

THE POLITICAL SCENE

HOW TRUMP WORSHIP TOOK HOLD IN WASHINGTON

*The President is at the center of a brazenly transactional ecosystem that rewards flattery and
lockstep loyalty.*

By Antonia Hitchens

April 21, 2025



"Oligarchs, favor-seekers, and sycophants are all around," a prominent Democratic lawyer said. "Either we're at the beginning of the end of democracy or the beginning of a rebirth." Photo illustration by Justin Metz; Source photographs from AP / Shutterstock

Representative Andy Ogles, a Republican from Tennessee, recently started making videos from his office on Capitol Hill. Ogles, a Freedom Caucus member in his second term, often films himself in front of a reproduction of “Washington Crossing the Delaware,” the painting by Emanuel Leutze. “What you have here is a moment in time that comes along once in a century,” he says in a clip called “The Case for Trump 2028,” in which he proposes that the President run for a third term. In another video, he walks through his office, with a chyron introducing him as “Judge Impeacher/Congressman.” Ogles recently filed articles of impeachment against several judges who have blocked executive orders issued by Trump. “Political hacks and their decisions belong in my SHREDDER,” he writes in a post promoting the video. Toward the end, he feeds a judicial ruling into an actual paper shredder. “Sicko Mode,” by Travis Scott, plays in the background.

Ogles began the year under investigation by the Office of Congressional Ethics and the F.B.I. They were looking into allegations that he had violated federal campaign-finance laws by falsely reporting a three-hundred-and-twenty-thousand-dollar loan to himself, something Ogles maintained was an “honest mistake.” (He had also allegedly raised nearly twenty-five thousand dollars on GoFundMe for a “burial garden” for stillborn babies—a project that donors say

never materialized.) Before Inauguration Day, when Trump first displayed an interest in Greenland, Ogles proposed the Make Greenland Great Again Act, a bill authorizing the President to try to acquire it from Denmark. (The U.S. is a “dominant predator,” Ogles said.) Ten days later, just after Trump was sworn in, Ogles announced his bid to allow the President to serve a third term, by changing the Twenty-second Amendment to the Constitution. “If the man who created the disastrous ‘New Deal’ gets more than two terms, then the man who created ‘The Art of the Deal’ should get the same,” he said. The following week, in a Fox Business appearance, he echoed an assertion by Trump that D.E.I. might have caused a fatal plane crash over the Potomac River. Federal prosecutors withdrew their investigation into Ogles the next day.

Brazen transaction mixed with humbling obeisance is hardly unknown in Washington. “Shame is for sissies,” the late lobbyist Edward von Kloberg used to say. (He referred to his clients, among them Saddam Hussein, as “the damned.”) In Trump’s Washington, the imperative has never been more plain: if you want to get ahead or stay out of trouble, praise the President as much as he praises himself. “You are the leader of the world,” Archbishop Elpidophoros, of the Greek Orthodox Church, said, at a recent celebration in the White House’s East Room. “You remind me of the great Roman emperor Constantine the Great.” The crowd cheered. Elpidophoros presented Trump with a gold cross—the symbol, he remarked, that led Constantine to victory. “Wow,” Trump replied, as he cradled the cross. “I didn’t know that was going to happen, but I’ll take it.”

The gestures of servility come from all over. At a Cabinet meeting not long ago, Trump’s secretaries took turns: “Your vision is a turning point and inflection point in American history” (Brooke Rollins, Agriculture); “You were

overwhelmingly elected by the biggest majority—Americans *want* you to be President” (Pam Bondi, Attorney General); “What you’re doing now is a great service to our country, but ultimately to the world” (Marco Rubio, State). Jeff Bezos, whose business empire can easily be affected by the favor or disdain of the White House, announced that the newspaper he owns, the *Washington Post*, would no longer welcome opinion columns outside certain boundaries. He redoubled his bow by licensing Trump’s reality-TV show, “The Apprentice,” in order to make reruns of it available to stream on Amazon. (Amazon also paid forty million dollars for the rights to two forthcoming documentary projects on Trump’s wife, Melania.) Senator Ted Cruz, who had once called Trump a “snivelling coward,” “utterly immoral,” “nuts,” and “a pathological liar,” now rushes to compliment the President, along with his main campaign funder and close adviser, Elon Musk; Cruz recently tweeted a photograph of himself with a red Tesla parked on the grounds of the White House. “This may be the coolest thing I’ve ever seen,” he wrote.

The list goes on. When Trump complained about an unflattering portrait that hung in the Colorado state capitol—“Truly the worst,” he said—the state’s legislature swiftly removed it. In Minnesota, Republicans in the state senate introduced a bill to codify “Trump Derangement Syndrome”—defined as “the acute onset of paranoia in otherwise normal persons that is in reaction to the policies and presidencies of President Donald J. Trump”—as a mental illness. Law firms are offering pro-bono services to Trump so that he will reverse

executive orders that target them; in a memo, the U.S. Attorney in D.C. referred to his staff as “President Trumps’ lawyers.” Brendan Carr, the head of the Federal Communications Commission, wears a gold lapel pin in the shape of Trump’s head.

At the beginning of April, Trump instituted a tariff regime that sent markets plunging across the world. As losses in the S. & P. 500 neared six trillion dollars, he gloated about the many nations that wanted to negotiate with him. “These countries are calling us up and kissing my ass,” he told the National Republican Congressional Committee. “ ‘Please, please, sir, make a deal. I’ll do anything, sir.’ ” He was also eager to remind any members of Congress who were opposed to his “big beautiful bill,” which called for tax breaks, spending cuts, and stepped-up immigration enforcement, to “stop grandstanding” and just vote for it. “Close your eyes and get there,” he said.

These days, they almost always do. “There’s never been anybody who has controlled that much of the base of any party,” Steve Cohen, a longtime Democratic congressman from Memphis, told me. “I don’t even think Franklin Roosevelt had that much power.” A person close to the Administration said, “Trump’s dealmaking often comes through a public assault.” Ralph Norman, a Freedom Caucus member from South Carolina, told me, “This is a blood sport now, more so than I’ve ever seen it.” Or, as a person close to Trump put it, “Republicans have an authority problem. Donald Trump is teaching them how to respect order.”

“**N**O DISSENT,” Trump recently posted on Truth Social. He was addressing House Republicans ahead of a vote on a stopgap funding bill. A lack of dissent is not what the Founders envisioned for the deliberative branch. James Madison and Thomas Jefferson assumed that Congress would be the strongest arm of the federal government. Madison wrote, in *Federalist No. 48*, that “the legislative department is everywhere extending the sphere of its activity, and drawing all power into its impetuous vortex.” In 1960, Lyndon B. Johnson, then the Senate Majority Leader, initially balked at an offer to be John F. Kennedy’s running mate, because he felt it would be a downgrade from the role he already had.

And yet it now seems that Congress—with both houses controlled by Republicans—exists to do little else but flatter the man who lives at the other end of the Mall, and ratify his edicts. A week after Trump was inaugurated, Anna Paulina Luna, a Republican congresswoman from Florida, proposed legislation that would direct the Secretary of the Interior “to arrange for the

carving of the figure of President Donald J. Trump on Mount Rushmore National Memorial.” “Let’s get carving,” she tweeted. The freshman congressman Brandon Gill’s third piece of legislation, the Golden Age Act of 2025, would require all hundred-dollar bills to feature an image of Trump. (This violates an 1866 law that forbids the Treasury to put the likeness of a living person on currency.) Claudia Tenney, a New York Republican, introduced a bill to make Trump’s birthday, June 14th, a federal holiday. “Just as George Washington’s birthday is codified as a federal holiday, President Trump’s birthday should also be celebrated to recognize him as the founder of America’s Golden Age,” she posted. Addison McDowell, of North Carolina, wants a new name for Washington’s Dulles Airport: Trump International. Last month, Darrell Issa, a Republican from California, announced that he was nominating Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize. “No one deserves it more,” Issa said.

In late March, I sat in on a hearing of the House Committee on Natural Resources, where a dozen or so members were discussing the Gulf of America Act of 2025, sponsored by Marjorie Taylor Greene. Her bill would require



"Let me repeat your order back to you, pronounced correctly."

Cartoon by Robert Leighton

As a staffer positioned a map of the “Gulf of America” behind Greene, I noticed a man slip quietly into the hearing room—this was Brian Glenn, Greene’s boyfriend and a pro-Trump TV anchor. Glenn got his start at Right Side Broadcasting Network, which emerged in 2015 by marketing itself as a channel that truthfully showed the size of Trump’s campaign crowds. (He is now the White House correspondent for Real America’s Voice, another right-wing media outlet.) Greene smiled at him, then introduced a slate of expert witnesses she had brought in to speak about how renaming the Gulf of Mexico would bolster national security.

Huffman's mood seemed to darken further. "This is remarkable new stuff in this committee, just bootlicking sycophancy of the highest order," he said. (Not long after the hearing, Huffman suggested an amendment to rename Earth "Planet Trump." This, he said, would amount to skating "where the puck is going.") Discussion in the committee room turned to a bill authorizing the purchase of tracking devices for fish living in the Great Lakes, and another to remove the gray wolf from the federal endangered-species list. Groups of touring schoolchildren occasionally filtered in and out.

Later, I caught up with Glenn at the White House. He was standing around waiting to go on air from "Pebble Beach," the long driveway leading up to the West Wing, where the various networks have little green cabanas from which anchors and officials broadcast. Glenn is tan and has a puffy face. (He addressed his puffiness on a recently televised segment about the drinking habits of Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth. "It's called allergies," Glenn said.

“And it’s called testosterone. That’s why my face gets puffy. I’m not an alcoholic.”) He sees himself as a sort of self-declared liaison between the President and Congress, helping the latter to more efficiently follow the former’s instructions. “Part of my job is to put pressure on Congress,” he told me. “We have to sell the President’s message to them. I want a carrier pigeon to fly straight from Trump’s desk to Speaker Johnson. Like a bank slot where you just put it in here and it comes out there.”

Lately, the President’s directive has been to stop the courts from derailing his agenda. In the first three months of his term, district judges have issued seventeen nationwide injunctions, blocking executive orders that, among other things, sought to end birthright citizenship, defund the Department of Education, and ban transgender people from serving in the military. Issa had introduced the No Rogue Rulings Act, which would bar district judges from issuing such universal injunctions. “It’s becoming an accelerating problem,” he told me. On March 20th, James Boasberg, a district judge in D.C., ordered the government to stop deportation flights that were carrying Venezuelan migrants to El Salvador. Trump posted, “This judge, like many of the Crooked Judges’ I am forced to appear before, should be IMPEACHED!!!” Soon, House members were scrambling to do so. “All options are on the table,” House Speaker Mike Johnson said. Bondi, the Attorney General, accused Boasberg of “meddling in our government.” A growing number of Republicans were now calling judges “insurrectionists.” Ogles hung a “Wanted” poster displaying photographs of various judges outside his office, and issued “Impeachathon Updates” on social media. The updates got retweeted by Musk, who has donated the maximum amount to Ogles’s reelection campaign.

I recently visited Issa’s office in the Rayburn Building, one of three outposts for House members. Issa is the wealthiest member of the House, with a net worth just under half a billion dollars. He made his fortune in the car-alarm business, eventually manufacturing an alert system that featured his own voice. “Step

away from the car,” it boomed. (As a younger man, Issa might have better heeded his own admonition; when he was nineteen, he and his brother were indicted for grand theft auto. Prosecutors ultimately dropped the case.) Congress was out of session, on a district-work week. The halls were empty and echoey. Jonathan Wilcox, Issa’s deputy chief of staff, welcomed me at the congressman’s office and led me into a sitting room. Wilcox was in a casual-Friday outfit of jeans and a vest. A commemorative book called “Save America,” which was by Trump and filled with photographs of Trump, rested on a coffee table. I noticed “gold card” memes on various staffers’ computer screens. (In February, the Administration announced a plan to replace an existing immigration visa with a “gold card,” which would be available to purchase for five million dollars. They look like American Express credit cards, except with Trump’s face on them.)

For many members of Congress, the week back home had become unexpectedly contentious. Various news outlets were reporting that constituents, even in deep-red districts, were berating their representatives over Musk’s ransacking of the federal bureaucracy, via his Department of Government Efficiency, and Trump’s encouragement of it. There had been a town hall in Issa’s district, near San Diego, at which dozens of angry citizens

addressed a stage with an empty chair. When I asked about the incident, Wilcox sighed, gesturing around the silent office. “Do you notice the phone ringing off the hook?” he said. “Our constituents love us.” He went on, “We have our hands full trying to be a fully effective legislative body.”

Two weeks ago, No Rogue Rulings came before the Rules Committee, which controls which bills go to the House floor. (Senator Chuck Grassley, of Iowa, proposed companion legislation in the upper chamber.) Jim McGovern, of Massachusetts, the ranking Democratic member, opened the discussion. “While students are getting literally kidnapped off our streets by masked ICE agents because they wrote an op-ed Trump didn’t agree with, what are our Republican colleagues doing?” he asked. “Trying to undermine the Constitution by eroding the independence of an independent judiciary.” McGovern continued, “If this were happening in another country, our State Department would condemn it. This regime is marching toward authoritarianism, trying to trample over the courts and undermine the rule of law.” Issa viewed the situation rather differently; he argued that the Founders “did not anticipate quite as many checks and balances.”

Issa isn’t the first member of Congress to take up the issue of nationwide injunctions, and he pointed out that Trump wouldn’t be the only President to benefit from a ban. “We don’t write laws for one President,” Issa told me. “We write them for all time.” But it was difficult to ignore the current timing and context: the President was posting online that “Unlawful Nationwide Injunctions by Radical Left Judges could very well lead to the destruction of our Country!” (Next month, as part of an emergency appeal by the Trump Administration, the Supreme Court will hear oral argument about whether the lower courts have gone too far.)

Nicholas Bagley, a law professor at the University of Michigan and a former chief counsel to Gretchen Whitmer, the state’s Democratic governor, opposes

nationwide injunctions, because they allow district courts to make decisions that extend beyond the parties involved. Still, he told me, “there’s something grotesque about Congress focussing on the powers of district courts when there is such a grievous assault on the rule of law happening right now.” Many in Trump’s camp, meanwhile, have long pushed for the President to be less impeded by the law. Vice-President J. D. Vance recently questioned whether the Administration could afford to bother with “due process” at all. A person who served in Trump’s first Administration, and is poised to join the State Department in the new one, told me, “Trump stops listening to the courts? That’s my dream.” On April 9th, No Rogue Rulings passed the House, with just one Republican dissenter.

Over the decades, certain bars and restaurants in D.C. have served as a kind of political headquarters. Ebbitt House poured drinks for members of various Presidential Administrations in the later nineteenth century and the early twentieth. During the Kennedy Administration, New Frontiersmen could be seen tucking into a steak at Sans Souci. Richard Nixon liked Trader Vic’s; the Bombay Club was more Clinton era. In Trump’s first term, the main hangouts were BLT Prime, at the Trump Hotel, where you might find Rudy Giuliani, and Harry’s Bar, where members of the Proud Boys sometimes

gathered. (Both have since closed.)

On a recent evening, I went to Butterworth's, a Capitol Hill restaurant that has been dubbed a de-facto MAGA clubhouse for a newer, younger set. A man wearing an embroidered American-flag sweater walked in and greeted a table of women. "I'm not a crook," he said, doing the Nixon double victory hand sign. Raheem Kassam, a former editor of Breitbart, is one of Butterworth's investors. He was chatting with Saurabh Sharma, who works in Trump's Office of Presidential Personnel, and sending French fries to customers who were waiting on drinks.

In the wake of Inauguration Day, Kash Patel, who has made a career of attacking Trump's enemies and in return got appointed to run the F.B.I., appeared at Butterworth's, as did Curtis Yarvin, the fringe anti-democracy writer. I'd last been during the Conservative Political Action Conference, a convention of right-wing activists that has transformed into a full-blown Trump rhapsody. As I walked in, Steve Bannon, Trump's former chief strategist and the current host of the "War Room" podcast, was posing for pictures with fans. "Make a hole," a staff member barked at me, so that Bannon, in his customary Barbour jacket, could pass through the crowd.

In past years, Butterworth's might've been a safe haven for a movement that still saw itself in opposition to the establishment. That premise has become obsolete. "I've honestly had way more Democratic congressmen than I have had Curtis Yarvin appearances," Kassam said. Crowds now intermingle with much less concern. Andrew Beck, a strategist who has had multiple clients go on to join the new Administration, told me, "Everyone's just accepting this populist revolution. To maintain your standing, you have to take up what until recently would have been a 'far-right' position."

Not long ago, when I got coffee with Beck, he still seemed bemused that, after

working for many years outside the Beltway, he now had regular meetings in the capital. Beck is tall and seems to cast politics as an explicitly masculine project; he'll lean across the table to say things like "It's about men building civilization." In the evenings, he sometimes goes to parties in a posh neighborhood in Northwest D.C., at the home of a tech billionaire who supported Kamala Harris but now finds himself with new friendships to maintain in Washington. "It's the hottest ticket in town," Beck said. One night, Beck invited his friend Trace Mayer, a Bitcoin evangelist and investor who hosts a cryptocurrency podcast, to a sort of MAGA salon at the house. State Department staffers were there, and over cocktails and crab cakes the chat briefly turned to a work-in-progress plan to deport alleged members of the Tren de Aragua gang to El Salvador. The idea was to pay El Salvador to warehouse the deportees in a notoriously brutal prison, but there had been an impasse in the negotiations. Mayer, through his crypto connections, was able to help reopen the conversation between the staffers and members of the administration of the Salvadoran President, Nayib Bukele. "I had no idea it would set off a constitutional crisis," Beck said. (The Trump Administration recently admitted that it had mistakenly deported a man living in Maryland to the Salvadoran prison, but has yet to comply with court orders, including from the Supreme Court, to try to bring him back.) For Beck, though, it wasn't about what he saw in the headlines later. "It's about being a spiritual king in the eyes of your bros," he told me. "It's about that validation in your group chats."

Fluency in the folkways of the internet has become a valuable form of currency. "It used to be the gold standard was placing a *W.S.J.* editorial," a D.C. political consultant told me. "Now the most important thing is an Elon tweet. That's what everybody wants most." He went on, "It's X and podcasts. Heritage, A.E.I., Cato—they have a lot less influence. The Catturd Twitter account is

way more important.” (Catturd—the nom de guerre of a man in Florida who turned to social media when arthritis prevented him from continuing to play the guitar—has helped to popularize various MAGA conspiracy theories: the F.B.I. planted evidence at Mar-a-Lago, the war in Ukraine is a “psy-op.” Trump has on several occasions retweeted him.) On a recent episode of “The Joe Rogan Experience,” Mike Benz, a former State Department official and an online crusader against the “deep state,” lambasted U.S.A.I.D. for nearly three hours. Musk reportedly listened to—and loved—the episode, before gutting the institution.

The other day, I met the consultant in an area of downtown that was surrounded by high-end co-working spaces and corporate-expense-account restaurants. When I told him that I was heading to the Hill, he said, “Congress doesn’t matter.” But he did see other industries acquiescing in ways that seemed consonant with congressional deference. Meta had paid twenty-five million dollars to settle a lawsuit with Trump for suspending him from Facebook and Instagram in the aftermath of January 6th; Comcast was trying to spin off MSNBC, which Trump routinely excoriates. They were all, the consultant said, “either migrating closer to what their actual beliefs always were, or they’re bending the knee.”

On April 2nd, referred to as “Liberation Day” by the Administration, Trump invoked national-emergency powers to impose sweeping tariffs on nearly ninety countries. His Cabinet gathered in the Rose Garden alongside supporters wearing hard hats and reflective vests—a stagy reference to all the manufacturing jobs that would presumably be flooding back to U.S. soil. Trump held up an enormous chart that displayed the names of countries and corresponding tariffs.

The print was very small. “I think you can, for the most part, see it,” Trump said. “Those with good eyes, with bad eyes.” He moved on. “They charge us,

we charge them,” he said. “How could anybody be upset?” Soon afterward, the stock market plummeted. Trump left for Florida, where he was hosting a three-day golf tournament. At first, nearly everyone in the MAGA movement, and even MAGA-adjacent financiers, fell silent. “Mostly everyone hates this, they are just too afraid of the Mad King,” Brian Schatz, a Democratic senator from Hawaii, remarked. On Truth Social, Trump insisted that an “ECONOMIC REVOLUTION” was under way.

As trillions of dollars of shareholder value evaporated, a coterie of defenders mobilized to quell any protest. Brian Glenn, of Real America’s Voice, was posting “#TrustTrump.” Those who were brave enough to betray their ambivalence about the tariffs were deemed “panicans,” a portmanteau of “panic” and “Americans.” (Trump considered them “weak and stupid.”) Jack Posobiec, a MAGA operative and podcaster, emerged as a primary enforcer. “Crush panicans, destroy panicans, deport panicans, roundhouse kick a panican into the concrete, slam dunk a panican into a trash can, banish filthy panicans,” he tweeted, to his 3.1 million followers. Early in his career, Posobiec had an internship in Shanghai with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce; he later served as a naval intelligence officer. He was a fervent supporter of Trump’s first Presidential campaign, when he began to promote the idea that Democratic luminaries were holding sex parties with children in the basement of a pizza parlor. Posobiec’s brother, Kevin, with whom he co-hosts a podcast, told me, “Jack helped Trump get in the first time, but back then people thought he was a Russian asset pushing Nazi policies.” Now he is a mainstream, almost avuncular figure in Trumpworld. The Administration has brought him along on official trips—to the Canadian border, with Kristi Noem, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and to Ukraine, with Scott Bessent, the Secretary of the Treasury. “Our job is to be that conduit between whatever the leader of the movement, which is of

course Donald Trump, has been doing and our audience,” Posobiec told me.

Any objection, no matter how trivial, to what Trump has been doing is now grounds for punishment. In late March, the White House tweeted an A.I.-generated meme of a fentanyl trafficker weeping as she was arrested by ICE. Mike Solana, a venture capitalist and the editor-in-chief of *Pirate Wires*, who has been publicly supportive of Trump, wondered whether the image “inadvertently made a previously deported felon and literal fentanyl trafficker sympathetic.” Posobiec, sensing insubordination, responded, “Take note of counter-signalers.” (“The fuck kind of joseph stalin kgb shit is this,” Solana replied.)

Posobiec told me that he has spent years “making lists” of those who display insufficient fealty to Trump. He was especially vigilant about newcomers. “When people come alongside your movement and say they believe the same things as you, and say they want the same things as you, that’s when we have to be very wary of entryism,” he told me. “Just because they’re making pro-Trump statements right now—let’s be careful.” You were on board from the start or you were an object of suspicion. “Immigration and trade are the two biggest issues of the new right,” he said. “And everything else is ancillary to those, because otherwise we would just be Jeb Bush.” He went on, “Loyalty is the most important political virtue. . . . In Dante’s *Inferno*, the lowest circle of Hell was reserved for those who were betrayers.” His job, he said, was to have the President’s back.



"Looks like the flooding's under control."

Cartoon by David Borchart

Some loyalists have taken an even more active approach. Laura Loomer, a thirty-one-year-old far-right agitator and provocateur, has long made it her mission to root out potential turncoats circling Trump. Loomer twice ran (unsuccessfully) for Congress, and now conducts, in effect, an aggressive form of online obedience oversight. She travelled with Trump to his first Presidential debate with Kamala Harris, where he announced that migrants in Ohio were

“eating the dogs.” She says that, “without Trump, we have nothing.” Trump has described her as a “great patriot” and sometimes calls on her for advice. Three weeks ago, she flew to Washington to meet with him in the Oval Office, where she suggested that he dismiss members of his National Security Council whom she deemed disloyal, largely because of loose associations with non-MAGA figures. The first targets were gone the next day. “People fail to do proper vetting,” Loomer told me. “A lot of these Republicans have a serious problem following instructions.”

In the wake of “Liberation Day,” and the catastrophic economic disruption that followed, Posobiec reminded me that this was all part of the plan. “It is *meant* to be a global shakeup,” he said. “All the right people are upset.” For the tech oligarchy, the business leaders, the rank-and-file Republicans, the tariffs were the ultimate loyalty test. He is focussed on insuring that the base remains committed.

Posobiec exists alongside a larger group of new MAGA enthusiasts in the White House press corps. In January, Karoline Leavitt, Trump’s press secretary, opened briefing-room applications to any podcaster or “content creator” in the country. (Zero Hedge, a blog that claims to “liberate oppressed knowledge,” was recently added to the pool rotation; a former writer once suggested that an ideological guidepost for the site was “Vladimir Putin = greatest leader in the history of statecraft.”) New lines of inquiry have been pursued: What is Trump’s opinion on why his approval rating is so high? Can the Administration sustain its commendably breakneck pace? Recently, a correspondent for LindellTV, the streaming channel started by the election conspiracy theorist and pillow magnate Mike Lindell, said, of Trump, “He actually looks healthier than ever before—healthier than he did eight years ago, and I’m sure everybody

in this room could agree. Is he working out with Bobby Kennedy, and is he eating less McDonald's?"

"A lot of conservative outlets are in there to just sort of have a victory party for Trump," Natalie Winters, the White House correspondent for Bannon's "War Room," told me. "They link the access to being very hype squad, fanboy, fangirl. And then you see media outlets who were anti-Trump now slobbering on him."

Norm Eisen, a former Obama ethics lawyer who worked on the first impeachment case against Trump, told me, "It's North Korean bootlicking." Eisen understands where the impulse comes from. Many Republicans, he said, "live in red communities where a perceived act of betrayal to Trump is followed by an onslaught of targeting. They're physically afraid for their lives or families' lives. It adds up to an atmosphere of false fawning, pretend adulation, and genuine fear." And it wasn't just Republicans who had reason to be afraid. On a Friday afternoon in March, Trump had delivered an hour-long speech at the Department of Justice, in which he vented about the "tremendous abuse" he had endured during his criminal trials. He bragged about stripping security clearances from Biden-era officials, and pledged to continue to expose his political enemies, calling out Eisen by name. "They're horrible people, they're scum, and you have to know that," Trump said. (Musk has called Eisen a "criminal" online.)

At a recent executive-order-signing session in the Oval Office, Trump introduced "Maintaining Acceptable Water Pressure in Showerheads"—"I like to take a nice shower to take care of my beautiful hair," he said. "It comes out drip, drip, drip. It's ridiculous"—then directed the Department of Justice to investigate an official who had denied that the 2020 election was stolen. After Trump announced the cancellation of nearly half a billion dollars in grants to Columbia, which, he said, was allowing "illegal protests," the university agreed

to a list of demands, including that it hire a new internal security force that had the power to arrest students. Five more law firms reached deals to do pro-bono work to avoid Trump's punishment. All of this made perfect sense to Beck, the consultant. "It's restorative justice," he said. "If you're truly in charge, you better strike a degree of fear. Trump represents a father figure who is returning to the house, and there are various people living in it who are freeloaders and grifters and lowlifes abusing the kingdom. It says in the Bible, the city rejoices when the righteous rule." Or, as Winters, of "War Room," put it, "There's a reason retribution was such a popular topic on the campaign trail. We operate in prison sentences."

Eisen described Washington as "a wartime capital," where the fight was between "the push of autocracy and the pushback of the Constitution." He said, "Oligarchs, favor-seekers, and sycophants are all around. Either we're at the beginning of the end of democracy or the beginning of a rebirth. There's a surreal quality to that split screen."

The Monday after "Liberation Day," I went back to the White House. In the East Room, a brass band played "I Love L.A."; Trump was hosting the Dodgers, to celebrate last year's World Series win. As I waited for the party to start, I read an article about possible plans for a military parade to commemorate Trump's birthday. The President had just returned from Florida, where he hosted a candlelight dinner at Mar-a-Lago. (The cheapest ticket was a million dollars.) On Air Force One, he told reporters that the golf had been "very good, because I won. It's good to win. You heard I won, right? Did you hear I won?" As anxiety about the tariffs continued to spike, Trump linked on Truth Social to a post from an account called AmericanPapaBear: "Trump is playing chess while everyone else is playing checkers." The world was meant to

sit back and respect the sacred, obscure geometry of his plan, but Congress, Wall Street, corporate executives, and even Musk were publicly backing away.

I found Glenn standing under a chandelier. “This event could take away some of the negativity,” he said. “Trump can do a lot of great stuff, but then nobody asks him to talk about it.” In Trump’s last term, the Dodgers’ manager had indicated that he’d decline an invitation to the White House. It was hard not to see this visit as a marker of changed times. Still, even Glenn admitted that the tariff rollout had left some cracks in the firmament. “If this goes on till September, the base is going to come unglued,” he said. Would he ever go on TV and criticize Trump? “Ask me in a year,” he said. “I’m scared about the midterms.” Republicans were mostly trying to put a good face on things. “Silently, they’re freaking out,” he said. Trump arrived. “You showed America that it’s not about individual glory,” he told the Dodgers. “It’s about the team digging deep.” He riffed on how many pitchers they had relied on to win the Series. “They had great arms, but they ran out,” he said. “It’s called sports.” He complained that nobody talks enough about how he lowered the price of eggs. Glenn grabbed my arm and said, “See, that’s the perfect example of what I would ask him about.”

The day before, I had gone to a brunch at the British Embassy in honor of the Shakespeare Theatre Company. In the garden, children played fetch with the Ambassador’s herding dog, who scurried up and down the sloping grass, underneath cherry trees in full bloom. “We like coming here, because it’s away from all the crazy,” a senior White House staffer told me. It was a sort of neutral space. A senior British diplomat said, “The golden-age MAGA people actually love this whole thing. It validates their status as the new D.C. establishment. Kash Patel comes and talks about the Premier League. We had one person giving a tirade about the Administration—I was at a table of Republicans who sort of gently rolled their eyes and we all just focussed on our soup.”

Peter Mandelson, the new British Ambassador, hasn't always been a neutral operator. In 2018, when Trump, in his first term, threatened a trade war with China, Mandelson wrote that he was "a bully and a mercantilist." Late last year, when Mandelson's appointment was announced, Trump's campaign co-manager, Chris LaCivita, called him an "absolute moron." But, just before Trump was inaugurated, Mandelson wrote a piece for Fox News stating that Trump was sure to be "one of the most consequential" Presidents ever, and went on to call his earlier comments "childish and wrong." (Kim Darroch, a previous British Ambassador, resigned in 2019 after a tabloid leaked cables of him saying that Trump was "radiating insecurity.")

Inside, as the guests ate eggs Benedict, Mandelson delivered a set of oblique remarks, with careful emphasis. "People say that Shakespeare's tragedies, his comedies, his histories capture the bygone age from the long-distant past—the power struggles, the feuds, the controversial advisers," he said. "He wrote about great leaders with very strong personal brands." Mandelson went on, "I have a lot to learn from Shakespeare, including from 'Henry IV, Part 1': 'The better part of valor is discretion.' " The room roared with laughter. "I'm trying. I'm learning. I'm breaking the habit of a lifetime here. I know that my job is to keep below the radar, not on the radar." He introduced the artistic director of the theatre. Shakespeare's themes, the director said, ranged through "deception, betrayal, artifice, kingship, human tyranny." He closed on a quote from "King Lear": "The weight of this sad time we must obey. Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated which party controls the Colorado state legislature.

Published in the print edition of the April 28, 2025, issue, with the headline “Follow the Leader.”

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