

LETTER FROM TRUMP'S WASHINGTON

OBITUARY FOR A FAILED PRESIDENCY

One final dispatch from Trump's Washington.



By Susan B. Glasser

January 19, 2021



In the end, Donald Trump was everything his haters feared—a chaos candidate who became a chaos President. Source photograph by Chip Somodevilla / Getty

Susan B. Glasser's column will continue as Letter from Biden's Washington. [Sign up to receive her stories in your inbox as soon as they publish.](#)

Precisely at noon on Wednesday, Donald Trump's disastrous Presidency will end, two weeks to the day after he unleashed a mob of his supporters to storm the Capitol, seeking to overturn the election results, and one week to the day after he was impeached for so doing. He leaves behind a city and a country reeling from four hundred thousand Americans dead, as of Tuesday, from a pandemic whose gravity he downplayed

and denied; an economic crisis; and an internal political rift so great that it invites comparisons to the Civil War.

In the end, Trump was everything his haters feared—a chaos candidate, in the prescient words of one of his 2016 rivals, who became a chaos President. An American demagogue, he embraced division and racial discord, railed against a “deep state” within his own government, praised autocrats and attacked allies, politicized the administration of justice, monetized the Presidency for himself and his children, and presided over a tumultuous, turnover-ridden Administration via impulsive tweets. He leaves office, Gallup reported this week, with the lowest average approval ratings in the history of the modern Presidency. Defeated by Joe Biden in the 2020 election by seven million votes, Trump became the first incumbent seeking reelection to see his party lose the White House, Senate, and the House of Representatives since Herbert Hoover, in 1932. A liar on an unprecedented scale, Trump made more than thirty thousand false statements in the course of his Presidency, according to the *Washington Post*, culminating in perhaps the biggest lie of all: that he won an election that he decisively lost.

Yet Republicans—the vast majority, that is, of those who still identify themselves as Republicans—continue to embrace Trump and the conspiracy theories about his defeat that the departing President has spread to explain his loss. This, more than anything, might have been the most surprising thing about Trump’s tenure: his ability to turn one of America’s two political parties into a cult of personality organized around a repeatedly bankrupt New York real-estate developer. And so we are ending these four years having learned not that Donald Trump is a bad man—the evidence of that was already voluminous and incontrovertible before he entered politics—but that there are millions of Americans who were willing to overthrow our constitutional system in order to keep him in power, who would follow Trump’s dark lies rather than acknowledge unwelcome truths.

I often wonder whether, a few years from now, we will really be able to remember what it was like these past four years: the early-morning tweets firing the Secretary of State and overruling the Pentagon; the bizarre sight of an obese, orange-haired septuagenarian President dancing onstage to the Village People before thousands of adoring fans; the final shocking spectacle of the pro-Trump mob storming the Capitol as the President watched it on television in the White House and put out a video telling the rioters, “We love you.” Will we recall Trump’s strange obsessions—his conviction that windmills cause cancer and modern toilets don’t flush well—and also his toxic lies about more consequential matters, such as the deadly pandemic that he compared to a bout of the seasonal flu? I don’t know, although I am quite sure that there will be decades of

efforts to understand how the most powerful country on earth came to have a leader who believed that hurricanes could be nuked.

This is my final Letter from Trump's Washington. At noon on Wednesday, I, too, will transition—to writing about the Biden Presidency and what it means for a capital struggling to reckon with Trump's disruptive legacy. Reading back through the more than a hundred and forty Letters from Trump's Washington I wrote, what stands out in hindsight is the stalking menace of these past few years. As Trump became more powerful and less constrained by successive waves of White House advisers, he was correspondingly more and more outrageous, untruthful, and unmoored from reality. His sense of grievance and victimization escalated; so, too, did his threats, name-calling, and public provocations. He fired the F.B.I. director, a Secretary of State, an Attorney General, a Defense Secretary, three White House chiefs of staff, and two—or three, depending on whose account you believe—national-security advisers. He pardoned war criminals and boasted of complete and total vindication in the Mueller investigation, even though it offered no such thing. He forced the longest government shutdown in history when Congress would not fund his border wall—all while continuing to claim that Mexico would pay for it. The lack of meaningful consequences throughout his tenure only emboldened him further. The disaster of 2020 was not an unexpected catastrophe so much as a predictable crescendo.

It strikes me that the mistake, the original sin for many in Washington, was in pretending that the Campaign Trump of 2016 was not the true Trump, when in reality they knew there was never going to be a governing Trump, never going to be a Presidential Trump. What he said in all those rallies and tweets was his authentic self: foulmouthed, bullying, self-obsessed, casually racist, and capable not only of breathtaking lies but of repeating them over and over until they became a strategy unto themselves. Back in the summer of 2018, I published an entire column when the fact-checkers at the *Washington Post* determined that Trump had hit the disreputable mark of more than four thousand falsehoods in his tenure. Two and a half years later, his final

tally of thirty thousand-plus is essentially double where the total stood just a year ago. The lies were the metastatic cancer of his Presidency. Many in his Republican base believed them; his party leadership succumbed to their dishonest force.

In the fall of 2017, my very first Letter recounted a lunch I had with the Republican lobbyist Ed Rogers, who relayed a conversation with Steve Bannon, Trump's recently banished chief White House ideologist. "There's a bunch of people who think they have to protect the country from Trump," Bannon had told Rogers. Bannon meant it as a criticism of insufficiently loyal Republicans; Rogers saw such internal pushback on Trump as an unpleasant responsibility. In many ways, this was the divide that would continue through the whole four years: a Republican establishment that loathed Trump but justified going along with him, fearing the political costs but also fearing the potentially worse costs—for themselves and, perhaps, for the country—of not doing so.

This was to be a running theme of the column: Trump's frontal attack on Washington and the struggle to see if anyone within his party could, or would, constrain him. What started out as a question was soon answered. The answer was no. Republicans would not. They believed that they could not abandon Trump, that those who had tried had failed, and that there was no political path inside their own party that did not involve fealty on some level to him. They accepted the rewards he offered, from tweets of praise and generous tax cuts for the wealthy to judicial appointments for far-right ideologues who will shape the law for a generation. Many began to remake themselves in his ruder, cruder, pseudo-populist image. From that point forward, it was arguably not a question of whether a big crisis would hit but how bad it would be. The converging debacles of 2020 showed it to be very bad, indeed. But when Trump ran for reelection on a platform of denying the severity of the coronavirus—even as hundreds of thousands of Americans were dying from it—the Party not only continued to back him; it handed him the nomination unopposed.

Through it all, Trump remained a unique combination of absurd and dangerous. He spent much of his time watching Fox News and playing golf, and, although he bragged that he knew more than the experts about everything from nuclear weapons to medicine, he displayed little interest in the nuances of governing. He surrounded himself with sycophants and was so historically illiterate he seemed genuinely surprised to have discovered that Abraham Lincoln was a member of the Republican Party. His critics could never quite decide, at least not until the catastrophes of 2020 forced a choice, whether Trump was a clown or a modern-day Caligula. Even up until the storming of the Capitol, many of even his most dedicated critics were not sure that a man they knew to be incompetent and undisciplined and profoundly unstrategic could wreak so much havoc on America's democracy.

When I asked my Twitter followers this week what stuck most with them about the parade of unthinkableables that has made up this Presidency, I received more than three thousand replies. Though some reflected on the disastrous, often inexplicable, policy choices Trump made—separating small children from their families at the southern border, taking Vladimir Putin's word over that of his own intelligence agencies, embracing "very fine people" on both sides of the white-supremacist march in Charlottesville—many others cited the bizarre antics for which his Presidency will also be known.

They recalled the time when he tried to buy Greenland—in exchange for Puerto Rico—and cancelled a trip to Denmark, in a fit of pique, when it wouldn't sell it to him. And the time he led a Boy Scout Jamboree in a chant of "Lock her up" aimed at Hillary Clinton. And "Sharpiegate," in which the President insisted, incorrectly, that a hurricane was about to hit Alabama and sought to cover up his mistake by redrawing a map

of the storm's trajectory with a black marker. One person called the array of responses "a trip down memory lane—if Memory Lane was a street in Nightmaresville." For my part, I often think back to Trump's warning about a fake "invasion" by illegal immigrants caravanning toward the southern border in the run-up to the 2018 midterm elections—and sending real U.S. troops to guard against it. It all adds up to a tour of dysfunction, low comedy, and national shame that has no precedent in American history.

Many of Trump's biggest outrages had the effect of directly challenging the laws and norms governing the Presidency, as he sought to expand executive power while simultaneously undermining those whose job was to wield it on his behalf. His obsession with defeating Biden led him to become the first President in American history impeached twice by the House. In his first impeachment trial, after he pressured Ukraine to dig up dirt on Biden, only a single Republican senator, Mitt Romney, voted to convict him. This time, a few more Republicans might finally break with him, after he incited a mob to believe that Congress could somehow defy the Constitution and overturn Biden's Electoral College victory. On Tuesday, Trump's last full day in office, Mitch McConnell, the Senate Majority Leader, who until this month had done so much to enable Trump's Presidency, said unequivocally that the riot at the Capitol was "provoked by the President." But, in the end, it may matter little or not at all that McConnell abandoned Trump so close to the finish. Consequences may now rain down on Trump, but they will come only after the tragedy of the past four years has played out.

There are some antecedents for Trump's failures in the long record of American Presidents, of course. Woodrow Wilson botched the handling of a pandemic in 1918; L.B.J. and Richard Nixon lied to the American public about Vietnam and much else besides. Bill Clinton and Andrew Johnson were impeached; many Presidents were outright bigots and philanderers. But none before Trump was all of those things at once, and that in the end will be the lasting embarrassment that Trump bears with him to Mar-a-Lago.

On the eve of his Inauguration, exactly four years ago today, Trump attended a glittering fireworks display at the Lincoln Memorial. "We're going to work together," he said. "We are going to make America great again—and, I'll add, greater than ever before." History will be brutally clear on this: he did not.

Read More About the Presidential Transition

- Donald Trump has survived impeachment, twenty-six sexual-misconduct accusations, and thousands of lawsuits. His luck may well end now that Joe Biden is the next President.
- With litigation unlikely to change the outcome of the election, Republicans are looking to strategies that might remain even after rebuffs both at the polls and in court.
- With the Trump Presidency ending, we need to talk about how to prevent the moral injuries of the past four years from happening again.
- If 2020 has demonstrated anything, it is the need to rebalance the economy to benefit the working class. There are many ways a Biden Administration can start.
- Trump is being forced to give up his attempt to overturn the election. But his efforts to build an alternative reality around himself will continue.
- Sign up for our daily newsletter for insight and analysis from our reporters and columnists.



Susan B. Glasser, a staff writer at The New Yorker, has a weekly column on life in Washington and is a host of the Political Scene podcast. She is also a co-author of “The Divider: Trump in the White House, 2017-2021.”
