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# What Trump Hath Wrought

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For President Trump and his allies, the 2024 election was less a vote for a new administration than it was an enabling act for a new sovereign. Americans had done more than give Trump the White House the way it might bless any candidate with presidential power. In their view, the vote was akin to regime change, the start of a new Constitution, a new covenant and a new commandment: Thou shalt have no other laws before Trump.

What followed, in the first year of the president's second term, was an effort to subordinate the entire society to the whims of one man. He did not do this alone. Rather than defend its prerogatives as the first branch among equals, the Republican-led Congress neutralized itself as a constitutional force, deferring to Trump as he destroyed the federal bureaucracy, subverted the rule of law, targeted opponents and rivals with threats and blackmail and governed by executive decree. And, eager to put in effect its baroque theories of unlimited presidential power, the Republican-led Supreme Court gave sanction to Trump's effort to remake the executive branch in his image, even when history, tradition, law and the will of the people through Congress said otherwise.

Worse, in the months before Trump won his second election, the same court freed him from fear of criminal prosecution in an extraordinary declaration of presidential immunity. The court opened the door to rampant corruption and abuse of power, and Trump walked right through it.

But as confident as the president and his boyars appeared to be in those first months, they were also in a race against the clock. The reality of the situation was that the American people — or, at least, a little less than half of the people who cast ballots in

November 2024 — did not vote for Trump to be an outer-borough Viktor Orban. They voted for lower prices and greater prosperity. And each moment the president spent on his ideological obsessions — from his attacks on racial integration in government to his effort to punish pro-Palestinian speech on college campuses — was one he did not spend on the promises that put him into office.

The most self-destructive of the president's obsessions was his single-minded devotion to tariffs, which promised to undermine the economy and raise the cost of everyday life for millions of Americans. In fact, according to a recent report from the nonpartisan Tax Foundation, the president's tariffs cost the average household \$1,000 last year.

Then there was immigration. As many voters heard it, Trump would direct the nation's immigration resources toward people who had committed violent crimes. The “worst of the worst,” as he likes to put it. But as he and especially Stephen Miller, his chief domestic policy adviser, meant it, “mass deportation was a plan to remove as many brown-skinned immigrants from the country as they could get their hands on, undocumented or otherwise. If those immigrants were here legally or had pending legal status, then the administration would target them as if they were criminals, seizing law-abiding people to send to squalid detention camps in Texas and Florida, where they would be deported to whatever country might take them. And if those immigrants had legal status — if they had done things the right way — then the administration would do everything it could to nullify that status so that it could target them with the full force of the federal government.

To pursue its project of mass deportation, the president and his allies in Congress pumped tens of billions of dollars into both Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement. This cash infusion — which made the agency as well funded as some of the world's militaries — went to hiring officers and constructing facilities, including the conversion of vast warehouses capable of holding thousands of people in cramped conditions. It also funded operations in cities targeted by the president, if not for high rates of immigration, then for political opposition. With masked agents toting military-grade weapons as they seized people off the streets or from their homes, ICE and the Border Patrol ceased to be law enforcement agencies and began to operate instead as state-sponsored paramilitaries, loyal to the leader and not to the rule of law.

To assist them, the president would also turn the American military against the public with showy occupations of major cities, including the nation's capital, which would be adorned with images of a glowering Trump as our dear leader — Big Brother with a spray tan. But, again, the clock was ticking. To remake the nation, Trump had to move fast. He had to consolidate a new authoritarian regime before the opposition could get its footing and before the broader public could react to the transformation.

Winston Churchill is said to have joked that “Americans can always be trusted to do the right thing once all other possibilities have been exhausted.” Something along those lines seemed to take place in 2025, as Americans slowly woke up to the president’s assault on their liberties.

In particular, they saw the unilateral destruction of federal agencies, the military occupations and the use of masked men to snatch immigrants as the start of something dangerous, and they began to react. First with protests and then at the ballot box.

November saw large Democratic Party victories in Virginia and New Jersey — elections considered bellwethers of the public mood. Then came Operation Metro Surge, the Trump administration’s attack on Minnesota, and the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul in particular, under the pretext of immigration enforcement. And in response to this tyrannical exercise of arbitrary authority, ordinary Minnesotans organized to protect their neighbors from seizure and rendition. Two of those Minnesotans, Renee Good and Alex Pretti, were killed by immigration agents for their resistance. The White House thought that this might intimidate the opposition. What it did instead was enrage much of the country.

On Tuesday, Trump gave his State of the Union address. “What a difference a president makes,” he said. Trump believes he is popular, strong and successful. The truth says otherwise. He is as unpopular as he’s ever been. His approval in high-quality surveys from CNN, the American Research Group and Reuters hovers between 36 and 40 percent. His disapproval rating reaches as high as 60 percent. Even the most skilled presidents would struggle to recover from this kind of collapse. We can safely assume that for Trump, things will only get worse.

One consequence of the president’s deterioration with the public is that it has almost certainly led others to offer stiffer resistance than usual. Last week, for example, the Supreme Court struck down his tariffs as unlawful, a gut punch to his domestic policy agenda. And the actions of ICE, in particular, have proved to be so unpopular that large majorities want the agency changed, reformed or ended altogether.

What Trump has, a little more than one year into his second term, is a failed presidency: one that has crashed on the rocks of his ambition to supplant constitutional government with that of his will. Yes, he has done a tremendous amount of damage. And yes, he has degraded American democracy to the point that it is on life support. But he’s failed to make himself a dictator, and the public is poised to punish his party for his transgressions.

Unfortunately, that will be the easy part. It’s what comes after that that will test our ability to make the union whole again.

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