

Killing the Messenger

A Follow-up to July's Newsletter:

What to Do When the President Acts Like a Five-Year-Old?

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Imagine a group of 5-year-olds playing a board game. The rules are clear, the goal is fair, and one child edges ahead — until, suddenly, another child starts losing. That's when the trouble begins. "He cheated!" the losing child yells. "I'm the winner anyway!" he declares. And then, like clockwork, he flips the board. In the world of kindergarten conflict resolution, we expect this kind of behavior. We chalk it up to development. We teach better sportsmanship.

What do we do when the president of the United States behaves this way? On Friday, [President Trump fired the head of the Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) — the nation's workaday scorekeeper of employment, wages and productivity. Why? Because [the data didn't make Mr. Trump look good](#). The statistics were inconvenient. So the president didn't just challenge the findings; he fired the statistician. That's not governing. That's board flipping.

For over a century, the integrity of U.S. economic data has rested on a fragile but vital precept: independence. Agencies like the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Economic Analysis operate under the executive branch, but their mandates are to serve the truth, not the administration. Their job is to report what is, not what the White House wishes were true.

Yes, legally, the president can fire the bureau's commissioner. The position is not protected by statute. But like many pillars of democracy — free press, fair elections, impartial courts — what protects the Bureau of Labor Statistics is not law but a common set of assumptions about how government should function. A basic idea that says: Presidents don't manipulate the scoreboard.

Past presidents respected this boundary. Ronald Reagan didn't fire the head of the agency when it reported double-digit unemployment during his first term. Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama took bad news from official statistics on the chin. Mr. Trump has charted a different course. This is not his first tangle with truth. He has questioned unemployment numbers and dismissed Covid fatality figures as inflated. Removing the Bureau of Labor Statistics chief because the numbers were off narrative is a new breach. It is not only attacking the game; it is removing the referee.

This may sound like inside baseball, of importance mostly to labor economists. But it's not. The credibility of American statistics is foundational. It undergirds investor trust. It guides fiscal and monetary policy. It tells businesses when to hire, when to expand and when to hold. When those numbers are tainted or appear to be, the ripple effects are vast. Markets can lose faith in the data and in the country that produces it.

Yes, the BLS made some retroactive changes to its May and June reports, sharply cutting its assessments of job growth. These kinds of revisions are routine as the BLS incorporates new data, even if these were particularly large. The job of counting is getting harder as the response rate to its surveys falls. But this isn't malfeasance.

What about citizens? When a government fires the umpire, we all have reason to wonder: What game are we playing? One danger certainly is that a future Bureau of Labor Statistics head might feel political pressure to

fudge a jobs report. The deeper risk is cynicism, the quiet corrosion of faith in institutions. If we can't believe the numbers, how do we believe anything?

Most children learn that flipping the board doesn't make them the winner. It just means the game is over. In a democracy, the same lesson holds. We need our referees. We need our scorekeepers. And most of all, we need leaders who understand that losing the game fairly is far more honorable than winning by force.

Why so? Because when presidents flip the board, it's not just a game that ends. It's the pieces of democracy that get scattered to the floor.