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Trump Doesn't Know About Labor

Thank God we've got so many inept cabinet members.



By Gail Collins

Opinion Columnist

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Image

Labor Secretary Alexander Acosta on Wednesday publicly defended his role in overseeing the prosecution of Jeffrey Epstein. Credit: Anna MoneyMaker/The New York Times

So, did you enjoy the parade for the U.S. women's soccer team? People sure did seem happy. I believe this is partly because the players are terrific and partly because many Americans are desperate to think about something other than Donald Trump.

And, good Lord, his crack team of cabinet members. On Wednesday, Secretary of Labor Alex Acosta tried to hold back the outrage that's been building [since people learned](#) that, as a federal prosecutor in South Florida, he had brokered a very lenient punishment for Jeffrey Epstein, a rich guy who liked to have sex with underage girls. Explanation: It was a good deal. You know how this administration feels about good deals.

"The Palm Beach state attorney's office was ready to let Epstein walk free," Acosta said in his calm, sort of toneless voice. "Our prosecutors ... presented the ultimatum." Which was that Epstein, who had molested a parade of teenagers, some only 14, had to serve at least a little jail time. The punishment Acosta wrangled with his alleged best possible efforts involved 13 months in prison, during which Epstein was free to spend most days at his office as long as he slept overnight in the clink.

The victims had no idea that might be the end of the story. [The case is now in the hands of federal prosecutors in New York who are going after Epstein on other sex-trafficking charges. \(You may have noticed that over the last few years virtually everything that happens in this country winds up in the hands of New York prosecutors.\)](#)

Do you think Acosta ever asked himself whether he could have fought harder? Nah. The problem was the victims, who were too "scared and traumatized" to be good witnesses. Asked by reporters if he had any regrets, he just said that was "a very hard question."

Have you heard anybody in the Trump administration apologize for anything? Well, there was the occasion the secretary of health and human services said he was sorry he spent \$400,000 of our tax dollars to fly around in specially chartered planes. But that was a long time and a whole lot of bad behavior ago.

About Jeffrey Epstein. He sounds like one of the worst people imaginable, so we are, of course, stunned to hear he [used to be tight](#) with our current chief executive. "Terrific guy," Trump said in an interview with New York magazine in 2002. "He's a lot of fun to be with. It is even said that he likes beautiful women as much as I do, and many of them are on the younger side."

The palship no longer exists. "I had a falling-out with him. I haven't spoken to him in 15 years. I was not a fan of his, that I can tell you," said the president, who appears to have erased the lot-of-fun-to-be-with period.

Are you shocked by any of this? Hey, early in our acquaintanceship we learned Trump is a guy who bragged about being so important he could get away with grabbing women by their private parts. Who was put into office thanks to Russian manipulation of our election. Some days you just want to sigh and talk a lot about women's soccer.

Ever since the Epstein scandal arose, Trump has been defending Acosta, stressing what an "excellent" job he's doing. After all, the president told reporters, "our economy is so good, our unemployment numbers are at record lows." You might have thought he was under the impression the secretary of labor had something to do with boosting the economy. As opposed to things like workplace safety and collecting job statistics.

And oh, yeah, human trafficking. Very embarrassing that Acosta is one of the people who's supposed to protect underage women from being sold as sex slaves.

Hmm. Before this week, what do you think Donald Trump thought the Department of Labor did?

A) Something about delivering babies.

B) Something about getting good people to, you know, mow the lawn and stuff.

C) Something.

The president is oblivious, but otherwise almost nobody likes the job Acosta's been doing. People who care about workers are naturally outraged that he's been trying to water down everything from mine safety regulations to the rules that prohibit restaurant managers from [grabbing a piece of the waiters' tips](#).

Trump insiders, of course, feel undermining workers' rights is supposed to be Acosta's mission. And they complain he's been sort of inept at it. Mick Mulvaney, the Trump Acting Chief of Staff For Life, has been [trying to take control](#). Recently, Acosta's chief of staff was pushed out for a lack of, um, leadership. Or, as one former administration official [told Politico](#), "There are times when he goes completely loony."

You've got to be appalled by Acosta's failure to stand up for vulnerable children being lured into serving as sex playthings for a man who truly does epitomize the concept of filthy rich.

But are you upset that Trump is too much of an ethical beanbag to get rid of him? The sad truth is that we're really probably better off with cabinet members too inept to accomplish anything at all.

Cheer up. There's always soccer.