. Chris Rea doesn't need a private jet. We're not the guys running around on private jets. And somebody maybe in Congress should ask for how many flights on a private jet? Director Comey took, or my predecessor, Director Wray, took, and how many personal trips they took.

KETTLER: Well, that's just a tiny bit hypocritical. This is actually probably a common experience for folks inside of government versus outside of government. It's easy to criticize public officials for some apparently questionable decisions around the use of public funds. But then they get into office and perhaps discover that these rules are kind of a straitjacket. But there's an irony that Patel knew these rules. He said so publicly, and then attacked Wray for it repeatedly, then took the job and started doing it more, not less. Plus, there's the reimbursement issue. Charlie, even if these officials reimburse for the cost of a commercial ticket, the actual cost of the government aircraft is in the many thousands. We can't fault him for following the law and taking that aircraft. But you would think he'd want to be a little more mindful about how much taxpayer money he's using. Even if he is technically following the law.

HUNT: Yeah. And unfortunately for Kash, air travel is not the only potential misuse of public resources the FBI director has been accused of. The New York Times also reported that elite FBI SWAT agents. These are personnel typically reserved for things like hostage rescues, terror threats and high risk raids were dispatched to protect Alexis Wilkins, Patel's country singer girlfriend at the National Rifle Association's annual convention in Atlanta, where once again she was scheduled to sing the national anthem. After securing the venue and finding that Wilkins was in no apparent danger. The agents

left before the event was over. The Times reported that resources have been diverted from the Swat team to Wilkins appearances multiple times in a matter of months.

KETTLER: I'm guessing for instances like this, it's not uncommon for the spouse of the FBI director to get some level of protection, you know, kind of like the first lady does. But of course, Wilkins is not Patel's spouse. And second, the use of the SWAT team sounds excessive.

HUNT: It does. And this sounds to me, frankly, like someone who spent years railing against the FBI for wasteful and biased investigations. Now turning around and using the resources of the Bureau, he now runs for increasingly personal tasks. For example, M.S. now also reported that on another occasion in Nashville where Wilkins lives, Patel yelled at FBI agents to drive Wilkins allegedly intoxicated friend home after a raucous evening out. I'll caveat here that the FBI called that report made up, and no other outlet has independently confirmed the reporting. I just found it pretty funny.

KETTLER: I mean, okay, this is all entertaining, but let me play devil's advocate. Is this a huge deal in the scheme of things? Yes. It's a bit more brazen and ridiculous even than Scott Pruitt and Trump's first term. But does this behavior really affect Americans all that much?

HUNT: It's interesting, Jacki, because the main criticism of Patel during this period has been that, you know, he's been off doing these personal trips when he should have been doing his actual job. But the truth is that behind the scenes, Patel and his deputies have actually been making really dramatic changes to the FBI. So for one thing, Patel has forced out dozens of agents throughout his first two years of his tenure. These included agents involved in the Mar-a-Lago classified document search, agents tied to the January 6th investigation, agents who had taken a knee during George Floyd protests, and those who had displayed a gay pride flag in a field office. And so it's hard not to look at these personnel changes and not see some political motivations there. But these shifts in the FBI's policies and culture went beyond individual personnel changes. NPR reported that Patel disbanded the public corruption unit in the Washington field office. That was probably a little premature. This is the group responsible for investigating wrongdoing by public officials, including the office that had investigated Trump and various other Republicans for attempting to overturn the 2020 presidential election.

HUNT: A former FBI agent told NPR that agents previously working on Chinese counterterrorism were also being pulled off of those cases to instead do street patrol in Washington, D.C., and conducting DWI arrests. So, Jaci, this is one thing that's definitely

different about Trump's second term. The laser like focus on public image and attention while behind the scenes, arguably even more scandalous public policy changes are being made. In this case, Patel is making many of the directorial choices he promised to make for years leading up to Trump's second term cleaning house, in what he sees as a bureau that's riven from top to bottom, with deep state agents and ideologues who will stop at nothing to take down his boss, President Trump. And they're being made by the kind of folks like Kash Patel who simply could not have passed muster in Trump's first term, according to one longtime adviser. Trump once said of Kash Patel, quote, A lot of people say he's crazy. I think he's kind of crazy, but sometimes you need a little crazy.

KETTLER: Well, that's a whole lot to process. I mean, how did we get here, Charlie? Is there something about second terms that sometimes make presidential cabinets look a little bit different?

HUNT: I think there are a couple of things at work here. One is the fact that, you know, Trump, at least in theory. I mean, he's been talking about trying to run for a third term, but he's at least in theory, a what we would call a lame duck. So, you know, he's he's not going to run for another election. The pressure is off, right? Because you don't have to run for reelection. You don't have to retain the public support. And so second term presidents, I think, generally are much more willing to sort of stretch the limits of their powers to sort of do things that wouldn't be as politically feasible in their first term. And that includes, I think, appointing people like Kash Patel to the director of the FBI. But I also think, Jaci, that Trump has really consolidated Support within the Republican Party. Right. And I would think that would help him be able to justify decisions like these.

KETTLER: Right. I mean, you're thinking that maybe Republican senators would support his picks, even if maybe in a different situation they wouldn't. But in this instance, they're more willing to support and vote for his his nominations.

HUNT: Yeah. I have the feeling if he had nominated Kash Patel in 2017, the Republican Senate even then might have said no or might have strongly encouraged him to choose someone else.

KETTLER: So, Charlie, all this information, it strikes me that it's not just that so many of these high profile officials in the executive branch lack traditional credentials or qualifications is that there's almost a made for TV aspect to it that traditionally we just hadn't seen in government like this. Does that help explain why these folks are pursuing some of the things that they're pursuing?

HUNT: It's really funny because I think in the first term, like we talked about, we saw Trump's cabinet and frankly, a lot of the white House staff sort of staffed with folks who are sort of more traditional Republicans. And Trump was sort of the reality star president. But now we just have a collection of either actual reality stars in the case of Sean Duffy, the transportation secretary, or like Kash seems like he has this kind of wannabe influencer reality star kind of glaze to him, right? Um, you know, known primarily going into this as kind of a podcaster and conspiracy theorist, right? By the time he gets back to the white House, uh, this is epitomized by something I didn't include in the main episode, which was another scandal of Patels, which is that apparently he has been ordering and branding his own, uh, bourbon. Woodford reserve bourbon.

KETTLER: Wait. Like, right. Like while he's FBI director.

HUNT: Yeah, it says, and on the bottles and it has the seal of the FBI. It says Kash Patel, FBI director. Sometimes he signs it and then writes number nine because he's the ninth FBI director.

NEWS CLIPS: The Atlantic adds that, quote, Patel has distributed his self-branded bottles while on official business, including during at least one FBI event. He and his team have transported the whiskey using a DOJ plane, including when he went to Milan during the Olympics in February.

HUNT: You can imagine someone doing that who's like trying to sell themselves and sell their personal brand, and this is something we're used to Trump doing. But now his staff are doing it, too.

KETTLER: I was going to say, it really seems like he's modeling himself after President Trump in a lot of different ways.

HUNT: Yes, exactly. And so again, like with the first term, you know, some of the folks that we talked about, they obviously had their problems like the chick fil A franchising was ridiculous, but all of it was on a much smaller scale. And most of these folks were not getting a ton of attention in a lot of other ways. But when we look at the second term, people like RFK Jr, Kristi Noem, I mean, Pete Hegseth certainly fits this description. And then of course, Kash Patel. That's clearly not the case. But Jaci, do we think that this focus on, uh, let's say style over substance might be partially responsible for some of the more scandalous activity that we've seen from these folks? Does it have actual big consequences or am I being too hard on them?

KETTLER: I think that that can play a role in coming in and not necessarily fitting the usual mold that some of the some of these scandals are actually problematic in terms of breaking rules. Others are just kind of ridiculous. Yeah. And we're not used to seeing our government officials engage in the behavior. But maybe that's just more attention seeking. You know, like it's not the most scandalous activity itself. And I do wonder if some of this reality show like chaos, including some turnover, which we can talk about in this administration, could disrupt things and make it a little harder to get some things done.

HUNT: Yeah, I think I mean, generally, if you're talking whether you're talking about the Cabinet or White House staffers or it's never a good day for you, if some of your top officials in your administration are in the headlines for the wrong reasons, especially if it's for silly stuff like showing up in the men's hockey team locker room and chugging a beer like they do not give off the appearance that you are hyper focused on your job. And I do think having these types of folks that don't have typical government experience, like one risk with that is that they are either not going to take the job super seriously, or they are going to act in ways that get them fired or force them to resign.

KETTLER: I do wonder with all this almost reality show like chaos within the white House, if it makes it harder to get things done, or if we're paying a whole lot of attention to these silly, weird, attention seeking scandals. And then there's actually big things happening behind the scenes.

HUNT: Yeah, I think there are plenty of examples of exactly that happening. You know, certainly we saw this with Kash, but, you know, thinking about someone like Robert F Kennedy Jr, a strange guy all around, but like weird public statements, the stories during the campaign about the bear carcasses and things like that. But meanwhile, he is sort of enacting policy around, you know, anti-vaccine policy guidance. And you've got these measles outbreaks. And like that's a really serious issue. You know, Pete Hegseth has had all these sort of weird public appearances focusing on like mass hyper masculinity and weightlifting. And a lot of people have made fun of him for it. But we also have this like directionless policy on the war in Iran, and that matters a whole lot. Kristi Noem had this, you know, blown budget on new airplanes, including lots of very expensive commercials with her on a horse. And don't worry, listeners, we're going to get into that one later this season. But at the same time, we've had this really dramatic change in deportation policies. And I think we can say fairly questionable enforcement practices by ICE, which falls under her jurisdiction. And so when we see Kash Patel, like, having this bourbon and influencer shtick and like having SWAT teams guard his girlfriend, like

that's like as, as you said earlier, like, yes, entertaining. But he's also completely purging and politicizing the FBI, which is a really serious change.

KETTLER: How much do you think the issue is coming from the top? Like, how much is Trump's leadership direction playing a role in these things?

HUNT: I think we have to be able to say it's playing at least some role. I think it's not so much that all of the orders are coming from the top. Like, I don't think Donald Trump actually cares that much about like vaccine policy or even all that much about the nitty gritty details about politicization at the FBI. But I think he himself has been in his second term a lot more brazen in his communication, his governance strategies. And so it only kind of makes sense that the kind of staff that's going to gravitate towards him in his second term and like, help him execute his agenda are going to be the same way. You know, I think if there's one thing we know about the presidency, it's that the person at the top, for better or worse, really sets an example for everyone else. And you always have like rogue or weird staffers in administrations. But when you are setting an example like this, where everything is geared towards this attention seeking behavior paired with really hard core changes to how government works. It's actually not that surprising to me that we see it from all these cabinet members. All right, Jaci, so a couple of quick party favors before we go. So first on our friend Scott Pruitt, who we talked about in that first segment, the former EPA administrator, a story that caught my eye that really tickled me. Shortly before he ended up leaving his post, which is that Pruitt reportedly really enjoyed eating at the white House mess, which is a U.S. Navy run restaurant that's open only to white House officials, cabinet members and other dignitaries. In fact, Pruitt dined there so often that eventually the white House had to send a memo to his office specifically requesting that he eat elsewhere. From time to time.

KETTLER: He was there too much there. Like you need to go elsewhere.

HUNT: Yeah, they were like, buddy, this is a little too much. You need to go elsewhere. Pruitt and his guests reportedly dined frequently on dishes like cowboy skirt steak, popcorn, chicken and waffles, spinach, strawberry salad and beer braised brisket tacos. Okay, honestly, it's making me hungry.

KETTLER: Yeah, I mean, it sounds pretty great. So he was bringing guests along for these meals.

HUNT: He was sort of using it as like a, as a place to like bring folks to talk business, you know, which is not unheard of. He was just going too much for it. And his guests,

they also seemed to have a sweet tooth. They would partake in a dessert called Chocolate freedom on multiple occasions. Politico reported that this dish, which is a molten cake with imported French chocolate that must be ordered at the beginning of the lunch because of the baking time, apparently has garnered rave reviews online and once prompted comedian Zach Galifianakis to ask white House staff under President Obama whether chocolate freedom was their nickname for the president. And then finally, Jaci, I have a very liberal party favor for you. A parting gift of sorts for this episode. So you have a three year old daughter who I adore, of course, and I know she likes books. So I took the liberty of getting this book for you by acclaimed children's book author and current FBI director Kash Patel.

KETTLER: Oh my gosh.

HUNT: So this is so Jaci's flipping through this right now for listeners at home, this is a book that is called The Plot Against the King, in which the author, Kash Patel, tells the story of a wizard named Kash, who sets out to save King Donald from the sinister machinations of Hillary Clinton, a shifty knight who looks suspiciously like Senator Adam Schiff and Keeper Comey, who uses his agency's magic slugs to plant false info about King Donald's connections to Russia.

KETTLER: Um, magic slugs?

HUNT: Yeah. You know, maybe. I mean, he was he's a very creative guy, so, uh.

KETTLER: Oh my gosh.

HUNT: So. Okay. So, Jaci, I'm sorry to spoil the ending, but you'll be happy to know that the story concludes with King Donald being anointed with a gold. Make the kingdom great again crown, and completely exonerated for all his ties to Russia. Any reactions to what you're looking at right now?

KETTLER: I have a lot of reactions. I don't totally understand why Kash is a wizard, it looks like.

HUNT: Yeah. I mean, he, you know, he's got a pretty cool outfit.

KETTLER: I've also Donald Trump looks like he's 30.

HUNT: Yes. He's, uh, yes, he's I'd say also maybe a little slimmer than he actually is in real life, but you know, that's okay.

KETTLER: I'm going to assume this was published before Trump won in 2024.

HUNT: Yes. So this was published during his first administration. So this was before Kash was FBI director. For sure. Basically, it's like a children's book version of the memo. We talked about that Kash wrote as a House staffer, talking about how all the Russia stuff was made up and all this stuff. So, you know, trying to reach a different audience and get kids involved in politics early.

KETTLER: Yeah, I guess so. I mean, it is an interesting strategy. Um, he's he's a busy man.

HUNT: Yeah. Jaci. You'll see in there it has some more info if you want to get some more swag. So at the time that the book came out, it was still possible to head on over to fight with cash.com. And for a special low offer of \$19.99, you could purchase playing cards, which he calls the collector's item of the century, featuring each of the story's characters. So King Donald, Hillary Clinton, etc. the King card, of course, weirdly belongs not to King Donald, but to Kash the distinguished wizard and corruption combatant. So, you know, if you want to get your daughter, you know, involved in the sort of trading card games like don't go Pokemon Go, the Kash Patel route.

KETTLER: I'm sure she's going to love it. Thanks, Charlie. Appreciate it.

HUNT: You're very welcome. This episode was written by me, Charlie Hunt, and my co-host, Jaci Kettler. It was produced and edited by me, with additional production and editing support from Sydney Snyder. Our theme music is by Dear Room, with other incidental sound from Shutterstock music and blue Dot sessions. We owe special thanks to the wide variety of sources used for this episode, and especially to Sarah Fitzpatrick at The Atlantic, whose deeply reported stories about Kash Patel's tenure at the FBI were essential. Finally, you've been listening to us talk for a while now. We think it's only fair that you get to ask the questions. This season, we're going to try something new with a mailbag episode where we answer your questions about political scandals, the podcast, or pretty much anything you can send your questions as emails or voice notes to scandalized@boisestate.edu, and we'll answer as many as we can in our end of season mailbag episode.

KETTLER: Next time on Scandalized, we dig into a massive public fraud in Mississippi that involves a pretty famous athlete.

Speaker 16: The FBI questioning former NFL quarterback Brett Favre in a Mississippi welfare case, Favre's attorney confirming that to NBC news. It's all part of a massive investigation into alleged misuse of tens of millions of dollars meant to go to needy families in America's poorest state.

KETTLER: This story has everything kickbacks, outrageous purchases, pro wrestlers, and lots of finger pointing.