

# NIH reels with fear, uncertainty about future of scientific research

The Trump administration's orders have created more turmoil and damage at the National Institutes of Health than was previously known.

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Inside the National Institutes of Health, there was little doubt about who would be tapped to lead the world's preeminent biomedical institution through the first weeks of the second Trump administration: Lawrence Tabak.

Tabak is a dentist and a scientist who was the longtime second-in-command at the sprawling campus in Bethesda, Maryland. Widely respected, he served as NIH acting director for two years under President Joe Biden.

At 10 a.m. on Jan. 24, Tabak sent a staff wide email. The Trump administration had installed Matthew Memoli, a longtime NIH influenza researcher and physician who was not part of the senior leadership ranks, as acting director.

NIH scientists scrambled to look up [Memoli's scientific papers](#) and how to pronounce his name, according to multiple staffers who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to provide details of events.

"All of us were on our computers trying to figure out who on Earth he was," said a member of the senior leadership team at one of NIH's 27 separate institutes and centers.

That initial surprise presaged six weeks of upheaval for NIH's scientific staff. The agency had long enjoyed [bipartisan support](#) and growing budgets, but with President Donald Trump's return to power, it had lost its carefully protected distance from Washington's partisan battles.

In just six weeks, the Trump administration overturned NIH's leadership, slowed its main mission of [identifying the best new science to fund](#) and silenced personnel at the biggest sponsor of biomedical research in the world — a nearly \$48 billion enterprise that supports the work of some 300,000 external scientists.

"It's terrible. It's awful. People are afraid to open their emails," one NIH senior scientist said.

This story is based on documents, emails and contemporaneous notes obtained by The Washington Post, as well as interviews with more than two dozen current and former officials. Most spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fear they would face retaliation for candidly describing all that has happened since Trump's inauguration.

Even in a climate of fear, NIH employees say they want to protect their institution. They worry this winter of disruption may be causing lasting damage to the way science is conducted in the United States.

"The whole thing could just disappear," said Phil Murphy, senior investigator and chief of the laboratory of molecular immunology at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). "The [biomedical research enterprise in the United States](#) depends largely on NIH dollars. You take the dollars away, the labs go away, and you lose the next generation of scientists."

In a statement, NIH said: "Acting NIH Director Memoli's priority is to ensure that NIH is complying with the administration's directives and related court orders so that NIH research and funding can fully resume.

"He has been transparent with NIH institute and center leadership about the actions he is taking and has stressed how important it will be to work together to achieve efficiencies."

Memoli and the White House did not respond to questions for this story. The Department of Health and Human Services, NIH's parent agency, referred to the NIH statement.

## **Week 1**

Overnight, Memoli — an infectious-disease researcher — became temporary captain of a biomedical research enterprise staffed by about [6,200 scientists](#), steering an enormous grant-making machine that distributes most of its budget across the country to support researchers at 2,500 institutions.

When his appointment was officially announced, his new colleagues at the top of NIH scoured his background for clues about how a scientist few knew had attracted Trump's attention. They discovered he had "gone up against Tony," as some put it.

During the pandemic, Anthony S. Fauci, the famed infectious-disease institute director, became a target of right-wing anger over coronavirus lockdowns. Memoli drew media attention, including in [the Wall Street Journal](#), for disagreeing with Fauci about who should be included in covid vaccination mandates.

Memoli did not try to impose his own agenda, other officials said. He did his best, they said, to help NIH comply with the administration orders that put the entire federal bureaucracy into turmoil.

In normal times, thousands of scientists on the 320-acre campus conduct basic research on problems such as ALS and heart disease. Clinicians at the research hospital care for patients in cutting-edge clinical trials. Much of this work continued.

But then came a hiring freeze, a travel ban, a communications pause and cancellations of routine grant-review meetings. Scientists were even told they could not purchase the basic lab supplies needed to keep experiments going.

It soon became clear that Memoli couldn't take full advantage of the expertise around him. Tabak found himself shut out of meetings with leadership at HHS, according to multiple people familiar with the situation. Tabak declined to comment for this story.

Memoli didn't appear to have full autonomy. Some degree of that was expected for a seat-warming acting director, but even the most routine operations at NIH were stymied by presidential executive orders and administration policies, according to multiple NIH employees. They couldn't get clear answers about a path forward.

“One thing Memoli would say very often during leadership meetings is: ‘I will check into that. I will get back to you,’” said one official familiar with those meetings. “We never heard that from previous NIH directors. They would not ‘get back’ to us. They would *tell* us.”

Trump's executive orders to terminate diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, as well as programs that support “gender ideology,” forced officials to scan the agency for activities, websites, grants and programs that might need to be modified or pulled down.

All of this was a shock to the nation's scientists, who work in laboratories that have been largely insulated from election cycles and the shifting political agendas of Republicans and Democrats in Congress. In transitions, some activities, such as hiring, would be temporarily frozen, but science would continue unimpeded.

No longer. Now the scientists, grants managers and trainees — young scientists starting their careers — began to feel uncertain, restive, afraid. No one seemed sure exactly what they could do, and that feeling would only intensify in coming weeks.

## **Week 2**

The second week started off with promise. A Monday memo from Memoli loosened up some research pauses and clarified which activities could go forward.

Clinical trials — medical experiments to test new drugs on patients — would continue. Laboratory purchasing could proceed for projects started before the inauguration. Scientists could submit papers to journals following normal procedures.

“As you can see, things continue to be in a state of flux, but there is a lot of good news in here,” wrote Jeffrey Diamond, a senior investigator at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders

and Stroke, the afternoon of Jan. 27 as he forwarded the email to staff. “I realize that this memo may raise other questions, and I would ask for your patience in that regard as we continue to seek clarity.”

But senior officials were grappling with a jaw-dropping memo from Trump’s Office of Management and Budget that called for a pause on federal grant activity — one of NIH’s main reasons to exist.

This order seemed to encompass most activities that spread NIH grants across the country, including making research awards, evaluating the most meritorious scientific proposals and even just continuing the funding of existing projects that needed renewal.

Lawsuits were filed, and NIH employees found themselves whipsawed between administration policies and court orders.

On Jan. 29, Tabak wrote a note to colleagues asking them to prepare a summary of activities related to the executive orders on diversity and on sex as a biological variable, as well as efforts to bring them into compliance.

That evening Nate Brought, the director of the executive secretariat, the office that oversees the director’s correspondence, canceled birthday plans with his wife to compose an impassioned email to Memoli, he told The Post. He forwarded to Memoli guidance from the Office of Personnel Management about how to comply with the executive order on [biological sex](#).

“I would be remiss if I did not note my strenuous objection, not only to the demands being made in this guidance, but to the underlying executive order as well,” Brought wrote. “I implore you, for the good of our country and our community, to refuse to comply with these destructive, divisive and discriminatory orders.”

Brought recalled that Memoli told him that he appreciated his candor and his willingness to share an unfiltered perspective.

The week ended, as was becoming customary, with more upheaval. A temporary restraining order issued by a federal judge in Rhode Island said funding should be unfrozen. This set the stage for the tensions of the coming week.

### **Week 3**

The administrative orders seemed on a collision course with the law. NIH employees by nature are not the types to go rogue. They follow the rules.

“By and large in my experience, the federal workforce is very conscientious,” said Carrie Wolinetz, a former chief of staff to the NIH director. “They recognize they are subject to the policies of the administration, and they want to make sure they are on the right side of the law.”

NIH officials had been considering how to ensure their activities complied with the executive orders. At the same time, the court order said funding activities should resume.

On Feb. 4, the office of the general counsel for HHS drafted a 14-point memo, obtained by The Post, that said funding should proceed even if it had been stopped by executive orders.

But that did not happen.

At a Feb. 6 meeting of leaders, NIH general counsel David Lankford read from the memo that said the agency should be issuing grants, but Memoli said they needed to get more clarity, according to multiple accounts of the meeting. Lankford did not respond to emailed questions seeking his comments.

On Feb. 7, Michael Lauer, deputy director for extramural research, wrote an email, obtained by The Post, notifying staff that Memoli had “asked me to inform you that it is now acceptable” for them to process one narrow category of grant — “*only* for clinical trials” that were already ongoing and didn’t need to compete against other projects to be renewed.

Lauer declined to comment for this story.

Then came the biggest blow yet: Late that afternoon, NIH officials were caught off guard by a request from HHS chief of staff Heather Flick Melanson and principal deputy chief of staff Stefanie Spear to post a document immediately.

HHS declared that henceforth NIH would cap at 15 percent the [indirect cost rates](#), or “overhead,” in funding it sends to research institutions. As NIH officials read the [notice](#), they realized it was a seismic shift in policy that would threaten the foundation of biomedical research in the United States.

Reforms to the indirect-costs policy had been debated over the years. There had long been an argument that the cost of helping universities and medical centers pay for “facilities and administrative costs” had gotten out of hand. Indirect rates were sometimes 50 percent or higher, meaning that a research grant supporting a \$100,000 scientific project would come with another \$50,000 in indirect funding.

The notice made several references to an analysis from a [Heritage Foundation white paper](#), titled “Indirect Costs: How Taxpayers Subsidize University Nonsense.”

As NIH officials worked to post the notice, HHS officials grew impatient with every passing minute. Hurry up, they demanded, according to multiple officials familiar with the events. The conflict was first reported by the Atlantic.

“We [NIH] had nothing to do with it, and this was a really totally inappropriate thing that was foisted upon us with no warning,” one official with knowledge of the notice said. A change like this typically would have been carefully reviewed for weeks before it was posted.

It went live on the NIH website in about an hour.

## **Week 4**

Internally, senior officials grew concerned about the legality of some of the agency's actions, according to memos and emails reviewed by The Post and multiple interviews with current and former officials.

On Feb. 10, a federal judge name-checked NIH in a court order that said the federal government must comply with a 10-day-old restraining order.

“The defendants must resume the funding of institutes and other agencies of the defendants (for example the National Institute for Health),” wrote U.S. District Judge John J. McConnell Jr. of Rhode Island.

The cap of 15 percent on indirect costs was temporarily [halted](#) by a court as well.

An internal memo that same day from the office of general counsel to Melanson stated, in bold font: “All payments that are due under existing grants and contracts should be un-paused immediately.”

But a day later, nothing had changed.

“We have (like you all) been struggling with specific issues that would benefit from discussion on Thursday — even if we don't have firm guidance,” NIAID Director Jeanne Marrazzo wrote in an email to other leaders on Feb. 11. Among the issues: “When can we anticipate being able to issue awards?”

In a leadership meeting that week, officials discussed an alarming new legal concern: The indirect-costs cap NIH had posted on Friday could put staff at risk of violating the Antideficiency Act, according to multiple people present for the discussion. The law prohibits federal agencies from spending federal funds in advance or in excess of an appropriation.

Leaders were concerned that individual grant managers could face criminal charges for doing their jobs.

As it wrapped up, Tabak was handed a memo that said he was no longer the top deputy at NIH. Instead, he would be a senior adviser to the acting HHS secretary, Dorothy Fink — working in downtown Washington, far from NIH, far from his own laboratory.

That evening, Tabak sent an email to colleagues saying he was retiring immediately, after 25 years of government service.

The next day, Lauer issued a memo obtained by The Post instructing staff to resume funding research and not to use the new 15 percent indirect-cost rate.

According to multiple people familiar with the internal debate, NIH staff had become fearful of issuing grants, worried that they would be held accountable for either violating executive orders or the law. The memo was written to provide unambiguous guidance to staff, according to those people.

“NIH will effectuate the administration’s goals over time, but given recent court orders, this cannot be a factor in [institute and center] funding decisions at this time,” Lauer’s memo instructed.

On Thursday morning, Lauer wrote a “Good Morning OER!” email to colleagues at the Office of Extramural Research (OER), which hands out tens of billions of dollars to researchers around the United States. In it, he announced his retirement after nearly a decade leading the office.

“I consider it to be one of the greatest blessings of my life that I had the opportunity to be part of OER,” he wrote.

With veteran leaders Tabak and Lauer gone, NIH scientists braced for mass firings as the Trump administration and Elon Musk’s U.S. DOGE Agency implemented a plan to terminate probationary employees across the government. On Feb. 14, Valentine’s Day, more than a thousand such employees at NIH awaited their fates. Some received a chilling email:

“You have been identified as an employee on a probationary period and may receive a letter today from HHS informing you that you will be terminated and/or placed on admin leave.”

The wait proved excruciating. The termination notices didn’t arrive until the weekend.

## **Week 5**

The agency reeled from losing nearly 1,200 NIH staff in the government-wide firing of probationary workers. So rattled were employees that many believed a rumor that all the institute’s leaders were about to be fired, a total decapitation of NIH bosses. That didn’t happen.

On Feb. 18, in a confusing twist, the new secretary of health and human services, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., shared fond memories of NIH at a town hall meeting. He said that when he was young, he admired scientists there because they were so smart but worked for modest pay.

“They’re very low-paid compared to people who are using high IQs to acquire things, to acquire status and money,” he said. “That means they must have been motivated by something higher, something more idealistic. And I still think, I still believe that today.”

But operations at NIH remained far from normal.

Thousands of grant proposals from outside scientists, often representing months of work, were stuck in the pipeline — essentially freezing the future of American science. Through an arcane

bureaucratic pause, dozens of meetings that are key parts of the review process were canceled that week.

When a fix would arrive in the coming days, it was only partial — allowing one type of meeting to go forward, but preventing the crucial next step of review.

NIH said in a statement that the agency is issuing grant awards “consistent” with several court orders. “Separately and independently, NIH is evaluating the agency’s priorities based on the goals of President Trump’s executive orders,” the statement said.

Meanwhile, some highly skilled NIH employees hired through a special authority called “Title 42,” which requires their positions be renewed every few years, are in limbo, fearing their jobs will expire. Some were placed on leave.

On Feb. 21, Memoli sent an email to staff acknowledging the turbulence. He urged them to steel themselves for more: “The last few weeks have been difficult for many of us, but we must prepare for further changes ahead.”

## **Week 6**

On Feb. 22, the Office of Personnel Management distributed a government-wide email asking federal employees “What did you do last week?,” demanding that they reply with a list of five accomplishments. “Failure to respond will be taken as a resignation,” Musk tweeted.

The OPM memo triggered contradictory and bewildering internal emails.

At 4:58 p.m. on Feb. 24, staffers received an email from Memoli that revealed how paralyzed NIH had become with HHS and the White House calling the shots:

“Dear Colleagues, The latest guidance from the NIH Office of Human Resources as of 3:45 PM is that we are still holding on additional guidance from HHS regarding the OPM email (‘What did you do last week?’). We realize many people are leaving for the day. Unfortunately we don’t have any further guidance at this time. Please do not take any actions unless instructed to do so.”

On Friday, they received a repeat email request: “What did you do last week? Part II.” This time, the guidance told them to respond, but to assume their words would be read by “malign foreign actors” and “to tailor your response accordingly.”

On the same day, Memoli approved new terms and conditions for grants that had to be terminated or modified, as part of guidance for NIH staff on how to cancel grants. The memo, obtained by The Post, contained “language provided to NIH by HHS providing examples for research activities that NIH no longer supports.”

Those topics included programs aimed at increasing diversity, equity and inclusion in science, transgender issues and research at Chinese universities.



On Saturday, [Francis S. Collins](#), perhaps NIH's most prominent former director, announced he had resigned and would leave behind the research lab where he had been working for the past 3½ years.

Thirty-six days after Tabak had announced Memoli's selection, Collins, who led the landmark project to map the human genome, reminded his colleagues of the significance of NIH.

"It is the main piston of a biomedical discovery engine that is the envy of the globe," he wrote. "Yet it is not a household name. It should be."