

2024 IN REVIEW

THE WEIRD NEW NORMAL OF DONALD TRUMP IN 2024

Radical revisionism is a strong contender for the theme of this disruptive year, in which some unique property of political alchemy managed to transform a defeated and disgraced ex-President into a perfectly electable Republican candidate.

By Susan B. Glasser

December 26, 2024

On Christmas Day, Donald Trump issued his traditional holiday greeting. Posting on Truth Social, the social-media site created to serve as a platform for both his personal enrichment and his political aggrandizement, he reprised his threats to reclaim the Panama Canal from its current state of being controlled by the country in which it exists, tweaked Canada as America's future "51st state," pushed his plan to purchase Greenland "for National Security purposes," and wished a merry Christmas to the "Radical Left Lunatics" he

so recently defeated in “the Greatest Election in the History of Our Country.” Would it be too 2016 of me to suggest that this is absurd, embarrassing, worrisome stuff? As 2024 ends, the prevailing attitude toward the manic stylings and overheated threats of the once and future President, even among his diehard critics, seems to be more one of purposeful indifference than of explicit resistance; call it surrender or simply resignation to the political reality that Trump, despite it all, is twenty-five days away from returning to the Oval Office.

A year ago, a Trump victory was far from inconceivable—the grimly anti-incumbent mood of the American electorate, and the former President’s almost comically easy dispatch of a host of G.O.P. primary challengers who were, for the most part, afraid to criticize him, suggested that it was not only a possible outcome but even a likely one. Yet it is also true that, as 2024 began, Trump’s win was far from inevitable—an alternate reality that, like the half of the country that could not countenance his return to office, has been erased from the Trumpian narrative about his “unprecedented and powerful mandate.” In the weeks since Election Day, it’s been as if Joe Biden and Kamala Harris and all the polite technocratic debates of their polite, technocratic Administration have vanished into the mists of time—were the past four years in Washington all some strange dream sequence, like that entire season of “Dallas” back in the nineteen-eighties?

Radical revisionism—by Trump and on his behalf—is a strong contender for the theme of this disruptive year, in which some unique property of political alchemy managed to transform a defeated and disgraced ex-President facing four criminal indictments into a perfectly electable Republican candidate with a quirky communications style, a host of more or less legitimate grievances, and a plan to Make America Great Again by empowering his billionaire sidekicks and rolling back laws, regulations, geopolitical trends, and social norms that he and his voters don’t like. Rewriting history, relitigating old fights, plain old revanchism—these worked for Trump in 2024, and it’s a safe bet that, along with revenge and retribution, they will be the themes of the new Trump Administration that takes office on January 20th.

Whether it's peremptory attacks on a 1977 Panama Canal treaty whose terms he now wants to reject or the resurrection of nineteenth-century economic protectionism or the fantastical reimagining of the January 6th rioters who stormed the U.S. Capitol as innocent martyrs, Trump is a conservative in an entirely different sense than the one we have come to know: he is not a Republican who sticks to the status quo but instead a would-be strongman whose attachment to a past of his own imagining will now, once again, become the country's governing ideology.

Every year since 2018, I have written a version of this year-end Letter from Washington. What's striking reading back through them now, on the eve of Trump's return to the White House, is not so much his continued dominance of our politics as it is the consistency of how he has accomplished it—the manic governing by social-media pronouncement, the bizarro news cycles, and the normalizing of what would have previously been considered the politically un-normalizable. Even his targets are remarkably similar year in and year out—the Radical Left Lunatics, windmills, Justin Trudeau. In Trump's 2023 Christmas social-media post, he wished the nation a happy holiday while praying that his enemies “ROT IN HELL.” What we have managed to forget about Trump in these past few years would fill entire books about other Presidents. This year-end exercise has been a small effort in trying to remember.

This strikes me as more important than ever in 2024, after an election year in which tapping into the American capacity for collective forgetting proved to be one of Trump's superpowers. Many of the year's signal events were so dramatic that they don't need much recounting now: Trump's unprecedented criminal trial and his thirty-four felony convictions in a New York state court last May; the incoherent June 27th debate that effectively ended Biden's career; the attempted assassination of Trump as he spoke at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, on July 13th, and the remarkable images of him thrusting his fist in the air and mouthing “Fight!” immediately after a bullet grazed his ear but spared his life. It was just a few days later that Biden dropped out of the race, reinvigorating Democrats with sudden hope that they might beat Trump, after all—only to have Harris, despite a surge of joyous online memes and more than a billion dollars in campaign contributions, suffer an even bigger defeat to Trump than Hillary Clinton's shocking loss to him in 2016.

Even the subsidiary plotlines of 2024 were epic, from the spectre of the world's richest man leaping around Trump's rallies like an overheated schoolboy to the scorching success of a Republican ad campaign that portrayed America as a dangerous hellscape of invading illegal immigrants, rampant inflation, and intolerant leftists eager to force transgender surgery on your children. Soon after the election, Trump tried to appoint

Matt Gaetz as Attorney General, even knowing that the Florida Republican had been investigated by his own congressional colleagues for paying a minor for sex—a choice that resulted in one of the fastest implosions of a Cabinet selection in modern history.

We will not soon forget all that. Where Trump benefits more from this failure to remember is in the common practice, among his allies and detractors alike, of disregarding much of what he says and does, whether it is his vow to close the U.S. border and begin the largest mass deportations in American history on the first day of his Presidency, to end the war in Ukraine in twenty-four hours, or to nullify the Constitution's guarantee of birthright citizenship. So that's what I'm most hoping does not get lost in this apathetic moment, when his enemies are averting their gaze and his allies are so confident in the imminent arrival of a MAGA utopia that they have little need to sweat the details. (A new Associated Press / NORC poll, released Thursday, says sixty-five per cent of American adults now feel the need to limit their consumption of news about politics and the government—the Great Tune-Out is real.)

Heading into 2025, I do not believe that warnings about the dangers of an unchecked Trump are overstated. Instead, it is the creeping sense that Trump is entering office largely unopposed that more and more worries me. It is a major warning sign, among many, that the ideological policing of Trump's adversaries as shrill, hysterical, and hypocritical has been so very effective. I am bracing for impact, and not only fearing but expecting the worst.

But while Trump may now believe himself so powerful that he can rewrite history on his own behalf, it's also fair to anticipate that his past will serve not only as prologue but as precedent for 2025. If neither the American voters nor the Republican Party could stop Trump, his many personal weaknesses just might. Presidents, especially second-term Presidents, often stumble. Many occupants of the White House find themselves bogged down in scandal and infighting, victims of their own overreach, hubris, or just sheer incompetence. This was the story of the first Trump Administration, and there is plenty of reason to believe that it will be what happens in his second term, too. Should one root for the failure of an American President? Half of the country, Trump's half, did this, to great effect, in 2024; in 2025, it will be everybody else's turn. ♦

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