

# [***Trump's extreme rhetoric is a mainstay of his 2024 campaign. Much of it could become a reality if he wins another term***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BST-9NG1-DY7V-G009-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; In the more than 370 days between his first indictment and his first criminal trial, [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45) unleashed rhetorical warfare as predictable as it was extreme.

The familiar slash and burn playbook, sharpened over decades in business and eight years in ***politics***, has shaped an overlapping public defense and political message at an unprecedented moment of legal peril.

But the volume and repetition - always repetition, longtime allies note - obscures a stark reality.

For a former president [*who has unapologetically shattered norms*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/06/politics/trump-presumptive-nominee-analysis/index.html) with an unrelenting message of grievance, vengeance and retribution targeting those who stand in the way of his policy and political ambitions, the rhetoric is far from empty.

Trump emerged from [*the Republican primary*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/12/politics/biden-trump-presidential-nominees/index.html) - where he bulldozed his opponents - supported by a policy and personnel infrastructure designed to turn his rhetoric into reality.

His pledge to direct Justice Department investigations is backed by allies who view his second term as driven by a maximalist theory of a president's authority.

Threats to target political enemies across the government are underpinned by planned executive action.

The system and guardrails Trump spent his first term perpetually straining and thrashing against on Capitol Hill, in the courts and within his own White House, have tilted in his favor.

"Democrats hit first, so we're going to hit back harder," a Republican official in regular communication with Trump's inner circle told CNN in reference to the former president's four criminal indictments, which include charges brought by special counsel Jack Smith for attempting to overturn the 2020 election and unlawfully retaining classified documents.

There is no proof that the special counsel's indictments were tied to political motivations, and the allegation, made repeatedly by Trump, that Biden's White House directed the investigations is a lie.

Confronted with those facts, the official responded without hesitation.

"That's what he believes. That's what his people believe," the official said. "And unlike last time, this is his party now."

The concept of a former president set to be the Republican Party's nominee for a third consecutive election just now claiming the party is, on its face, nonsensical.Yet it's a critical element to why this moment for Trump and his supporters is so different than any prior.

If Trump manages to dodge or delay his legal troubles and win the presidential election in November, he and allies will enter to White House more personally emboldened, politically powerful and with a more expansive view of a president's authority than any administration in recent memory.

That is an opportunity Trump and his allies have moved aggressively to ensure isn't wasted.

"We are going to finish what we started," Trump pledged during a March 2023 rally. "We will totally obliterate the deep state."

2024 rhetoric

Trump has framed the 2024 campaign as existing to save the nation from an apocalyptic implosion.

The rematch with Biden is the "final battle." Trump is but a vessel for his supporters, he says. He's their "retribution. He's their "warrior." He's their "justice."

The debate over Trump's words has hung over US ***politics*** since his 2015 announcement. Should he be taken seriously or literally? Does he mean what he says or is he throwing red meat to his base? Is it getting darker? More autocratic? More extreme?

In the last year, Trump has threatened to appoint a special prosecutor to target President [*Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) and his family if he's reelected.

He's repeatedly attacked prosecutors and judges, their families and relationships, former officials and political opponents.

He called for former GOP Rep. [*Liz Cheney*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/28/politics/liz-cheney-trump-mccarthy-book/index.html) and the other members of the House panel that investigated the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol to be jailed.

He floated the execution of the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

And amid all these statements, Trump currently sits ahead of, or within the margin of error, Biden in national and key swing state polling. His rock-solid base of die-hard supporters certainly hasn't diminished.

On some level, either many voters don't seem to mind or, in the view of many Republican and Democratic strategists alike, have grown so accustomed to the extreme nature of his rhetoric that it has just been tuned out.

"The guy accused the sitting president of being on cocaine last week and nobody even blinked," one senior Democratic campaign official said when asked about the effect. (That did actually happen, though it wasn't a new Trump tactic - he floated Biden being on drugs in 2020, too.)

When Trump talks about vengeance and retribution, there are plenty of examples that can be viewed through a similar lens.

After all, his 2016 campaign was animated by the explicit call to jail his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton.

But while Trump's Justice Department never pursued charges against Clinton, multiple former officials confirmed that Trump raised the idea of prosecuting Clinton while in the White House. The list of opponents - and former allies who became opponents - who Trump would raise to staff for potential prosecution was long, the officials said.

"One of my favorite preoccupations as national security adviser was counting how many times Donald Trump said that John Kerry should be prosecuted," former Trump official John Bolton said of the former Democratic senator and secretary of state.

Bolton has said repeatedly he will not support Trump and views him as a danger to the country, as have more than a dozen of Trump's former Cabinet officials and senior White House aides.

It's a striking reality with no precedent.

But it also underscores why a second Trump term would be dramatically different.

Critics gone

Trump repeatedly ran headlong into advisers, lawmakers and judges loath to bend to his will in his first term.

His allies viewed these as unnecessary - or in some cases, unlawful - impediments to the agenda voters sent to the Oval Office in 2016.

Some in Washington saw them as guardrails for a White House intent on fracturing not one, but all three branches of government.

Yet Trump, should he secure a second term, would enter the White House with his most powerful Republican critics on Capitol Hill almost all gone.

If House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell sought to quietly placate and pacify Trump in his first two years in office, Congressional Republicans nowadays more often seek to elevate and advance his wishes.

Ryan, a Wisconsin Republican, retired and has called Trump a "populist, authoritarian narcissist." McConnell, who has not spoken to Trump since the end of 2020 after condemning his actions during the January 6 attack on the Capitol, will depart his position as Senate GOP leader at the end of this Congress. He has endorsed Trump.House Speaker Mike Johnson, the Louisiana Republican who holds Ryan's old job, traveled to Mar-a-Lago on Friday to hold a joint press event with Trump as he seeks to beat back efforts to remove him from the position.

Trump isn't one for detailing regrets, but one of the few he's acknowledged is the people he surrounded himself with when he entered the White House in 2017.

"I made a mistake with some people I put in," Trump said during an interview last month with NEWSMAX. "I now know people. I now know, I believe, Washington probably at the upper levels, better than anybody."

There's a roster of Cabinet officials and senior White House advisers who saw their role as minimizing or ignoring what they viewed as Trump's worst instincts and ideas. Many candidly acknowledged that reality after their departures.

Trump is now surrounded in and around his campaign by advisers who aren't just loyalists who espouse his "America First" approach, but also hardened by their own lessons learned from the first administration.

His campaign has released an expansive and far-reaching series of policy outlines that the former president regularly highlights in the scripted sections of his campaign rallies.

A constellation of outside groups filled with former top Trump administration officials and loyalists have dedicated millions of dollars and an expansive network to build out the policy and personnel resources that will almost certainly be drawn upon should Trump win a second term.

That infrastructure, while not in total alignment and at times in the position of getting crosswise with one another, puts Trump's words in a dramatically different context.There is clear alignment on the embrace of a maximalist view of presidential authority that Trump could use to dispense with the long-standing concept of Justice Department independence.

That includes an explicit pledge, detailed in his campaign policy plans, to direct Justice Department civil rights investigations against district attorneys in Democratic cities.

Two of Trump's indictments were filed by Democratic district attorneys.Trump's pledge to fire career government officials deemed insufficiently loyal is backed by an effort to build on, and utilize, an executive order drafted in the final months of his time in office.

National security and intelligence agencies, long the center of Trump's most deeply held frustration and grievance for his view of their role in undercutting his authority and leaking damaging information, would be audited, overhauled and subject to widespread terminations.

Seeking retribution

Trump and his campaign have publicly tried to massage his official position on personal retribution.

Trump has repeatedly suggested his indictments mean he has the right to target his political opponents - "pandora's box," Trump has said several times.

But when asked directly about his plans for personal revenge, Trump has attempted several ways to deny what those around him say he's intent on pursuing in a second term.

"No, I wouldn't do that because I want to bring our country forward," Trump said when asked last February on "The Hugh Hewitt Show" about punishing those who attacked him, a message his advisors have said he should stick to on the issue. "No, I wouldn't do that."

"I would be entitled to a revenge tour if you want to know the truth, but I wouldn't do that," he added.

That would be a position that isn't backed by his second term policy plans, or his private impulses during his first term in office - or, for that matter, in the decades prior.

Trump's affinity for retribution existed long before his first campaign.He spoke at length, in a 1992 interview with Charlie Rose, about his desire to get even with those he viewed as disloyal when his business career sat on the verge of collapse.

"If given the opportunity, I will get even with some people who were disloyal to me," Trump told Rose.

Trump called revenge "very therapeutic" in an interview on CNN's "Larry King Live" in 2007.

"If you have a problem with someone, you have to go after them," Trump said in a CNBC interview with Erin Burnett that same year.

The topic was relevant in 2007 for one reason: Trump's newly released book spent an entire chapter detailing his view on the merits of retribution.

The chapter title: Revenge.

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