

CNN Political Briefing

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Trump, Tragedy and Politics

Speakers David Chalian, President Donald Trump, Jeff Zeleny, Peter Alexander (clip), President Donald Trump (clip)

David Chalian 00:00:01
Hey, everyone. I'm David Chalian, CNN's Political Director and Washington Bureau Chief, and welcome to the CNN Political Briefing. There has been nearly a constant stream of news coming out of the White House since Donald Trump moved back in. Trump has issued more than 60 executive orders as he tries to make good on his promise to radically reshape the federal government. Earlier this week, his administration moved to freeze trillions of dollars in federal spending, a directive it reversed just 45 hours later after it sparked widespread confusion and an order by a federal judge. Then on Wednesday night, focus in Washington shifted to a tragedy at Reagan National Airport. An American Airlines flight carrying 64 people collided with a U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopter conducting a routine training mission with three soldiers on board. President Trump spoke Thursday about the fatal accident.

President Donald Trump 00:00:59
We are one family, and today we are all heartbroken. We're all searching for answers.

David Chalian 00:01:06
But he quickly shifted from a message of unity to one of blame. He criticized past Democratic administrations and DEI policies broadly as perhaps playing some role in this horrific accident and not providing a shred of evidence to support that theory.

President Donald Trump 00:01:26
Obama, Biden and the Democrats put policy first, and they put politics at a level that nobody's ever seen because this was the lowest level. Their policy was horrible, and their politics was even worse.

David Chalian 00:01:43
Jeff Zeleny is CNN's Chief National Affairs Correspondent, and he has been covering the White House for us in these early days of the second Trump administration. He joins me now to help us sort through some of the key moments for this White House so far. Jeff, thanks so much for being here.

Jeff Zeleny 00:02:01
David, it's my pleasure.

00:02:02

David Chalian

So when we scheduled to have this conversation, taking a look at sort of the first 10, 11 days of the Trump administration's second time around, I did not know, obviously, that the events of Wednesday night at Reagan National Airport would take place and Donald Trump would put himself sort of at the center of that story. So, let's deal with that first now, Jeff, which is what we've all been covering over the course of the last 15 hours or so, as you and I sit here. And it was just less than three hours ago that Donald Trump wrapped up a press conference in the briefing room there in the White House where we find you, and I will just say, and I will see if you have reporting or insight into sort of squaring this circle for me. But he said, the president, that it wasn't necessarily, this accident, the fault of an air traffic controller. And yet he spent a lot of time throughout the press conference trying to suggest that the hiring practices of air traffic controllers from previous Democratic administrations that perhaps focused too much on DEI policies may be at play here to cause this accident. How do those two things, him saying, well, we don't know that it's an air traffic controller, but, by the way, I don't think that the hiring policies of air traffic controllers in Democratic administrations have been a good thing and may have contributed to this. How do those two things square?

00:03:26

Jeff Zeleny

They don't square. That's the reality. I mean, there is no reconciling those two different thoughts. And he was asked that actually by David Sanger, our old friend and former colleague at The New York Times. Basically, you know, how do you prove this? What evidence do you have? And the president didn't offer any. But I think the bigger point here is that clearly President Trump, in his very first time in the White House briefing room, addressing what all presidents must "tragedy happens on their watch. Unexpected challenges happen on their watch, and how presidents respond to them, of course, is one measure of how any presidency is gauged. And I think today, for the first time, watching President Trump walking into the briefing room, clearly trying to use this moment when he had the nation and indeed the world's attention, to promote his agenda of DEI and really raising the questions about the diversity initiatives of the federal government. But I think, at the same time, there was no suggestion that the president was saying the buck stops with me. He said, I'm going to blame my predecessors, never mind the fact that he served between President Obama and President Biden, and he also was in office for four years. But I think the bigger picture of it is just at the moment, just minutes after he said we are in an hour of anguish, he suddenly and so abruptly returned to his familiar spot, one to blame and politics.

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David Chalian

And of course, that turn to blame and politics was planned. I mean, the White House press shop put out a press release that linked to all these articles that he was referencing when he got to that portion. He brought up his vice president, his defense secretary, his transportation secretary, all in, you know, a little bit of like "Dear Leader" moments of praising his leadership on this "felt very familiar to that, like, cabinet meeting scenarios in the first Trump administration when everyone would go around and praise his leadership. They did that, but also those three members of his administration " Vice President Vance, Defense Secretary Hegseth, Seth, Transportation Secretary Duffy " all also picked up on this thread of DEI, of diversity, equity and inclusion policies that seemed to, from their perspective, have run amok and somehow are connecting that to this midair collision between a Black Hawk helicopter with three Army soldiers on board and this commercial American Airlines flight with 64 Americans on board.

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Jeff Zeleny

"It's extraordinary, not surprising because we have seen this movie before. We saw four years of slightly different storylines but a similar theme of placing blame elsewhere. And no one is blaming the new Trump administration for this midair collision. I mean, that is one thing that I think was clear in all the coverage. It is a tragedy of the highest order. And, again, I mean, the split screen image of watching the rescuers still in the frigid waters of the Potomac, recovering bodies, as the president is speaking from the White House, it is just extraordinary in its level of lack of compassion, lack of empathy there. We often talk about a president, you know, has moments to be the consoler-in-chief, a very overused, perhaps even a cliché phrase. But it is true. It's part of the job. And this was something that there was very little empathy coming from the president this morning, again, using this "and you're right, it was planned. I mean, he was reading from a script right down to blasting former transportation secretary Pete Buttigieg, and he seized upon him, I think we know why. So it's a bit of deflection. But this now is Donald Trump's government. This is his administration, and how this investigation plays out and how this federal workforce holds up at a time when it makes clear we do need government. Government exists for a reason, and that often is front and center during a national tragedy.

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David Chalian

So one of the questions to the president in the briefing room today from our colleague at NBC News, Peter Alexander, was about, as you noted, Jeff, President Trump did indeed serve as president for four years between President Obama and Biden. I haven't had a chance to look into this yet. I don't know if you had, but it seemed like he was suggesting, Alexander was in the questions, that there was no change between the Obama administration policy and the Trump administration policy in terms of hiring practices in the Department of Transportation.

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Peter Alexander (clip)

The cited FAA text that you read is real. But the implication that this policy is newer, that it stems from efforts that began under President Biden or the Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg is demonstrably false. It's been on the FAA's website.

00:08:03

President Donald Trump (clip)

Who said that, you?

00:08:03

Peter Alexander (clip)

No, it's on the website, the FAA's website. It was there in 2013. It was there for the entirety "it was there for the entirety of your administration, too. So my question is, why didn't you change the policy during your first administrations?

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President Donald Trump (clip)

I did change it. I changed the Obama policy. And we had a very good policy, and then Biden came in, and he changed it. And then when I came in two days, three days ago, I signed a new order bringing it to the highest level of intelligence. Okay.

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David Chalian

Trump seemed to dismiss that entirely and suggested he had definitely changed things in between the two Democratic administrations.

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Jeff Zeleny

I think he definitely dismissed the question in a very reflexive way, as we've seen President Trump do for a long time, particularly from reporters who ask, you know, aggressive but fair questions. I mean, that is something that he does. We have looked at this in a very quick way, and it does seem that President Trump served between the 44th President Barack Obama and the 46th President Joe Biden, and he did not change, at least to a large degree, the hiring initiatives. And what Peter Alexander, our friend from NBC News, was asking, was sort of pointing out some of the specific things that were on the website of DEI initiatives during the Trump years.

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David Chalian

Really, really interesting, and it is, as you pointed out, just so blatant and apparent that he chose to take this tragic accident and turn it into an opportunity for him to push something he's been signing executive orders on and that he campaigned on, irrespective of any evidence of a connection, which brings me to what you said before, Jeff, and I want to get at this larger conversation now, not just the response to this accident, but this notion of delivering on a radical overhaul of government, and I don't know anyone on planet Earth or here in America that would say the federal government and bureaucracy could not come in for some reforms. But what he is trying to deliver on seems to be portions of eradication of pieces of the government, real dismantling of key components of the federal government that provide services that Americans rely on. And I think this was in most stark display this week with that memo that came from the Office of Management and Budget out of the White House trying to implement an executive order of his to freeze all federal spending. Explain to me where we are in that process.

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Jeff Zeleny

And it's so amazing, David. All of these things are actually linked. Really, we are in the moment here where President Trump is largely picking up where he left off at the very end of his first term when his longtime allies and advisers really had a handle on the huge bureaucracy. It takes all presidents quite some time to sort of get their arms around things, and the Trump administration did. And they began to make pretty serious changes to the federal workforce. Time ran out. The pandemic happened. So here we are now. And this is something that really has been four years in the making by many longtime allies of the president. And we saw it talked about during the presidential campaign as Project 2025. Democrats, you know, screamed from the mountaintops about Project 2025, so much so that I think it became an issue for Democrats. But I think it became a noise for a lot of other people. But now here we are. And there is a fundamental desire to remake, reshape the federal government. And it is being even accelerated by the very presence of Elon Musk, who is now one of Donald Trump's top advisers. And, of course, he is actually a new figure in this rerun of the Trump campaign and the Trump administration. He was not here the first time around, but certainly is eager to disrupt this workforce, and we saw that play out this week when federal employees were all receiving one email from the Office of Personnel Management, something that they've never received, a single email that went out to all federal employees, and it said "fork in the road." That was exactly the words that were used by Elon Musk when he was doing his takeover of Twitter. We are just hearing reports from longtime staffers at OMB, which of course, is the Office of Management and Budget, which is really the central nervous system of the government that disperses money. Elon Musk has been going around these offices. He has been in the Office of Personnel Management and really is trying to get his handle on the government. But the government is not a private enterprise. It is different in so many ways. So we will see. This is a moment of, again, this crash shows why government is necessary. We will see if any reforms happen, if they are for the better or for the worse. But these things, despite, you know, his executive flex of power, if you will, you know, ran into some challenges this week when they immediately rescinded the order to freeze the programs. Later that day, the crash happened. But it really brings to light, I think, why the government is needed. And some longtime employees just worry about the morale in the federal government, and they worry about it being hollowed out at the very time when it's clearly needed at moments of crisis.

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David Chalian

We're going to take a quick break, but everything Jeff just raised obviously invites a ton of questions, and we will get into that and a lot more with Jeff Zeleny in just a moment.

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David Chalian

Jeff, you talked about Donald Trump's executive flex, if you will, and I do wonder, in talking to White House sources, just to bring this to a constitutional level for a moment, what is their argument as to why they believe it is within their constitutional realm to stop the spending of money that the Article One branch, Congress, as mandated by the Constitution has a responsibility to do, already appropriated that money to be spent. So, why can Donald Trump just ignore Congress's will?

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Jeff Zeleny

We will see if he can or not. But that will be one of the central questions of this Trump administration, and, certainly, the White House counsel's office and other advisers and people who, again, have been planning for this moment for the last four years believe that the president has many more powers than might be suggested, and the spending is a key example of that. The White House will argue, at least from a political point of view, that he has an overwhelming mandate to do what he ran on. And, again, we should point out, we've not seen really any surprises in terms of what President Trump has, like, suddenly changed his view on. He ran on immigration. He ran on remaking the federal government. He ran on a variety of those things, and we're seeing that now. But I think the question here is, I think this administration is going to be one more example of a real life civics lesson, if you will. And it's sort of coming day by day. But one is the Impoundment Control Act of 1974, and it's something that Donald Trump talked about some on the campaign trail, but it really is coming into the forefront. And what that is is, when Congress, during the Nixon years, said the president has too much authority to spend money, we are going to pull that power back, and we have the power of the purse. Donald Trump and a lot of his allies and lawyers believe that it's unconstitutional. So that is going to be essentially litigated and tested. But the fascinating thing is now the stage on which it will be litigated and tested is a judiciary which is significantly of Donald Trump's own making from his first term. Now, not entirely, of course. President Biden also had a record number of judges, but that is what makes this moment so different, I think, than eight years ago. A â€” President Trump and his advisers have a much better grasp of the government. And B â€” it's a very different Supreme Court and a very different federal bench across the country.

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David Chalian

So where we are right now, as you and I chat on Thursday afternoon, is that a federal judge put on hold this executive order implementation of freezing federal spending broadly. Then, in the aftermath of that ruling, the rescinding of that memo that was clearly causing confusion out in the country. Republican and Democratic members of Congress, as you and I both know, they were getting flooded with calls. Americans just did not know or understand what the impact would be. Those people who are running programs that depend on federal grants and federal funding just didn't know if the money was going to be there to operate the next day or the next day and how they should respond to that, and, clearly, that was happening not just in blue states and blue districts but a lot of Republicans with relationships to this White House were calling and saying this is total confusion. And so they pulled back this memo. But the White House has been really clear that the executive order still stands. So where does this stand right now, as you and I are talking? Because this is still a policy, a sort of an assessment of all this federal spending and trying to get their hands on it that Donald Trump is still committed to. It's not like that has simply gone away.

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Jeff Zeleny

He hasn't changed his view on what he believes that federal money should be spent on. But, David, it was extraordinary, and we watched this in real time. It was definitely one of the perhaps best examples yet in his ten years in public life of such a quick reversal. As we talked about at the time, it was so extraordinary just how quickly they rescinded that move. And we don't exactly know the full reason for that. When you talk to White House advisers, they will acknowledge privately that they were getting an earful from Republican senators. In fact, the new Republican senator from Pennsylvania, Dave McCormick. He tweeted, thanking Pennsylvanians for rising up and making clear that these programs were at risk, and he assured them that this freeze had been put on hold. I think the broader point now is, though, that the White House is scrambling a bit to execute what the president still wants to do. So those executive orders he talked about last week, he did sign in a flurry of executive orders. I mean, it's hard to keep up with them all, which is also by design. He signed specific executive orders, sort of questioning the programs and the funding for DEI programs, foreign aid and the like. But what's not in those are all these grants and all of these other loans that Congress has already appropriated money for. So that's the difference. I mean, there is no freeze now. He still now wants to do this. So the budget going forward obviously is complicated. But, I mean, the bigger point of all of this is one thing that people in the White House are very mindful of, Susie Wiles, the White House chief of staff, who is in the biggest test of her life here, hears from a lot of Republican members of Congress and others. And they have to be mindful of the narrow Republican majorities on Capitol Hill as they try to advance their legislative agenda. President Trump knows he will not be viewed as a success without getting his legislative agenda through. There's very little room for error, certainly on the House side. So why alienate Republican members of Congress who are hearing from constituents about, you know, the Pell Grant program, which has long been supported by Republicans. Those fundings' money streams were in question. Meat safety plants in red states, tornado research, on and on and on. You could literally go through the budget. So I think that the White House and certainly the president had to agree to it, had to put a pause on this. But I think the politics were sort of a little bit too much to bear for what he needs to do going forward here.

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David Chalian

Yeah, usually when in the first administration, as you and I were talking about, you know, he would get backlash even from those in his own party, and that would just be fodder for him to double down, quadruple down, keep the fight going, elevate a new enemy. And this was just such a rapid cave, just folding up the tent and being like this clearly was not going the way that they hoped it would go. And maybe that's Susie Wiles's influence. Maybe, as you said, it was the specific kinds of Republicans they were hearing from. But it was noteworthy how quickly he moved. So, Jeff, as you just laid out, with all those executive orders, you said as an aside, really hard to keep up and hard for folks to keep track. Can you step back with me in these first 11 days or so that we've experienced here? I mean, I see three big buckets of definitional topics thus far for him. You know, one, as you said, is immigration, making very public displays of ICE enforcement and the whole battle with the president of Colombia and the like on on repatriation flights and the like. So I think there was a lot of immigration activity. There was clearly the retribution grievance piece on like the January 6th pardons and delivering on those kinds of promises he made on the campaign trail. And then there is this other bucket of the reshaping of the federal government and all its tentacles in all different ways. Those seem to me the three major sort of focuses thus far of Trump's initial days here. How would you characterize the Trump administration thus far in these early days?

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Jeff Zeleny

I think in the early days when we watched the expression on the president's face when he was sitting back behind the Resolute Desk, back in the Oval Office, I mean, he was just clearly basking in the moment that he was back in one of the most powerful rooms on the planet. And I think now knowing that he knows his way around the government a little bit more and certainly many of his advisers do, that has sort of fueled everything he's done in the opening two weeks. So I think just a knowledge of government, and there has been much more discipline. It doesn't seem like it perhaps hour to hour. But there really has been. There's not nearly as much infighting, not nearly as much backstabbing. People are on board with the Trump team, at least those in the West Wing. We will see if that changes, of course, but that is markedly different. I remember being here at the White House eight years ago during those first sort of really intense and chaotic weeks of the first Trump administration with the Muslim ban that was overturned and the firing of some, you know, executives and the fighting over crowd size, etc. He comes in in a much more confident role. He's surrounded by absolute loyalists, which was not entirely the case the first time. But, to your point, I'm not sure, aside from the executive orders and the executive actions, that's the easy part. The easy part for a president is to pull out his pen and sign executive orders. And all those were prepared during the transition and indeed for the last four years. So they really are shining a light on the immigration raids, for example. It's unclear, actually, if that will be sufficient for him. On Wednesday at the White House, the president suddenly mentions that he would like to use Guantanamo Bay in Cuba as a holding ground, if you will, for migrants, some 30,000 or so. That was a new development coming right after this funding freeze discussion. So I think immigration is still an open question. Is he actually making the gains that he promised? But I think certainly enough for his base. The pardons remain controversial, but it's something that he did and I think has no regrets over. But I think reshaping the government. I think we saw the first limits of how difficult this actually may be when they made the decision to walk away from this big government freeze. A judge ruled on Tuesday night and about, you know, 15 hours later or so, they walked away from it. So there are limits to this presidential authority. But, overall, I think that President Trump is much more in command of the office the second time around. But who wouldn't be after returning to a place of a familiarity that he's been thinking about for so long? But I think we don't know the answer to the questions that will really define his presidency, and that is his legislative agenda. Can he corral without having a grasp of details or any interest in that, really, can he get his agenda through this Congress? We shall see. And I think we also saw in the last couple of days Democrats, for the first time, sensing overreach, that they can essentially turn their outrage into something a little bit more resembling a resistance that is not simply in name only.

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David Chalian

Or, at least, potentially constructive organizing principle around being the opposition party. Jeff, thanks so much for your time. Really appreciate it.

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Jeff Zeleny

David, it's my pleasure. Thank you.

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David Chalian

That's it for this week's edition of the CNN Political Briefing. Remember, you can reach out to us with your questions about Trump's new administration. Give us a call at (202) 618-9460. Or send us an email at CNNPoliticalBriefing@Gmail.com. And you might just be featured on a future episode of the podcast. So don't forget to tell us your name, where you're from, how we can reach you and if you give us permission to use the recording on the podcast. CNN Political Briefing is a production of CNN Audio. This episode was produced by Emily Williams. Our senior producer is Felicia Patinkin. Dan Dzula is our Technical Director, and Steve Lickteig is the Executive Producer of CNN Audio. Support from Alex Manasseri, Robert Mathers, Jon Dianora, Leni Steinhardt, Jamus Andrest, Nichole Pesaru, and Lisa Namerow. Special thanks to Katie Hinman. We'll be back with the new episode next Friday. Thanks so much for listening.

