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Newsletter

What got me steamed up this week



[Michael Tomasky/](#)

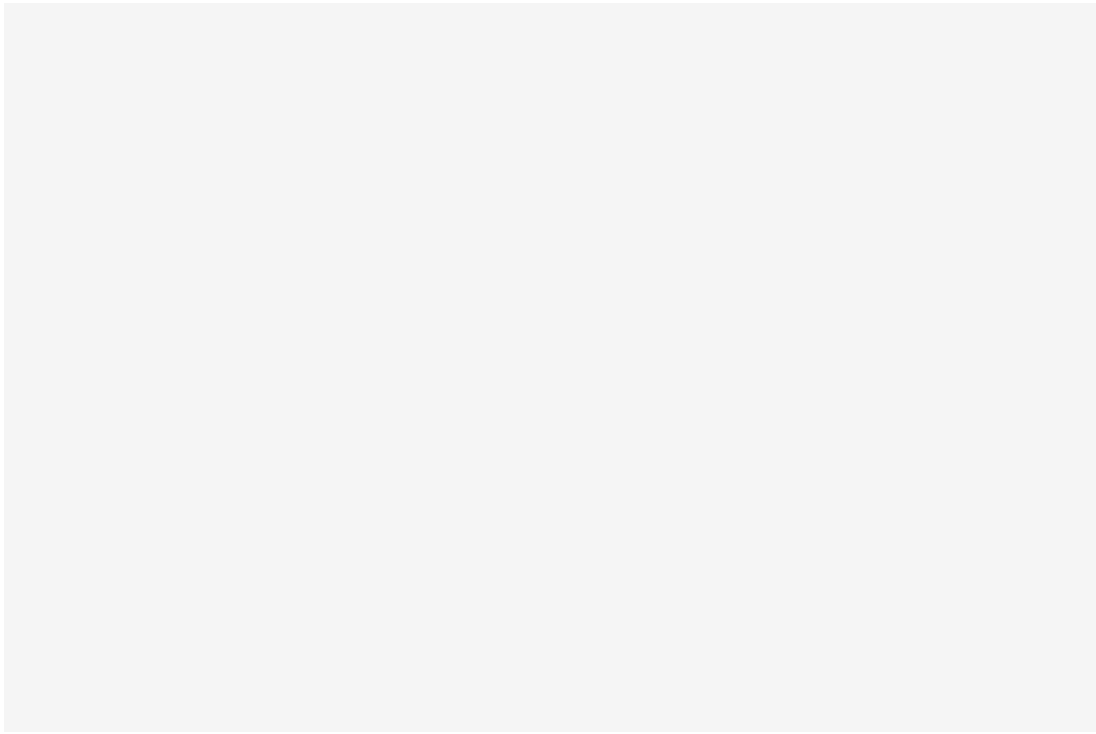
February 14, 2025/10:51 a.m. ET

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Trump’s A.G. Just Did Something So Corrupt She Should Be Fired Already

Note to right-wing “media” and all you fantasists who believe them: This is what judicial sleaze actually looks like.



Andrew Hamik/Getty Images

Trump and Attorney General Pam Bondi in the Oval Office on February 5

Pam Bondi was [approved by the Senate](#) to be attorney general on February 4. On February 5, she [was sworn in](#). And on February 10, five days into her already ghastly tenure, she committed an act so electrically sleazy that in a normally ordered world, she'd be forced from office immediately.

Why Bondi? Why is my wrath not limited to Emil Bove, the acting assistant attorney general? After all, it was Bove (apparently rhymes with “no way”) who wrote the instantly infamous [memo](#) ordering Danielle Sassoon, the acting U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, to dismiss all charges against New York Mayor Eric Adams “as soon as is practicable.” (Sassoon [quit](#) instead.)

True enough, Bove's Bond-villain name and his broodingly pharaonic countenance help finger him as an easy bad guy. But read the damn memo. Here's how it starts: “You [Sassoon] are directed, as authorized by the Attorney General, to dismiss the pending charges in *United States vs. Adams*.”

As authorized by the attorney general. There it is. The top law enforcement officer of the United States, *five days* on the job, ordered that corruption charges, painstakingly assembled over a multiyear period by prosecutors in New York's Southern District, be dismissed. Why? Well, your average fair-minded person, presented with the facts as I've laid them out so far, would assume that said attorney general and her people had discovered new information that exculpated the mayor. That's how justice works in the movies, right?

But not here. In fact, Bove's memo admits the opposite! It reads: “The Justice Department has reached this conclusion without assessing the strength of the evidence or the legal theories on which the case is based.” Couldn't be clearer. Bondi's decision—and please, please, call it that; Bondi's decision, not Bove's—had nothing to do with evidence. So what did it have to do with?

Two factors. The first is timing. The memo states: “It cannot be ignored that Mayor Adams criticized the prior Administration's immigration policies before the charges were filed.” That's a staggering sentence. It assumes an almost casual and universal corruption on the part of prosecutors in the Southern District generally, and the U.S. attorney in particular.

This is an outrageous charge: that prosecutors are working to exact political revenge for presidents. That is a morality that Fox News and others have gotten millions of American to cynically buy into. It is not the real-life morality of the Southern District, which for decades has rightfully enjoyed an apolitical reputation. Even when there have been politically ambitious U.S. attorneys in charge who were clearly bringing cases that might benefit them politically—most obviously, Rudy Giuliani prosecuting corrupt Democratic bosses in the 1980s—it had to be admitted that the prosecutions were legit. Giuliani won convictions in those cases, and the city was better off.

But this is an accusation—by the nation's top law-enforcement officer—that the Southern District is, or was, a priori corrupt. It's the kind of accusation, history instructs us, that is usually made by people who are guilty of exactly that which they allege.

And it is an accusation lodged specifically at former U.S. Attorney Damian Williams. Yes, Williams was appointed by Biden. Yes, Williams is a Democrat. But what is his record of politically selective prosecutions?

Well, let's see. He oversaw the indictment of former New York Lieutenant Governor Brian Benjamin—a Democrat and, for what it's worth, like Williams, a Black man (I mention this only because the right-wing media would surely claim the fact as relevant were it expedient to do so). He oversaw the indictment of Democratic Senator Bob Menendez of New Jersey. In 2018, as an assistant U.S. attorney in the same Southern District, he helped secure the indictment and conviction of Sheldon Silver, the powerful former speaker of the New York State Assembly—and, yes, another fellow Democrat.

And bear in mind, of course, that the investigation of Adams stretched back years. Read [the indictment](#). It's more than 50 pages, and it tracks events going back to 2016. You don't assemble that in a week. Southern District investigators were obviously building an Adams case for years—probably before Williams was even named U.S. attorney, which happened in 2021, and long before Adams cozied up to Donald Trump.

On top of all that, suspicion of corruption has [swirled around Adams's head](#) practically since he took office. The notion that the filing of the Adams indictment was somehow tied to his refusal to talk nice about Kamala Harris before the election is the kind of absurd conspiracy that used to be laughable in this country, consigned to the John Birch margins, before the right-wing media promoted this kind of thinking to the extent that it became imprintable on millions of fevered minds.

But remember—that’s only the first factor cited by Bove (and Bondi). The second, if you can believe it, is far more ridiculous. The indictment against Adams needs to be dropped posthaste, Bondi ordered, because it’s distracting him from doing his job! I’m not joking: “The pending prosecution has unduly restricted Mayor Adams’ ability to devote full attention and resources to the illegal immigration and violent crime that escalated under the policies of the prior Administration.”

This is, to put it politely, not how the law works in this country. Remember that the Supreme Court ruled—unanimously—that [even a sitting president](#) can’t be immune from civil litigation on the grounds that it will distract him from his duties. But that was about Bill Clinton, a scourge of the right. For a darling of the right, the rules appear to be different.

Except that the dismissal of these charges carries a big asterisk. They were dismissed “without prejudice,” meaning they can be refiled anytime Bondi—or Donald Trump—wants them to be. In other words, Mayor Adams is too busy fighting crime and immigration, but only for as long as Bondi and Trump think he’s fighting it their way. Once he’s not, cuff him.

So things go in a nation where it is openly declared that some people are above the law. That was not supposed to be the United States (although often it has been, in the case of rich people). It was supposed to be places like Daniel Ortega’s Nicaragua. But now it *is* the United States. I didn’t declare it so. Trump did—more specifically, his White House counsel David Warrington did this week, in the form of [a memo obtained by The Washington Post](#) stating that it is now the official policy of the Trump administration that the president *and vice president* (What? Why?) and their top lawyers “can discuss ongoing criminal and civil cases with the attorney general and her deputies.” In other words, Trump—or Vance—can make one phone call and set any investigation they wish in motion, or get one quashed. In other words, they *are* the law.

But don’t forget the central role here of Bondi: “As authorized by the attorney general.” She has proven in a week that she will corrupt her office to any point and in any way that Trump desires. Don’t take it from me. Take it from Sassoon—a Republican and a Federalist Society member who, far from thinking Adams innocent, was about to file [a superseding indictment](#) charging him with even more corruption, including tampering with evidence. And take it from the five Justice Department prosecutors who [followed Sassoon](#) with their resignations.

This is a crisis. A legal and constitutional crisis of a sort seen only a few times in this country’s history. And yet the squashing of the Adams case will pass, as all these things pass, with nary a peep from elected Republicans because a serial liar with a mighty propaganda machine working overtime for him has convinced half the country that up is down, that honor is venality, and that integrity is just a ruse for suckers who believe all that garbage from our schoolbooks.

This article first appeared in Fighting Words, a weekly TNR newsletter authored by editor Michael Tomasky. [Sign up here.](#)

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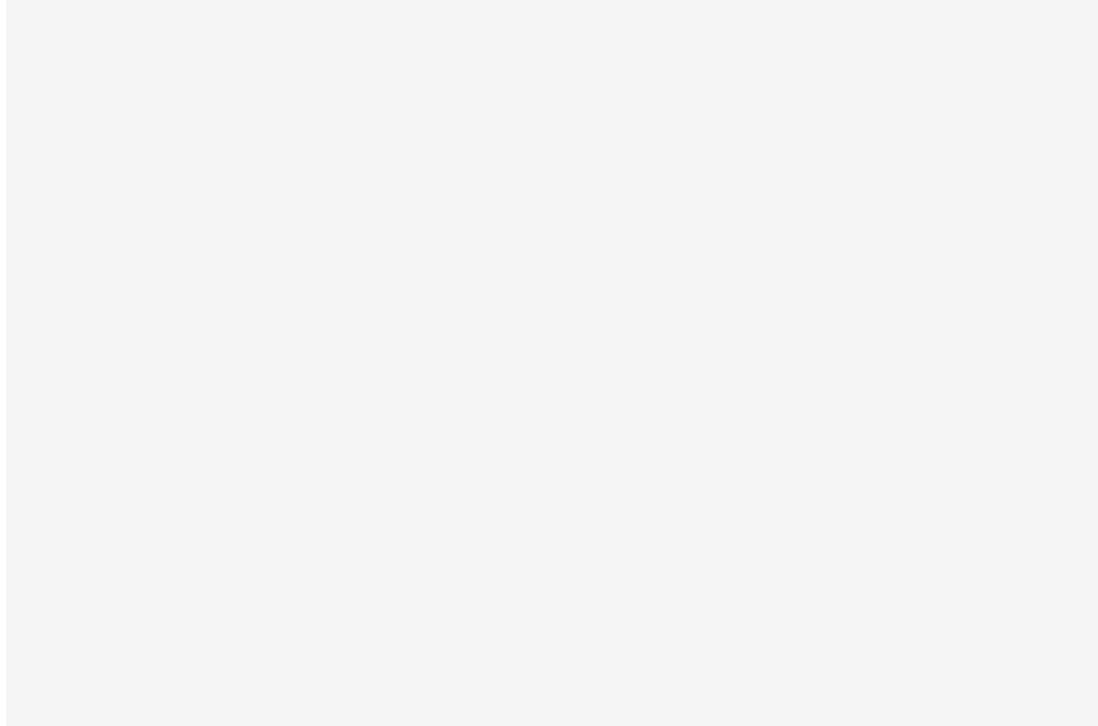
February 7, 2025/10:33 a.m. ET

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Trump’s Gaza Plan Is Not a Distraction. It’s a Potential War Crime.

The U.S. has committed war crimes in its history, but they’ve never been part of stated peacetime policy—until this week.



Demetrius Freeman/The Washington Post/Getty Images

Trump greets Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House on Tuesday.

When the initial shock began to wear off from Donald Trump's announcement Tuesday evening describing his "[beautiful](#)" plans for Gaza that "[everybody loves](#)," two schools of thought emerged.

The first was that we can't possibly take this seriously. The president apparently thought of it two hours before blurting it out. It's preposterous on several levels. Never going to happen.

The second was that Trump said it to distract us from [his and the Great Salutist's attacks on democracy at home](#)—making the press obsess about the Middle East so maybe they won't notice how he's destroying USAID.

These are both wrong. We should assume that Trump is deadly serious about this. This is exactly the stuff of deeply held Trumpian fantasy—hotels, casinos, golf courses, steakhouses, bathrooms with chandeliers. And if that's true, then by definition it's no mere distraction.

But here's what it also is: a potential war crime. A plan to forcibly move a people out of a place where they have been living for decades (centuries, actually) amounts to a pretty clear violation of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the 1998 Rome Statutes, which established the International Criminal Court. It's ethnic cleansing, plain and simple.

One understands the impulse to laugh it off, I guess. It's ridiculous. But it is not merely ridiculous, and to laugh it off is to minimize its savagery toward a people who have just experienced tens of thousands of deaths and who are now literally walking back to their homes, except for the fact that in most cases, when they get there, their homes are being carted off piece by piece in wheelbarrows.

Yes, it's very hard to imagine how the United States and Israel would pull off the feat of displacing two million Palestinians to places that don't want them and won't take them. Very hard—but not quite impossible. The Associated Press [reported Thursday](#) that Israel has already begun preparations for the departure of Palestinians from Gaza. Details were thin, but the AP dispatch did report that "Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said Thursday that he has ordered the military to make preparations to facilitate the emigration of large numbers of Palestinians from Gaza through land crossings as well as 'special arrangements for exit by sea and air.'"

That sure sounds to me like they're at least thinking through the logistics. Besides which, forced deportation is all the rage among corrupt authoritarians these days. As goes [Aurora, Colorado](#), so goes Rafah.

Ever since Trump blurted this out, the White House has backtracked, and the confusion and crossed signals convey that it isn't a serious thing. Press secretary Karoline Leavitt [assured the White House press corps](#) that no American troops would be committed to this project (Trump himself said the same on Truth Social Thursday morning). Secretary of State Marco Rubio said that Palestinians would leave Gaza for an "interim" period only, while it was being rebuilt. Trump of course has said the opposite: that Gazans would find beautiful, modern homes ... somewhere.

But don't let the current confusion lull you. Trump means this. How he'd get the Palestinians to leave, and who would take them—yes, those are rather large snags. It's highly unlikely that this will ever happen on the scale in which it's happening in Trump's head right now. But what if Israel manages to "facilitate the emigration" of, oh, 300,000 Palestinians? That's 15 percent of the Gaza population. What would we call that?

But whether it ends up being two million or 300,000 or 157 isn't really the point we need to be focusing on here. The president of the United States has made the expectation that we will at least abet—if not carry out—a war crime into official U.S. policy. The current impassioned defenses of the USAID remind us, as we often forget, that the U.S. does spread plenty of good across the world. At the same time, we know all too well that we have spread more than our share of misery and committed some war crimes, from Dresden and Tokyo to Abu Ghraib.

But I don't think we've ever announced, with pride, that violation of the Geneva Conventions and other international laws is our policy. In fact, the Bush administration took great pains in the run-up to Iraq to ensure that the relevant U.N. resolutions were worded in such a way that the U.S. was not in violation of international law. But now, we are bragging that the potential commission of a war crime is just another weapon in the U.S. arsenal.

The administration has showed us pretty clearly on the domestic policy front what it thinks of the law. Why should this be any different? And anyone naïve enough to

have believed last year that Trump cares anything about the Palestinian people should have some pretty heavy scales falling from their eyes right now. I'm not lecturing anybody about how they voted. I am saying, though, that if you fooled yourself into thinking that Trump's campaign stop in Dearborn, Michigan, last year was anything more than a cynical attempt to harvest some disgruntled votes, well, I fear time will reveal to you your miscalculation. Let's just hope it's not at the price of two million people being forcibly uprooted from their land.

This article first appeared in [Fighting Words](#), a weekly TNR newsletter authored by editor Michael Tomasky. [Sign up here](#).

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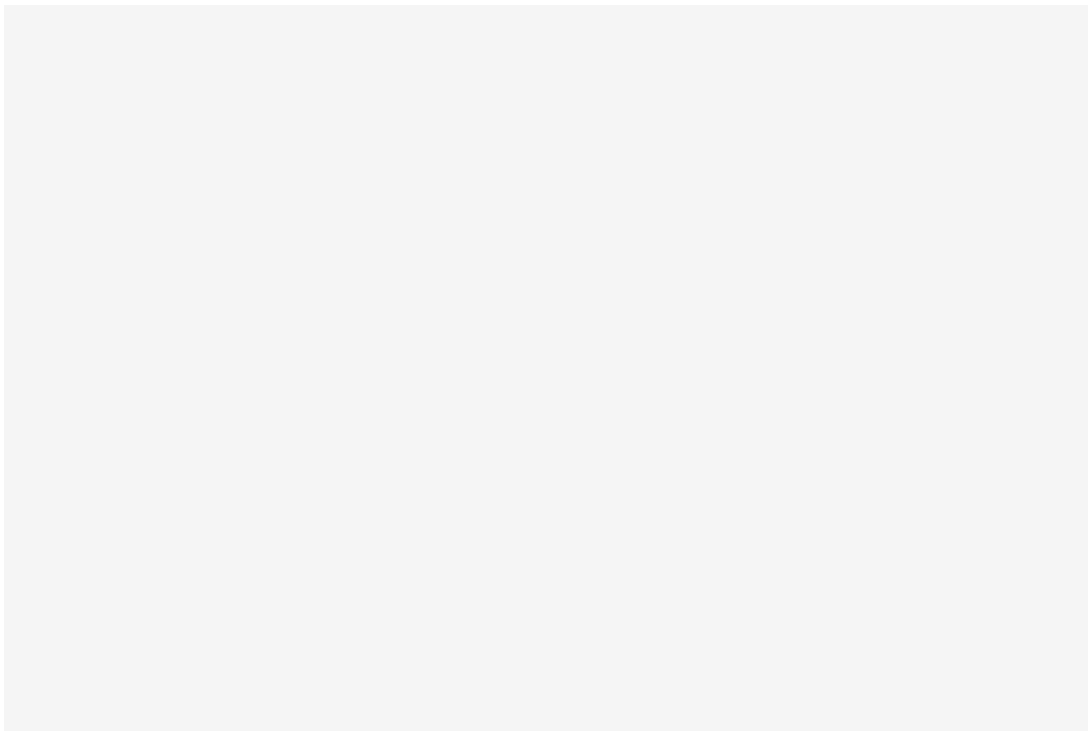
January 31, 2025/10:14 a.m. ET

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We've Now Learned the Three Principles of Trumpism, and They're Ugly

Trump 1.0 was a Jackson Pollock—splat splat all over the place. Trump 2.0 is painting within very precise lines. It's terrifying—but it should help plan how to fight.



Hu Yousong/Getty Images

We're nearing the end of week two of Trump 2.0, and several things are already manifestly clear. First and foremost, that the new Trump administration was more than ready to hit the ground running at noon on January 20. As one journalist friend said to me: "We were prepared for a 2,000-volt dose of MAGA. We got a 20,000-volt dose."

The scope and audacity of the moves floored everyone. There have been a lot of complaints about the Democrats; with Democrats, there's always something legitimate to complain about (their timidity, their rationales for nonaggression). But there's also an extent to which, in this case, everybody was taken aback by the tsunami of orders, the fuck-you unqualified-ness of crucial appointees, and more. That we've needed a few days to take it in is understandable.

But now we know. I write these words on Day 12 of the new Trump era, and already, the three guiding principles are obvious:

1. There is no such thing as settled law. There is law Trump and the broader right accept, and law that they don't accept, and everything in the latter category will be relentlessly challenged.
2. There is no such thing as independence within the government. There is only loyalty to Trump and the cause.
3. Diversity is poison. It's the job of the federal government not merely to arrest its progress where it is but to push it back, aggressively.

Let's examine each.

With respect to the first principle, the key evidence exists in the form of certain moves Trump has made that challenge settled law. The Office of Management and Budget order attempting to block all federal grants and loans is Exhibit A. The Trump people know very well that this is money appropriated by Congress, and that money appropriated by Congress is money that a presidential administration has no legal right to rescind.

So it's not that they aren't aware of what the law says. Rather, they know and just don't care. They know very well that the order violates the 1974 Impoundment Act. That's not a problem. It's the point. They want to challenge the law, have people bring lawsuits, and hopefully from their perspective have it get to the Supreme Court, where, in theory, there are at least five justices available to overturn the Impoundment Act.

Why play it this way? Well, there are two motivations here—Trump's, and that of the broader right. Trump's motivations are simple to understand: It's just so that he will have fewer constraints on his executive power. For the right, this is a longtime goal that precedes Trump's arrival on the scene. They hate this post-Nixon reform that gives power to a drunken Congress (especially when run by Democrats), and they want a (Republican) president to be able to unilaterally cancel piles of federal spending. If you're of a certain age, you remember Ronald Reagan's obsession with the line-item veto. This is its kissing cousin.

The same motivations are on display with the firing of the 18 inspectors general. They know that these dismissals violated the law. Their point is to change the law: to have the Supreme Court affirm that the president can fire these people at will—or ideally, that he can even just order such offices dissolved.

These are just a few of the ways this drive for raw and unchecked power has manifested itself over these first few days, and we'll see many more. And by the way, this is all straight out of the pages of Project 2025.

Principle two: The firings of the 12 prosecutors who worked for Jack Smith. A half-dozen or so top-ranking FBI officials told to resign or retire. The buyouts offered to roughly two million federal employees. The point of these and other similar moves is obvious, and it's exactly what we've known ever since Axios [broke that Schedule F story](#) back in July 2022: Across the federal bureaucracy, career bureaucrats are to be replaced by operatives loyal to Trump.

This, again, is both a Trump goal and a longer-held goal of the broader right. For Trump, the motivation is obvious: Nothing is more important to him than loyalty. For the right, the point is to reshape the bureaucracy and fill it with people who seek not to carry out the mission of the Environmental Protection Agency or the Department of Housing and Urban Development but who seek to subvert it.

And yes, a Democratic president can come in and replace all those people if he or she wants, but it's a reasonable bet that the Democrat will be slow and timid about doing so—or that their respect for norms will override the commonsense urge to fumigate the civil service of Trumpian parasites and return it to its former level of professionalism.

From the perspective of Trump's Project 2025 goons, they know they can break more things than future Democrats will be able, perhaps even willing, to fix. And so the sledgehammers swing. Result: On balance, the federal bureaucracy will have fewer dedicated civil servants who can perform their jobs under Democratic *or* Republican regimes, as has been the norm in the United States for a century, and instead will be more packed with right-wing ideologues.

Principle three is more ideologically aggressive than the first two, because diversity has become so embroidered into so many aspects of American life and culture, accepted even by many facially conservative institutions, such as large corporations. There are certainly instances of woke leftism in this country, chiefly in the academy, which are illiberal and lamentable. But by far, the reality is that a broad consensus exists that diversity is a good thing that has enriched society.

Trump is moving with gobsnacking speed against this consensus on many fronts. His statement that DEI was basically to blame for the Washington, D.C., plane crash was, of course, intentional; no doubt uttered to push this idea into the media maw so that it got talked about and argued over at the expense of conversations about the fact that he dismissed that aviation safety board or that Elon Musk bullied the holdover Federal Aviation Administration head out the door. Mainly, however, he wanted to get more Americans to start thinking in the MAGA way: that any instance of sloppiness, inefficiency, or incompetence can be laid at the feet of liberal diversity initiatives. Oh, and by the way—the kinds of diversity initiatives that he railed against Thursday for weakening the FAA? They were [put in place in 2019](#), under President Trump.

The assault is multipronged. If you haven't, for example, read the language of [the executive order](#) banning transgender people from enlisting in the armed services, you should do so. It basically says that these Americans, who have volunteered to risk their lives if necessary for their country, are inherently incapable of loyal service: "Adoption of a gender identity inconsistent with an individual's sex conflicts with a soldier's commitment to an honorable, truthful, and disciplined lifestyle, even in one's personal life. A man's assertion that he is a woman, and his requirement that others honor this falsehood, is not consistent with the humility and selflessness required of a service member."

These are the ugly organizing principles of Trump 2.0. But on the bright side: At least we know them. At least they are self-evident to us, just 12 days in. It's like Germany announcing they're marching through the Ardennes before they even do it. The battle lines are clear. We can't say we don't know what we're fighting for.

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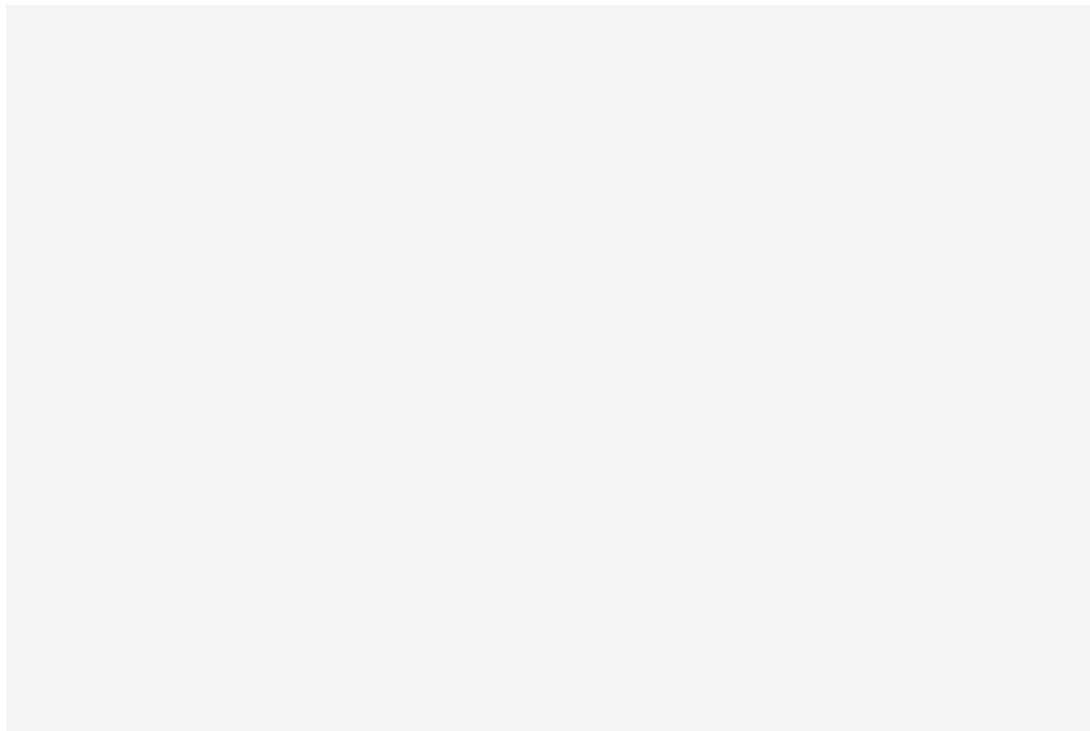
January 24, 2025/10:50 a.m. ET

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At the End of Week One, Every Dark Prediction Is Already Coming True

Trump 2.0 is following the “Nike rule”: Just do it, and dare the courts to come after them later.



Al Drago/Bloomberg/Getty Images

Trump at the White House

We're nearing the end of week one of Trump 2.0. What have we learned? Three things, all of them ugly:

1. They came in prepared this time, with outrageous and lawless executive orders written and ready to roll out.
2. When Trump makes an impromptu decision ([“Fuck it: Release ‘em all”](#)), it's based on his worst and most authoritarian instincts.
3. Obviously, this administration will act totally without regard to precedent or law.

From ending birthright citizenship to the shocking halt of grant processing at the National Institutes of Health and diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, and so much more, Trump is following what we might call the “Nike rule”: Just do it, and let the courts sort it out; if some court comes along in two years and says what he's been doing is unconstitutional or against some law, well, he got away with doing it for two years.

He went too far, for now, on birthright citizenship. A federal judge in Seattle not only called Trump's executive order [“blatantly unconstitutional”](#) but said it “boggles the mind.” Judge John C. Coughenour imposed a two-week restraining order, blocking the administration from moving forward. Trump will no doubt move to get the matter in front of a friendlier judge.

Most likely, the Supreme Court will have to weigh in someday. It's kind of hard to imagine the justices or any court overturning birthright citizenship, since it says in plain English right there in the Fourteenth Amendment—which, remember, is as much the Constitution as the first 10 amendments, as the words “We the People”: “All people born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.” But

then again, this Supreme Court has surprised us before. “Originalism” probably doesn’t cover those meddling slavery-enders of the 1860s.

The NIH order effectively freezes that body’s grant-making process, which accounts for [about 80 percent of its \\$47 billion budget](#). It’s potentially devastating to scientific research in this country, and it portends a bigger shakeup at NIH when budget time arrives—especially if Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is confirmed as secretary of health and human services. And I hardly need to tell you why all of this is happening. It’s not because the Trumpists care passionately about scientific research and have wonderful ideas about reforming the system. It’s for one reason and one reason only. Hint: It [rhymes](#) with *ouchy*.

On the DEI front, a conservative administration is bound to have a different view of these initiatives from a liberal one, and, yes, Trump won the election. A recalibration of these policies, or the appointment of a task force to reexamine them, would have been hard to object to from a small-*d* democratic perspective.

That, however, is not what’s happening. Some of the language in the memorandum from Charles Ezell, the acting director of the Office of Management and Budget, goes well beyond that. The memo directs federal employees to snitch on their colleagues. It reads in part: “If you are aware of a change in any contract description or personnel position description since November 5, 2024 to obscure the connection between the contract and DEIA or similar ideologies, please report all facts and circumstances to DEIAtruth@opm.gov within 10 days” (the *A* adds “accessibility” to the list of crimes, even though accessibility rights for people with disabilities are [clearly enshrined in law](#)). It threatens possible “adverse consequences” for employees who don’t comply. By next Friday, all executive agencies are to submit “a written plan for executing a reduction-in-force action regarding the employees who work in a DEIA office.”

Even more worrying is the administration’s halting of work by the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division. No new cases, no indictments, no settlements, no nothing. Usually, administrations just decide on a case-by-case basis which of its predecessor administration’s lawsuits it will pursue and which it will drop; not the Nike administration. It’s all chucked out the window. The wide presumptions are that the division that integrated the University of Mississippi will pursue no civil rights cases, and all consent decrees monitoring police departments will be canceled.

That’s because Trump is a bigly law-and-order Republican, right? Well, not so fast. What kind of law-and-order Republican grants a wholesale pardon to some 1,550 rioters, 89 of whom have [pleaded guilty](#) to felony charges of assaulting Capitol Police officers (and some D.C. officers) on January 6, 2021? We know what kind. The kind who enforces the laws he agrees with and flouts or tries to undo the laws he doesn’t like. And that’s called lawlessness.

Again: It would have been . . . not exactly defensible, but politically less vulnerable to criticism if Trump had decided to pardon only those who weren’t charged with committing violence against officers. But that isn’t what he did. Fuck it: Release ’em all.

I think he knew exactly what he was doing here. In freeing that many people—and especially in [freeing the two generals of this army](#), Proud Boy Enrique Tarrio and Oath Keeper Stewart Rhodes—Trump has potentially loosed upon an unsuspecting nation his own private militia. Is it early days to jump on the Germany 1930s analogies? All right, I’ll leave that alone. For now, Tarrio vows “[retribution](#)” against his pursuers, saying the “people who did this . . . need to be put behind bars and they need to be prosecuted.”

But let’s say there’s another Charlottesville, or a police shooting, or a mass shooting with a seemingly racial element. Do we really think these 1,550 people will just be content to stay at home and watch it all unfold on Fox? The father who [called his own son a “traitor”](#) (the son helped turn the father in) and said, “Traitors get shot”?

All this in four days. If these four days haven’t woken you from postelection slumber, you need to ask yourself what it would take. And imagine what four years will be like.

This article first appeared in Fighting Words, a weekly TNR newsletter authored by editor Michael Tomasky. [Sign up here](#).

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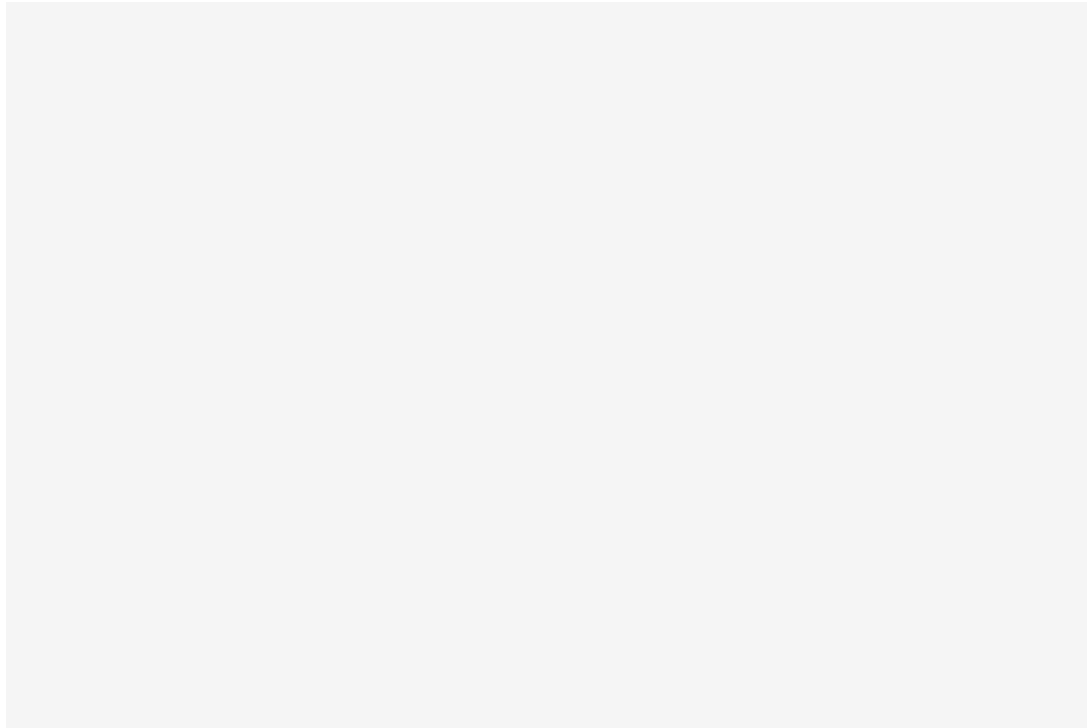
January 17, 2025/10:20 a.m. ET

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It’s Time to Check Back in, Liberals—Trump 2.0 Will Be Far, Far Worse

Most people I know—even me, to an extent—have been avoiding it. Well, we don’t have that luxury anymore.



Rebecca Noble/Getty Images

After the election, nearly all my friends, those who are political junkies and those who are only casual users (and no, I’m not friends with anyone who isn’t at least a casual user, which is something I should perhaps think about), said: “I need a break. I’m checking out for a while.” The idea that the country would ignore everything it had seen and elect Donald Trump again was just unprocessable.

We saw this manifest itself in a number of ways, notably MSNBC’s [lower ratings](#), which right-wingers crowed about on social media. As *Governing* magazine put it, “When a sports team loses, its fans don’t hang around for the postgame show.” I did this myself. I took nearly three weeks off work and read relatively little news. It was kind of great.

Folks, it’s time to reengage. Trump will take the oath of office at noon on Monday. Soon thereafter, this parade of misfit toys we’ve been watching testify this week will occupy their Cabinet positions. Orders will start percolating out—from Stephen Miller, Russell Vought, and other Trump deep staters—to start doing things differently. Trump already knows certain leverage points in the federal bureaucracy that took him months or years to locate the first time around. And he’ll have one big thing that he didn’t have in 2017: a pliant and willing establishment that signals a desire to be 100 percent on his side and that will give him every benefit of every doubt as he pulls at the republic’s threads.

It blows my mind, and ought to blow yours, that the [three richest men in the world](#) will be on Trump’s inaugural podium. It’s significant because, whatever their other powers and properties, they are three of the country’s most powerful media titans. Elon Musk owns the country’s most prominent news-oriented social media platform. Mark Zuckerberg owns the largest social networking service. And Jeff Bezos owns a newspaper that isn’t the ubiquitous behemoth that X and Facebook are, but even so, *The Washington Post*, at least to people on the broad left in the nation’s capital, means far more emotionally than the first two.

It’s worth staying with the *Post* for a paragraph here. Bezos bought the paper with seemingly good intentions in 2013 and poured a lot of money into it. Maybe, in retrospect, he went on too big a hiring spree. But that doesn’t excuse what’s been happening there lately. It’s a tragic mess, with its Murdoch-tainted publisher causing many excellent staffers to head for the exits. Bezos not long ago [declared himself](#) “very optimistic” and “very hopeful” about Trump’s return. This week, *Post* executives [voted to adopt](#) a new tag line/mission statement: “Riveting Storytelling for All of America.” Wow. This statement commits the paper to . . . what, exactly? I guess it’s quaint and hopelessly antique of me to mention that newspapers were once meant to be the people’s eyes and ears against corruption and assaults on the civic weal. The *Post* decided to keep “Democracy Dies in Darkness” for now. At least they didn’t vote to add, “Hey, if it happens, it happens.”

We are in an odd sort of waiting room at the moment. Trump and all his minions and enablers have told us many times what his administration will set out to accomplish: Project 2025, sweeping out the vermin, all the rest. At the same time, Trump himself has sent occasional mixed signals, indicating that it won’t really be *that* draconian, and every so often we read stories in the press meant to reassure us that, for example, rounding up and detaining 10 million people is literally not possible in four short years.

Well . . . call me cynical, but I sense a lot of people trying to convince themselves that it won’t be as bad this time around. I mean: Were you reassured by Pam Bondi’s testimony, for example? When Adam Schiff asked the attorney general nominee if she would pursue an investigation into Liz Cheney on Trump’s behalf, she said, “Senator, that’s a hypothetical, and I’m not going to answer it”—before lecturing Schiff that what he really ought to be concerned about is crime in California. But the maximum-creep moment came when Chris Coons asked her what she’d do if Trump ordered her to do something “outside the boundaries of ethics or law.” Bondi’s reply: “Senator, I will never speak on a hypothetical, especially one saying that the president would do something illegal!” Senator Coons, how dare you!

We’ve been navigating a hall of mirrors in this country ever since George W. Bush and Dick Cheney et al. convinced America that we had to invade a nation that had done nothing to us, possessed no weapons of mass destruction, and, deplorably as it may have treated its own people, had no serious imperialist designs on its region (unlike the country—Iran—that our invasion ended up strengthening). Twenty years on, the mirrors are just stranger and more relentless and pitched at more confounding angles. And it won’t stop.

And the main point: There are more and more people in positions of power telling us, “Mirrors, what mirrors? You’re imagining things.” Goldman Sachs CEO David Solomon [said this week](#): “There has been a meaningful shift in CEO confidence, particularly following the results of the U.S. election.” The data would suggest that he meant a shift to the negative, since the president who oversaw the creation of 16 million jobs is leaving and the former president who oversaw a net loss of jobs is

returning. But that is not of course what he meant.

So here we are. On Inauguration Day eight years ago, I was at a liberal confab down in Florida (as it happened, just a few miles from a Trump property). That morning I ran into James Carville. So, I asked, are you going to watch him take the oath of office? The only-from-Carville reply: “Are you kiddin’ me? I’d rather watch my uncle’s colonoscopy.”

A great line. But I watched that day, and I’ll be watching Monday. I still feel that the more of us who witness him swearing to defend and protect the Constitution, the better. And I want to see what he has to say in his address, and you should too. You can’t tune him out, even if you wanted to. It’s time to reengage.

This article first appeared in [Fighting Words](#), a weekly TNR newsletter authored by editor Michael Tomasky. [Sign up here](#).

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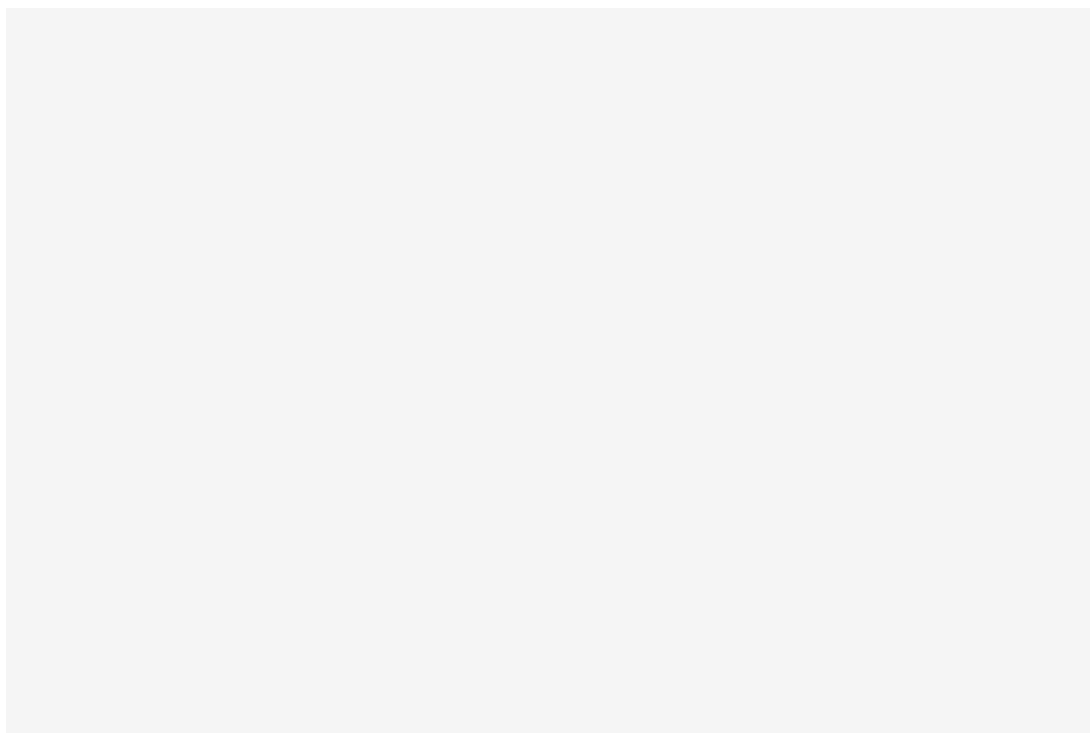
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We’ve Never Been Here Before: The Zero-Accountability Presidency

The only institutions that will try to hold Trump accountable are powerless, while the only ones with the power to punish him will never do it.



Craig Hudson for The Washington Post/Getty Images

So here we are, at another one of those Trump moments that by now can only be called boringly surreal: The president-elect was [sentenced](#) Friday in New York in the hush-money trial, 10 days before taking the oath of office. He was given an “unconditional discharge.” At least he had to appear. Amazingly, the Supreme Court, this once, did not bail him out, although four justices [were ready to](#).

Nothing is shocking anymore. Trump refused to rule out invading Denmark (to take Greenland). Well, of course he did. What else should we expect? That he also wouldn’t rule out invading Panama (to take the canal) took me by surprise, I admit. But only for about three seconds. By the fourth second, it made perfect sense: Jimmy Carter’s decision to give the canal to Panama has been a festering boil on the right ever since it happened.

To say we’re in an unprecedented place is vastly understating it. We are in a place where no proper democracy has ever been or should ever be. We are about to have a president for whom there are utterly and literally no expectations. No one expects him to behave well. No one expects him to uphold normal standards of decency. If he muses one day about bombing London, or bombing Vancouver, or for that matter bombing Detroit, he will surprise no one. The panelists on *The Five* will just joke that there are certain sections of Detroit that a good bombing would only improve. Ha ha.

Trump will enter office facing no accountability, and with virtually no chance that he will ever be held accountable. You think I’m exaggerating? OK. Let’s play out a hypothetical. Let’s say President Trump gives nuclear secrets to North Korea. *The New York Times* breaks the story, let’s say. What would happen?

We know all too well what would happen. One of two things. Either he’d lie and call it fake news, in which case the right-wing agitprop machine would grind its gears in his defense. They’d unload on the *Times*. They’d snoop around and find out that the reporter on the story cheated on an algebra test in tenth grade. Fox and the others would have the story “debunked” within about two days, and the *Times* and the rest of the mainstream media would be overpowered.

Under scenario two, Trump would simply admit that he did it and explain why it was a very stable-genius-y thing to do, how everybody’s saying so, and Fox et al. would immediately take up that drumbeat. And over at the *Times* and on MSNBC and CNN (and I originally added *The Washington Post* to this list, but these days, one isn’t so sure, alas), everyone would be in high dudgeon about a sitting president sharing nuclear secrets with a regime that has repeatedly stated a deep hostility to the United States, but none of it would matter.

Meanwhile, on Capitol Hill? We’d see the same pattern. Democrats would be up in arms, while the only thing the Republicans would be doing with their arms would be to lock them. A few of them would express “concern” (hi, Susan Collins), but in time, they’d announce their faith in the president’s sound judgment.

And in the event someone sued and it got to the Supreme Court? The court may not have interceded for the prepresidential Trump, but it has already held that the presidential Trump can do anything.

Trump will be a completely unaccountable president, then, for this very simple reason: The only three power systems capable of holding him to account—the right-wing media, Republicans in Congress, and the Supreme Court—have no interest in doing so. The mainstream media will try to hold him to account, or at least we hope it will; but the mainstream media means nothing to Trump, his party, and his base. Ditto Democrats in Congress.

I can’t imagine a single scenario in which the right-wing media or the GOP Congress or the high court will show backbone or independence. In the meantime, these three entities, especially the right-wing media, have by now been trained to immediately and reflexively aim their fire at Democrats and liberals for every single thing that may go wrong during Trump’s presidency.

We’re getting a little taste of that now. Once upon a sweet old time, the barely imaginable horror of the Los Angeles fires would have been given a little time to marinate before us as a merely human tragedy. It’s entirely appropriate to ask questions and hold leaders accountable—of course. But historically, we tend to get a few days of unified mourning before we get to that. And those days of unified mourning serve a civic and national purpose of reminding us that we are one people.

No longer. Within hours or even minutes of the fires spreading, conservatives took to social media to let the world know that there was nothing accidental or capricious about any of it—it was all the fault of Governor Gavin Newsom and Mayor Karen Bass and, most of all, DEI, which stripped the LAFD of the kind of manly white men whom the fires would have taken one look at and retreated back to the hills in fear.

As I said, obviously, it’s necessary to ask questions of leaders (which the GOP will never do with Trump). But it’s equally necessary not to instantly and excessively politicize events that obviously have nonpolitical elements to them. Newsom, Bass, and fire chief Kristen Crowley aren’t in control of the winds, or of the climate change that’s making these wildfires more common and more severe.

This is what the new Trump era will be like, and it’s what Democrats need to know they will be up against. There is a powerful disinformation and propaganda apparatus (1) for which Trump can do no wrong and (2) which, in all cases of conflict, will instantly advance a narrative, whether true or false or somewhere in between, that it’s the fault of Democrats, liberals, or the woke left. Thus the paradox of the new Trump era: The only institutions that will try to hold Trump accountable are powerless to do so, while the only ones with the power to punish him will never do it.

Powerlessness does not, however, imply surrender. Quite the contrary. The republic is in the hands of Democrats and mainstream and progressive institutions. They, we, must fight harder than ever. It’s just going to be maddening, watching a convicted felon president tell lies and corrupt our values. We have to believe that a day of reckoning will come. Without that belief, he wins.

This article first appeared in Fighting Words, a weekly TNR newsletter authored by editor Michael Tomasky. [Sign up here](#).

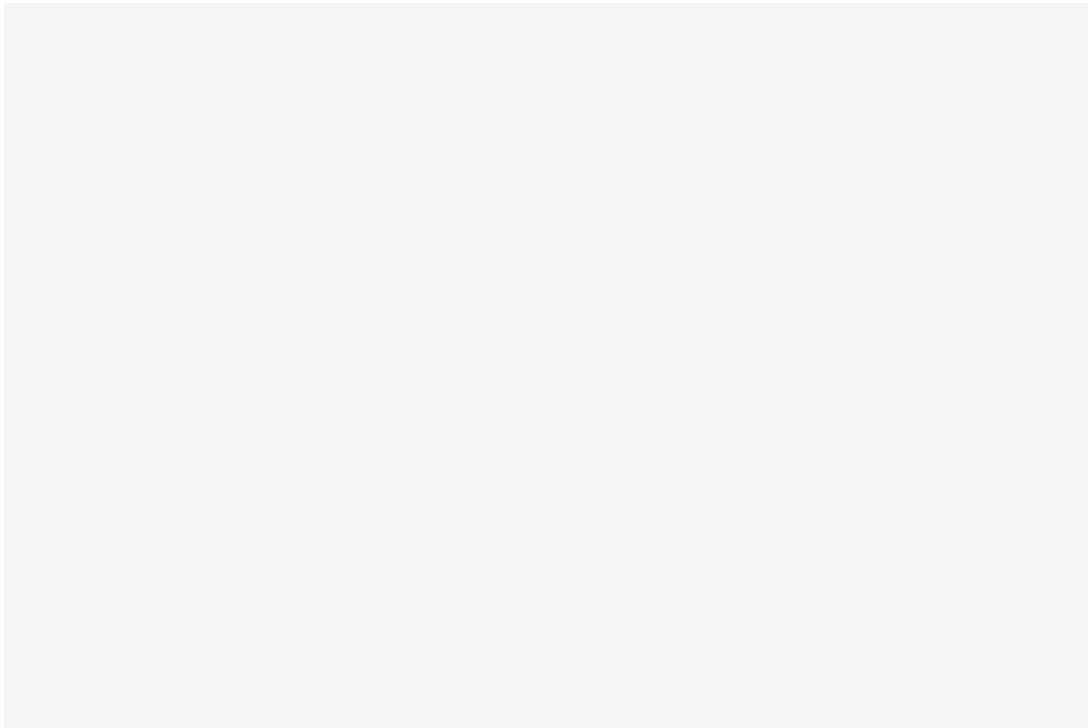
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The Trump Era Came Into Sharper View This Week. God Help Us.

Corporate tax cuts! Threatening Republicans! Arresting Democrats! Rethinking the polio vaccine?! People are about to find out what they voted for.



Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images

Donald Trump welcomes Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to the stage at a rally in Duluth, Georgia.

Where do I even begin in describing what the events of the week have told us about the coming Trump era? Four developments this week, in entirely different realms, have done much to illuminate what life under Donald Trump is going to be like.

Let's begin with a piece of news that you may have missed. This was good news: The Biden administration's Federal Trade Commission [won a big one](#) in a Portland, Oregon court when, after a three-week trial, a judge ruled against the proposed Kroger-Albertsons grocery store merger. The stores argued that the merger would give them more leverage over suppliers, thus enabling them to lower prices. The government argued that it would reduce competition, allowing them to both *raise* prices and reduce the power of their unionized work forces. The judge ruled for the government.

What does this tell us about the Trump era? A couple important things. One, it's extremely unlikely a Trump FTC, under nominee Andrew Ferguson (who will not require Senate confirmation), would try to block such a merger. You see, the Biden administration announced merger guidelines a year ago that made effects on the labor market a more central factor in considering mergers. In other words: It took a stand for the working class. Two, Judge Nelson was appointed by Joe Biden.

The Trump FTC will surely revisit—that is, toss—those Biden-era guidelines. It would also look more favorably on mergers like the Kroger-Albertsons one. Ferguson, and Trump's other antitrust appointments, do want to do [a certain amount of cracking down](#), but to the extent they're prepared to swing a big stick at corporate consolidation, it will be in pursuit a narrow interest: Big Tech's alleged (and mostly phantasmal) suppression of right-wing speech. And if a future merger like Kroger-Albertsons comes before a Trump-appointed judge, count on it getting approved. But remember, the Republicans are the party of the working class!

Item two: Trump rang the opening bell on Wall Street Thursday, to thunderous applause and chants of "USA, USA!" He announced there that he'll lower the corporate tax rate to 15 percent for companies that make their products in the United States. It would stay at 21 percent for companies that do not. That sounds very MAGA. But what about corporations that don't make anything at all? Here are [the 10 largest companies](#) in the United States by revenue: Walmart, Amazon, Apple, United Health Group, Berkshire Hathaway, CVS, Exxon Mobil, Alphabet, McKesson, and Cencora (the last two are pharmaceutical distributors). Only a couple of them make things. Let's guess what these companies' new rate will be.

The great avatar of the working class will stop considering workers' interests in antitrust enforcement and will lower corporate taxes again. But hey, he went on Joe Rogan. He's a tough guy tribune of the working stiff.

A third development of the week that opens a window onto what Trump 2.0 will be like was the open declaration by Elon Musk that [he'll finance primaries](#) against Republican senators who vote against Trump's Cabinet nominees. "How else? There is no other way," Musk wrote on X. Marjorie Taylor Greene, chasing approval and relevance, [chimed in](#): "Elon and Vivek talked about having a naughty list and a nice list for members of Congress and senators and how we vote and how we're spending the American people's money."

In other words, Republican senators: You better vote to approve Pete Hegseth and Tulsi Gabbard and Kash Patel and RFK Jr., or you're going to have a primary challenger on your hands financed by Elon Musk—who, thanks to the right-wing Supreme Court, can throw as much dark money at a primary as he wants. Twenty GOP incumbent senators are up for reelection in 2026, including Mitch McConnell (if he runs) and that sometime troublemaker Joni Ernst. This is hardly different from Putin's Russia, or an Americanized version thereof. The billionaire president had better get his billionaire Cabinet just as he wants it, or the world's biggest billionaire will destroy your career.

Those confirmations will include, as I mentioned above, Patel, who as of this week looks like he's on a glidepath to confirmation. So reassuring, in a week that started with Trump [telling Kristen Welker](#) that the members of the House January 6 committee belong in prison. It's another marker of how grotesquely Trump has debased American political culture that a president-elect can dangle the threat of jail time in the faces of incumbent elected representatives and it's barely even news.

It *was* news, however, that FBI Director Chris Wray will be throwing in the towel, and rightfully so. Wray chose not to go submit himself to the abasement that he knew he and bureau faced, the endless smearing of his reputation in the right-wing media, if he tried to defy Trump's wishes and stay on. The precedent this sets will reverberate plenty over the next four years and beyond. So Patel, the man who promised to explode the FBI and whose [enemies list](#) is three times longer than Richard Nixon's, will probably take over the agency.

Fourth and finally, let us not forget Robert F. Kennedy Jr. There's so much craziness and corruption and incompetence that it's impossible to keep it all front of mind, which is of course part of the plan. So, when we manage to direct our attention to the future of the nation's public health, we must think not only about Kennedy. We are introduced to figures like Kennedy's attorney Aaron Siri, who in 2022, *The New York Times* [tells us in a scorching piece](#), petitioned the government to revoke the polio vaccine. The polio vaccine! Literally one of the great triumphs of the human race. Hey, Siri, is polio on the rise again? Why [yes, it is](#). Lower rates of vaccination are part of the reason.

Trump expressed skepticism about polio vaccine revocation, so at least he's apparently that sane. But the signal is clear: If Kennedy is confirmed, it'll be open season on vaccines in general—maybe even modern medicine writ large. Siri is advising Kennedy on people to fill the top positions at his agency should he win confirmation. Feel better?

I know. Voters were angry about the price of eggs. And we can't blame them. But soon enough, they'll start to see what they voted for. And as Trump finally admitted this week, after lying for a year on the campaign trail, there isn't really much he can do to bring down prices, either. So now we'll have five-dollar eggs *and* a corrupt oligarchy *and* political opponents under arrest *and* new outbreaks of once-defeated diseases. But remember, Trump was the working-class candidate.

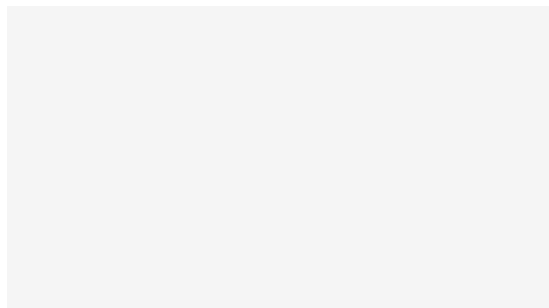
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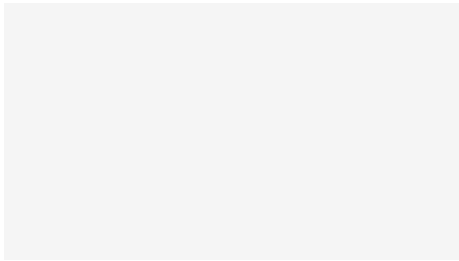
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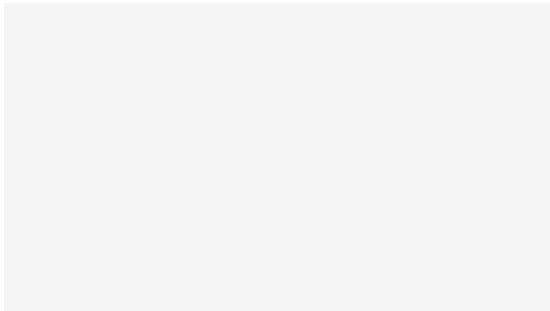
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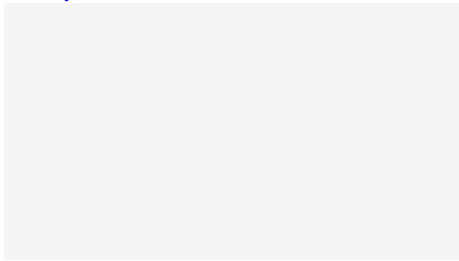
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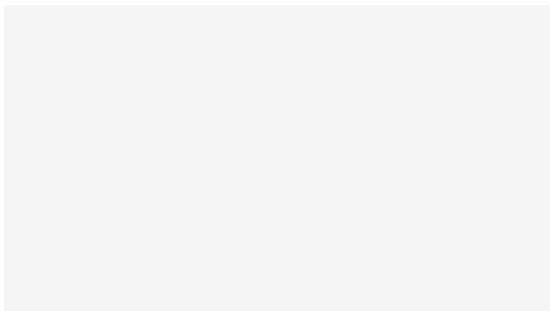
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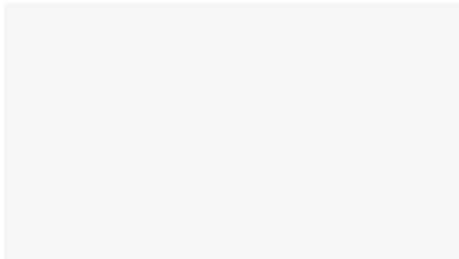
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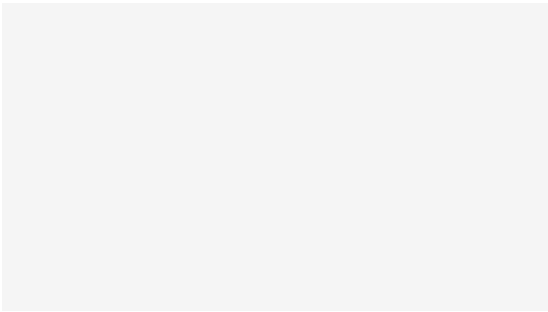
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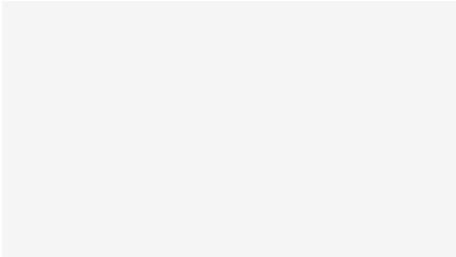
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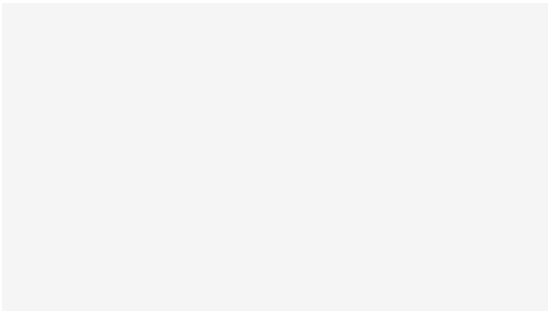
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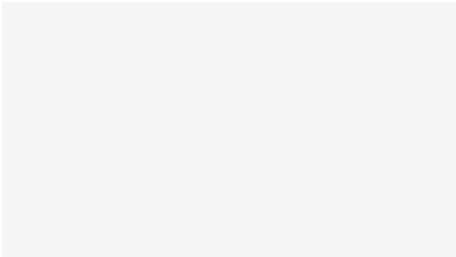
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Trump Has Handed Democrats a Fast Way to Build Some Working-Class Cred
The party can use the upcoming confirmation hearings to start to restore its class identity.



Brandon Bell/Getty Images

Trump and oligarch Elon Musk at a SpaceX event in November

One important point that gets lost in the avalanche of coverage about Donald Trump's appalling Cabinet nominees is that they're all (except the ones who withdraw) going to have to undergo confirmation hearings next year. Those hearings are a long way away—they'll be held in February or March, mostly. By nominating all these people faster and earlier than usual, Trump has given Senate Democrats a long time to prepare and plot strategy.

The Democrats are not going to block any nominees. They don't have the votes or the power to do that. But they can still ask tough questions; they can still command the stage with national attention focused on them. And there is an obvious way they can use that spotlight to do the one thing most observers think is their top priority: to rebuild some credibility with working-class voters.

Let me start by asking you this question: Looking over Trump's nominees, what is the great unifying theme? No, it's not that they're all Trump loyalists. That's true, but it was a given and is thus uninteresting. No, it's not that they're awful toward women. That's true of some of them, but only some. No, it's not that they've said and promised to do shocking things. That's true too, and they should be questioned aggressively on those matters, but that still isn't the great theme.

The great theme is how many of them are massively rich. I saw on Alex Wagner's show Thursday night that the combined net worth of Joe Biden's Cabinet was \$118 million. That's not chicken feed, and no doubt if we went back to late 2020—early 2021 we'd find a bunch of Fox News segments on what a bunch of hypocritical plutocrats Democrats are.

But the total net worth of Trump's Cabinet? It's [at least \\$13.3 billion](#), and that's not because there are just one or two really wealthy picks. Just-named Small Business Administration nominee Kelly Loeffler and her husband, for instance, [are worth \\$1 billion](#). By Axios's [count](#), at least 11 billionaires "will be serving in key roles in the administration" if they're all confirmed. That's not even counting Vivek Ramaswamy and Elon Musk, who won't be official Cabinet members. If you throw them in, the total [is \\$360 billion](#) (the vast majority of which is Musk, the world's richest man). And then, of course, there's the billionaire presiding over all of them.

But let's stick with the roughly \$14 billion net worth of those nominees who'll appear before the Senate. It's a staggering figure. It's often forgotten that one of the core characteristics of authoritarian regimes, along with extremism and nativism and so on, is corruption. Authoritarians are corrupt and self-dealing, from [Hermann Goering's art collection](#) to [Imelda Marcos's shoes](#). And, accountability being a bourgeois democratic concept, it's something they laugh at. It's in their nature.

I don't know how all these people made their money. I don't quite agree with Balzac that there's a crime behind every fortune, and of course there are certainly ways in which people who build large companies are to be admired because of their contributions to technological innovation or their communities or both. But I do believe two things.

One: The vast majority of great fortunes in this country in this day and age are made with a helping hand, somewhere along the way, from the federal government—a favorable agency ruling, a soft plea deal with a federal prosecutor for something or other, a government loan. Indeed, Tesla in 2010 got [a whopping \\$465 million loan](#) from the Department of Energy. Tesla, I should note, repaid the loan quickly, but still, the company apparently wouldn't have been able to launch its successful Model S without Uncle Sam's help.

Two: There may not be a crime on record, but there's bound to be some kind of skeleton in almost any rich corporate closet. Labor violations, hiring discrimination, failure to pay certain fees or fines, price collusion or manipulation, lack of required legal transparency with consumers. Many companies—maybe most companies—engage in this kind of behavior to one degree or another. And the documentation is always there, for those with the capacity to dig.

So this tees up the Senate Democrats' big job at these hearings. They have to make sure, when these hearings are over, and whether the nominees are confirmed or not, that America sees them through one lens only: as a bunch of out-of-touch plutocrats. They'll need to pick their shots well, but surely they'll be able to find three good cases in which these nominees have in some way made consumers' lives a little harder than they needed to be.

Senate Democrats need to bring that out fearlessly and plainly. We live in a country where, thanks to Fox News and the rest of them, your average person believes that the elitists in this country are people like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Well, AOC [doesn't even have a net worth](#) to speak of (needless to say, the right spread rumors not long ago that she was worth \$29 million). The real elites are the kinds of people who'll fill Trump's Cabinet. If the Democrats use the hearings to advance

this argument with evidence and put some of these people in uncomfortable positions with respect to their corporate track records, either because they hypocritically took government handouts of some kind or because they weren't straight with consumers, they can start to reframe the debate in this country about who is an elitist and who is not.

Will they do it? The Democrats' track record, alas, suggests they don't have the stomach for this. But they'd better realize that they are in a precarious position. Kamala Harris lost more working-class voters than Biden. Among non-college voters overall, Trump beat Biden [by just 50–48](#); he beat Harris [56–43](#). Among non-college, nonwhite voters, Harris still won with 64 percent, but Biden won with 72 percent.

Maybe Harris just lost working-class support because of inflation. I think that's probably the case. But is that an assumption Democrats can afford to make? One more presidential election like this one will constitute a pattern that will be hard to break. Democrats must show voters between now and 2026 and 2028 that they are on the side of working- and middle-class people. Being in the minority, they'll have few opportunities to show that. Confirmation hearings of nearly a dozen billionaires are a golden opportunity, Democrats. Go seize it.

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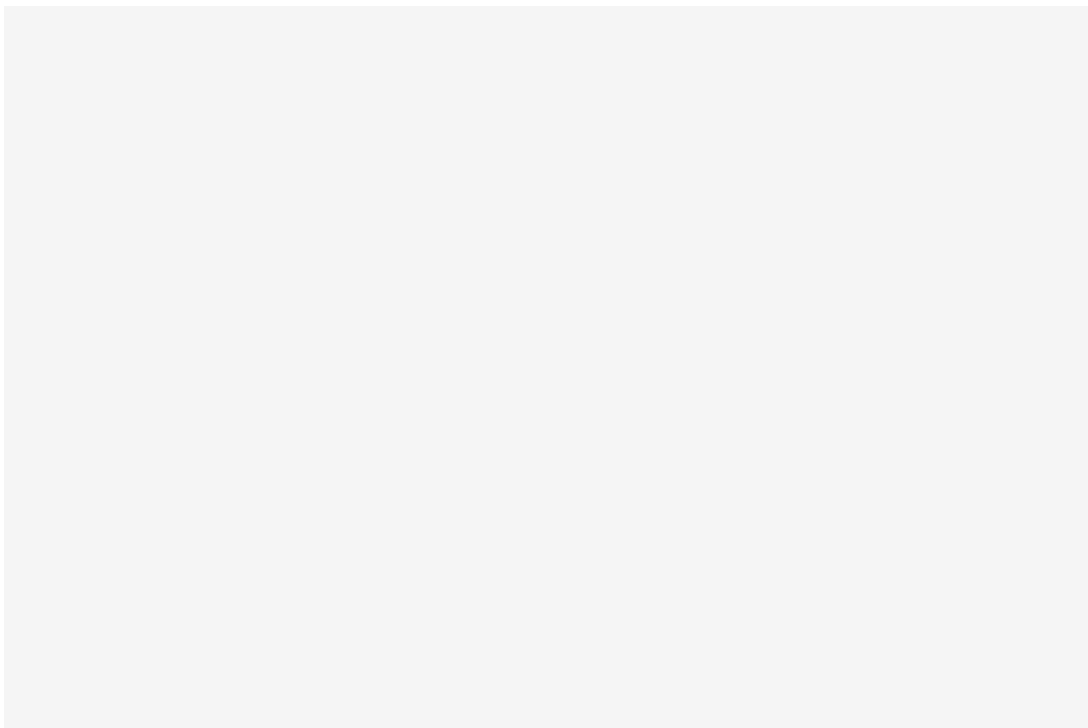
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Does the Gaetz-to-Bondi Transition Count as a Win? Maybe. For Now.

It's great that Matt Gaetz will not be our attorney general. But this may be an example of the Senate saving Trump from himself.



Joe Raedle/Getty Images

Matt Gaetz at the Republican National Convention in July

You know the old leftist phrase “the worse, the better”: It’s said to date to the early days of revolutionary Russia, and it means that the worse social conditions become for the proletariat, the better things will be for the left, because people will be more sympathetic to revolution. It’s a plausible idea, I guess, although it hasn’t usually worked out very well for the leftists—often, the worse just keeps getting worse and the revolution never comes; at other times, the revolution *does* come but things don’t get any better and arguably get far worse, as was the case in the Soviet Union itself, where Joe Stalin probably butchered or imprisoned or starved to death more proletarians than all the czars put together.

So now, here at home, we have our first scalp of the not-yet-extant second Trump administration. Matt Gaetz is [out as attorney general](#). I wrongly [thought he’d make it](#). Senate Republicans may have a little more backbone than many of us thought. At least four GOP senators told their colleagues they would vote “no” (including [Senator-elect John Curtis of Utah](#); could be worth keeping an eye on him). Of course, it didn’t come to a vote, or anywhere near that, but it certainly looked like Gaetz would go down in flames, so he did the sensible thing (for once!).

Is this a win for the opposition? Sure. Any setback for Donald Trump is a win for the other side. Plus, more substantively, it’s hard to imagine how awful Gaetz would have been as attorney general.

But now we have Pam Bondi stepping into the job. No one can seriously question her credentials on paper—a former assistant state attorney who served as Florida’s attorney general for eight years—so she will probably sail through confirmation. Is this so much better? She’s been a MAGA loyalist for a decade. She dropped an investigation into Trump University after Trump donated \$25,000 to her campaign ([no charges were brought against her](#)).

In a normal world, that would be pretty controversial. But in Trumpworld, it’s jaywalking. Bondi will presumably do whatever Trump wants her to do, and more cleverly than Gaetz would have done. We’re left hoping that those 18 years as a prosecutor have inculcated in her some modicum of respect for the law, such that if Trump calls her and orders up an arrest of someone he doesn’t like, she may slow-walk it.

It’s roughly the same with all the other absurd appointees. What Pete Hegseth, Trump’s pick to run the Department of Defense, is alleged to have done to that woman in 2017 is [repulsive](#) (he denies the charges and says it was consensual). His views are beyond extreme. But if he becomes so toxic that he, like Gaetz, has to withdraw, it won’t be because he believes liberalism must face “[utter annihilation](#),” but because of the sex scandal. On the one hand, that’s good—it would tell us that even Republican senators draw a line on sexual assault. On the other, it means that all Trump has to do is nominate someone else who isn’t charged with sexual misconduct but is cool with the annihilation of liberals, and that nominee will sail through.

We could run through several more of Trump’s nominees in a similar vein. Tulsi Gabbard, his pick for director of national intelligence, may be the most outrageous choice of all. I mean, if you were Germany or France, would you share intel about Russia with her? She may get bounced, but again, she’d likely be replaced by someone just as ferociously loyal to Trump and roughly as reactionary and objectionable, just less histrionically so. Ditto Linda McMahon, a truly nutty choice for education secretary, although she seems likely to get through. Matt Whitaker to NATO? His main qualification is trying to interfere with the Mueller report. Federal Communications Commission chair nominee Brendan Carr wrote the relevant section of Project 2025 and [has recently suggested](#) that his FCC will look closely at the broadcast licenses of the major networks, which no administration has done in decades.

And don’t ever forget the most alarming of them all, the man who has faded from the headlines somewhat because his elevation does not require Senate confirmation. Border-czar-to-be Tom Homan has nevertheless been out there talking to right-wing news outlets about [doubling the number of ICE agents in sanctuary cities and states](#): “Sanctuary states said they’re not allowing any detention facilities in their state—fine. Then we’ll arrest them. We’ll fly them out of the state and detain them outside the state, again, away—away from their families, their attorneys. That’s what you want, that’s what you get.”

So it’s good that Matt Gaetz won’t be attorney general. Yet somehow it’s hard to think of this as much of a victory. Bondi looks to be a slight improvement. But she’s likely to do the job *better* than Gaetz would have. How much of a win is that?

If anything, the Gaetz episode shows that the Senate will save Trump from himself. They’ll block some of his most obviously problematic and indefensible appointments and, once he becomes president, thwart the occasional policy move, but they’ll rubber-stamp 90 percent of the Trump agenda and even help him by making it all look more palatable to those not paying close attention. And overall, the worse will not get better.

This article first appeared in Fighting Words, a weekly TNR newsletter authored by editor Michael Tomasky. [Sign up here](#).

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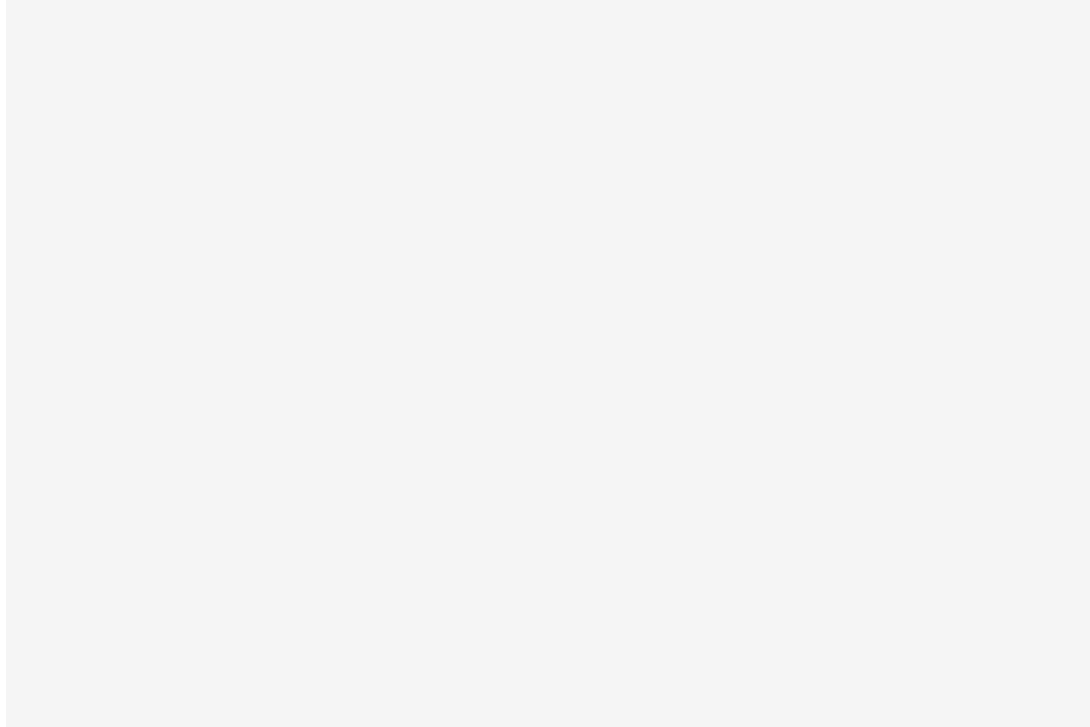
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Why Does No One Understand the Real Reason Trump Won?

It wasn't the economy. It wasn't inflation, or anything else. It was how people perceive those things, which points to one overpowering answer.



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I've had a lot of conversations since Tuesday revolving around the question of why Donald Trump won. The economy and inflation. Kamala Harris didn't do this or that. Sexism and racism. The border. That trans-inmate ad that ran a jillion times. And so on.

These conversations have usually proceeded along lines where people ask incredulously how a majority of voters could have believed this or that. Weren't they bothered that Trump is a convicted felon? An adjudicated rapist? Didn't his invocation of violence against Liz Cheney, or 50 other examples of his disgusting imprecations, obviously disqualify him? And couldn't they see that Harris, whatever her shortcomings, was a fundamentally smart, honest, well-meaning person who would show basic respect for the Constitution and wouldn't do anything weird as president?

The answer is obviously no—not enough people were able to see any of those things. At which point people throw up their hands and say, “I give up.”

But this line of analysis requires that we ask one more question. And it's the crucial one: *Why* didn't a majority of voters see these things? And understanding the answer to that question is how we start to dig out of this tragic mess.

The answer is the right-wing media. Today, the right-wing media—Fox News (and the entire News Corp.), Newsmax, One America News Network, the Sinclair network of radio and TV stations and newspapers, iHeart Media (formerly Clear Channel), the Bott Radio Network (Christian radio), Elon Musk's X, the huge podcasts like Joe Rogan's, and much more—sets the news agenda in this country. And they fed their audiences a diet of slanted and distorted information that made it possible for Trump to win.

Let me say that again, in case it got lost: Today, the right-wing media sets the news agenda in this country. Not *The New York Times*. Not *The Washington Post* (which bent over backwards to exert no influence when Jeff Bezos pulled the paper's Harris endorsement). Not CBS, NBC, and ABC. The agenda is set by all the outlets I listed in the above paragraph. Even the mighty *New York Times* follows in its wake, aping the tone they set disturbingly often.

If you read me regularly, you know that I've written this before, but I'm going to keep writing it until people—specifically, rich liberals, who are the only people in the world who have the power to do something about this state of affairs—take some action.

I've been in the media for three decades, and I've watched this happen from the front row. Fox News came on the air in 1996. Then, it was an annoyance, a little bug the mainstream media could brush off its shoulder. There was also Rush Limbaugh; still, no comparison between the two medias. Rush was talented, after a fashion anyway, but couldn't survive in a mainstream lane (recall how quickly the experiment of having him be an ESPN color commentator went off the rails.) But in the late 1990s, and after the Internet exploded and George W. Bush took office, the right-wing media grew and grew. At first, the liberal media grew as well along with the Internet, in the form of a robust blogosphere that eventually spawned influential, agenda-setting web sites like HuffPost. But billionaires on the right have invested far more heavily in media in the last two decades than their counterparts on the left—whose ad-supported, VC-funded operations started to fizzle out once social media and Google starting eating up the revenue pie.

And the result is what we see today. The readily visual analogy I use is: Once upon a time, the mainstream media was a beachball, and the right-wing media was a golf ball. Today, the mainstream media (what with layoffs and closures and the near death of serious local news reporting) is the size of a volleyball, and the right-wing media is the size of a basketball, which, in case you're wondering, [is bigger](#).

This is the year in which it became obvious that the right-wing media has more power than the mainstream media. It's not just that it's bigger. It's that it speaks with one voice, and that voice says Democrats and liberals are treasonous elitists who hate you, and Republicans and conservatives love God and country and are your last line of defense against your son coming home from school your daughter.

And that is why Donald Trump won. Indeed, the right-wing media is why he exists in our political lives in the first place. Don't believe me? Try this thought experiment. Imagine Trump coming down that escalator in 2015 with no right-wing media; no Fox News; an agenda still set, and mores still established, by staid old CBS News, the House of Murrow, and *The New York Times*.

That atmosphere would have denied an outrageous figure like Trump the oxygen he needed to survive and flourish. He just would not have been taken seriously at all. In that world, ruled by a traditional mainstream media, Trump would have been seen by Republicans as a liability, and they would have done what they failed to do in real life—banded together to marginalize him.

But the existence of Fox changed everything. Fox hosted the early debates, which Trump won not with intelligence, but outrageousness. He tapped into the grievance culture Fox had nursed among conservatives for years. He had (most of the time) Rupert Murdoch's personal blessing. In 2015-16, Fox made Trump possible.

And this year, Fox and the rest of the right-wing media elected him. I discussed all this Thursday with Matthew Gertz of Media Matters for America, who watches lots of Fox News so the rest of us don't have to. He made the crucial point—and you must understand this—that nearly all the crazy memes that percolated into the news-stream during this election came not from Trump or JD Vance originally, but from somewhere in the right-wing media ecosystem.

The fake story about Haitian residents of Springfield, Ohio eating cats and dogs, for example, started with a Facebook post citing second- and third-hand sources, Gertz told me; it then “circulated on X and was picked up by all the major right-wing influencers.” Only then did Vance, a very online dude, notice it and decide to run with it. And then Trump said it himself at the debate. But it started in the right-wing media.

Likewise with the post-debate ABC “whistleblower” claims, which [Gertz wrote about](#) at the time. This was the story that ABC, which hosted the only presidential debate this election, fed Team Harris the questions in advance. This started, Gertz wrote, as a “wildly flimsy internet rumor launched by a random pro-Trump X poster.” Soon enough, the right-wing media was all over it.

Maybe that one didn't make a huge difference (although who knows?), but this one, I believe, absolutely did: the idea that Harris and Joe Biden swiped emergency aid away from the victims of Hurricane Helene (in mostly Southern, red states) and gave it all to undocumented migrants. It did not start with Trump or his campaign or Vance or the Republican National Committee or Lindsey Graham. It started on Fox. Only then did the others pick it up. And it was key, since this was a moment when Harris's momentum in the polling averages began to flag.

I think a lot of people who don't watch Fox or listen to Sinclair radio don't understand this crucial chicken-and-egg point. They assume that Trump says something, and the right-wing media amplify it. That happens sometimes. But more often, it's the other way around. These memes start in the media sphere, then they become part of the Trump agenda.

I haven't even gotten to the economy, about which there is so much to say. Yes—inflation is real. But the Biden economy has been great in many ways. The U.S. economy, [wrote](#) *The Economist* in mid-October, is “the envy of the world.” But in the right-wing media, the horror stories were relentless. And mainstream economic reporting too often followed that lead. Allow me to make the world's easiest prediction: After 12:00 noon next January 20, it won't take Fox News and Fox Business even a full hour to start locating every positive economic indicator they can find and start touting those. Within weeks, the “roaring Trump economy” will be conventional wisdom. (Eventually, as some of the fruits from the long tail of Bidenomics start growing on the vine, Trump may become the beneficiary of some real-world facts as well, taking credit for that which he opposed and regularly denounced.)

Back to the campaign. I asked Gertz what I call my “Ulan Bator question.” If someone moved to America from Ulan Bator, Mongolia in the summer and watched only Fox News, what would that person learn about Kamala Harris? “You would know that she is a very stupid person,” Gertz said. “You'd know that she orchestrated a coup against Joe Biden. That she's a crazed extremist. And that she very much does not care about you.”

Same Ulan Bator question about Trump? That he's been “the target of a vicious witch-hunt for years and years,” that he is under constant assault; and most importantly, that he is “doing it all for you.”

To much of America, by the way, this is not understood as one side's view of things. It's simply “the news.” This is what people—white people, chiefly—watch in about two-thirds of the country. I trust that you've seen in your travels, as I have in mine, that in red or even some purple parts of the country, when you walk into a hotel lobby or a hospital waiting room or even a bar, where the TVs ought to be offering us some peace and just showing ESPN, at least one television is tuned to Fox. That's reach, and that's power. And then people get in their cars to drive home and listen to an iHeart, right-wing talk radio station. And then they get home and watch their local news and it's owned by Sinclair, and it, too, has a clear right-wing slant. And then they pick up their local paper, if it still exists, and the oped page features Cal Thomas and Ben Shapiro.

Liberals, rich and otherwise, live in a bubble where they never see this stuff. I would beg them to see it. Watch some Fox. Listen to some Christian radio. Experience the news that millions of Americans are getting on a daily basis. You'll pretty quickly come to understand what I'm saying here.

And then contemplate this fact: If you think they're done, you're in fantasy land. They're not happy with the rough parity, the slight advantage they have now. They want media domination. Sinclair's executive chairman, David Smith, [bought](#) the once glorious *Baltimore Sun*. Don't think they'll stop there. I predict Sinclair or the News Corp. will own *The Washington Post* one day. Maybe sooner than we think.

I implore you. Contemplate this. If you're of a certain age, you have a living memory of revolutions in what we used to call the Third World. Question: What's the first thing every guerilla army, whether of the left or the right, did once they seized the palace? They took over the radio or television station. First. There's a reason for that.

It's the same reason Viktor Orban [told CPAC in 2022](#): “Have your own media.”

This is a crisis. The Democratic brand is garbage in wide swaths of the country, and this is the reason. Consider this point. In Missouri on Tuesday, voters passed a pro-abortion rights initiative, and another that raised the minimum wage and mandated paid leave. These are all Democratic positions. But as far as electing someone to high office, the Man-Boy Love Party could probably come closer than the Democrats. Trump beat Harris there by 18 points, and Senator Josh Hawley beat Lucas Kuncie, who ran a good race and pasted Hawley in their debate, by 14 points.

The reason? The right-wing media. And it's only growing and growing. And I haven't even gotten to social media and Tik Tok and the other platforms from which far more people are getting their news these days. The right is way ahead on those fronts too. Liberals must wake up and understand this and do something about it

before it’s too late, which it almost is.

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