

IDEAS

# Trump's Appetite for Revenge Is Insatiable

The president is making good on his campaign promise.

By Peter Wehner

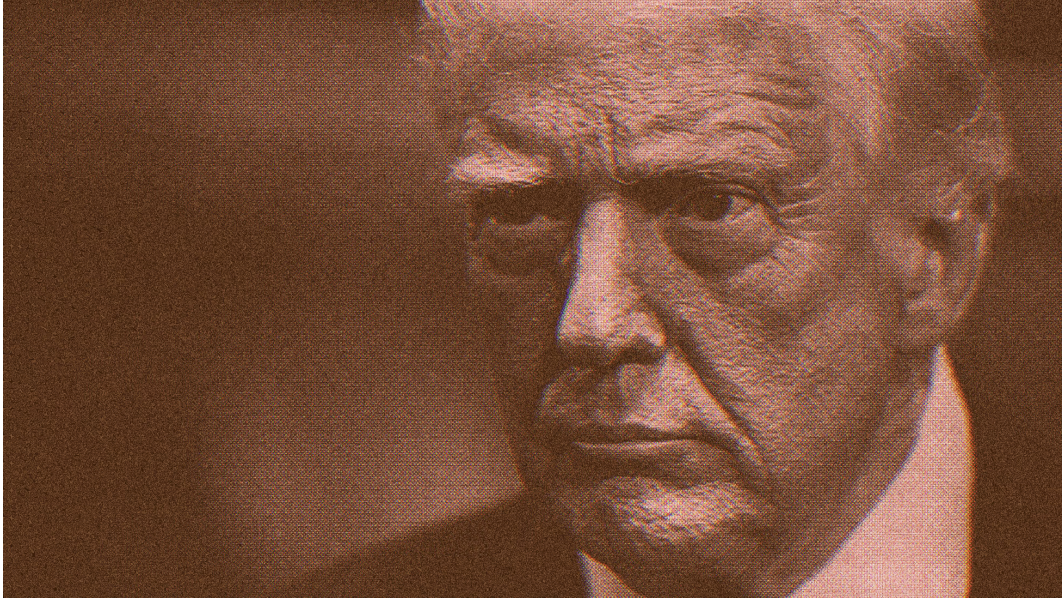


Illustration by The Atlantic. Source: Chip Somodevilla / Getty.

MARCH 20, 2025

---

*Sign up for [Trump's Return](#), a newsletter featuring coverage of the second Trump presidency.*

**N** O ONE CAN SAY THEY DIDN'T KNOW.

During his first official campaign rally for the 2024 Republican nomination, held in Waco, Texas, Donald Trump vowed retribution against those he perceives as his enemies.

"I am your warrior," he said to his supporters. "I am your justice. For those who have been wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution."

Sixty days into Trump's second term, we have begun to see what that looks like.

The president fired the archivist of the United States because he was enraged at the National Archives for notifying the Justice Department of his alleged mishandling of classified documents after he left office following his first term. (The archivist he fired hadn't even been working for the agency at the time, but that didn't matter.) He also fired two Democratic members of the Federal Trade Commission, a traditionally independent regulatory agency, in violation of Supreme Court precedent and quite likely the language of the statute that created it. (Both members plan to sue to reverse the firings.)

Read: Gulag humor is now everywhere in D.C.

Trump stripped security details from people he had appointed to high office in his first administration and subsequently fell out with, including General Mark Milley, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, former National Security Adviser John Bolton, the former diplomat Brian Hook, and the infectious-disease expert Anthony Fauci. The National Institutes of Health, where Fauci worked for 45 years, is being gutted by the Trump administration. The environment there has become "suffocatingly toxic," as my colleague Katherine J. Wu reported.

Trump has sued networks and newspapers for millions of dollars. His Federal Communications Commission is investigating several outlets. And he has called CNN and MSNBC "corrupt" and "illegal"—not because they have broken any laws, but simply because they have been critical of him.

Trump's FBI director, Kash Patel, told the MAGA podcaster Steve Bannon in a 2023 interview that "we're going to come after the people in the media who lied about American citizens, who helped Joe Biden rig presidential elections—we're going to come after you."

Trump has also come after the legal profession, expanding his attacks on private law firms and threatening the ability of lawyers to do their job and private citizens to obtain legal counsel. U.S. Marshals have warned federal judges of unusually high threat levels as Elon Musk and other Trump-administration allies “ramp up efforts to discredit judges,” according to a Reuters report. On his social-media site, Musk has attacked judges in more than 30 posts since the end of January, calling them “corrupt,” “radical,” and “evil,” and deriding the “TYRANNY of the JUDICIARY.”

Earlier this week, Trump targeted a federal judge, James E. Boasberg, who ordered a pause in deportations being carried out under an obscure wartime law, the Alien Enemies Act of 1798. Trump, who ignored that court order, called the judge a “Radical Left Lunatic” and demanded his impeachment. (Chief Justice John Roberts responded to the president’s attack with a rare public rebuke.) Trump and his supporters are clearly looking for a showdown with the judicial branch, which could precipitate a constitutional crisis.

But that’s hardly where the efforts at intimidation end. Trump’s antipathy for Ukraine and its president, Volodymyr Zelensky, was on vivid display a few weeks ago, when the president berated Zelensky in a televised Oval Office meeting. Trump’s hostility toward the Ukrainian president, whom he referred to as a “dictator,” is explained in part by his long-standing affinity for totalitarian leaders such as Vladimir Putin, who invaded Ukraine three years ago. But it almost surely also has to do with Trump’s embrace of a conspiracy theory that Ukraine intervened in the 2016 presidential election in an effort to defeat him. (In fact it was Russia, not Ukraine, that interfered in the election, and on behalf of Trump.)

Last Friday, in the Great Hall of the Justice Department, the president described his adversaries as “scum,” “savages,” and “Marxists,” as well as “deranged,” “thugs,” “violent vicious lawyers,” and “a corrupt group of hacks and radicals within the ranks of the American government.”

No one has any doubt what this means: The department is under Trump’s personal control. As if to underscore the point, Attorney General Pam Bondi, who called

Trump “the greatest president in the history of our country,” said she works “at the directive of Donald Trump.” The Justice Department is Trump’s weapon for revenge. And his appetite for vengeance is insatiable.

**R**EVENGE HAS LONG BEEN a central theme for Donald Trump. In a 1992 interview with the journalist Charlie Rose, Trump was asked if he had regrets. Among them, he told Rose, “I would have wiped the floor with the guys who weren’t loyal, which I will now do. I love getting even with people.” When Rose interjected, “Slow up. You love getting even with people?” Trump replied, “Absolutely.”

It’s one thing for a real-estate developer to act like a vindictive narcissist; it’s entirely another for an American president to act that way. And in Trump’s case, he’s been untethered in his second term in ways he wasn’t in his first, when top aides were able to check some of his worst tendencies. That won’t happen this time.

The threat this poses to American democracy is obvious. A president and an administration with a Mafia mentality can create a Mafia state. They can target innocent people, shut down dissent, intimidate critics into silence, violate democratic norms, act without any statutory authority, sweep away checks and balances, spread disinformation and conspiracy theories, ignore court orders, and even declare martial law.

Read: Trump’s ‘secretary of retribution’

Whether all of these things will come to pass is unknowable, because Trump is just getting started. But there is no reason to believe that any internal checks will keep Trump or his administration from crossing any lines. That’s especially the case since the Supreme Court issued a ruling last year that provides a former president with immunity from criminal prosecution for all “official acts” taken while in office. Trump and MAGA world interpret this, and not without cause, as giving them carte blanche. (Recall that Trump’s legal team suggested that a president’s directive for SEAL Team Six to kill a political opponent would be an action barred from prosecution, given a former executive’s broad immunity.)

**B**UT SOMETHING ELSE, something quite far-reaching, is going on as well. Trump is having a corrosive effect on the public’s civic and moral sensibilities. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville, in a section on corruption and the vices of rulers in a democracy, warned:

In a democracy private citizens see a man of their own rank in life who rises from that obscure position in a few years to riches and power; the spectacle excites their surprise and their envy, and they are

led to inquire how the person who was yesterday their equal is today their ruler. To attribute his rise to his talents or his virtues is unpleasant, for it is tacitly to acknowledge that they are themselves less virtuous or less talented than he was. They are therefore led, and often rightly, to impute his success mainly to some of his vices; and an odious connection is thus formed between the ideas of turpitude and power, unworthiness and success, utility and dishonor.

Tocqueville's concern was that if citizens in a democracy saw that unethical and corrupt behavior led to "riches and power," this would not only normalize such behavior; it would validate and even valorize it. The "odious connection" between immoral behavior and worldly success would be first made by the public, which would then emulate that behavior.

That is the great civic danger posed by Donald Trump, that the habits of his heart become the habits of our hearts; that his code of conduct becomes ours. That we delight in mistreating others almost as much as he does. That vengeance becomes nearly as important to us as it is to him. That dehumanization becomes *de rigueur*.

Tocqueville believed, as did the American Founders, that religion would be the source of republican virtues. What they didn't anticipate was that religion might become a source of republican *vices*. What happens when, in many cases, religion summons the darker, and sometimes the darkest, impulses in people? When it is Christians who are excusing immoral conduct in our leaders and spreading conspiracy theories, who are at best silent at the decimation of humanitarian programs that may well lead to millions of deaths and who at worst cheer it on, and who champion a public figure who is shattering the load-bearing walls of our democracy?

**T**HERE IS an important psychological component to all of this as well. Trump's vindictiveness—relentless, crude, and capricious—has reshaped the emotional wiring of many otherwise good and decent people. He tapped into their fears and activated ugly passions that in the past had been kept at bay. In the process, he created a MAGA community that provides its members with a sense of purpose and feelings of solidarity.

A clinical psychologist who asked for anonymity in order to speak candidly told me that primal fear is an immediate, instinctual response to perceived danger. Trump was reelected, at least in part, because Americans were told for a very long time to feel very afraid. These Americans believe they will lose their country without Trump. For those in MAGA world, the feeling is: *If you're not for me and you're not for Trump, you have no place here.*

The culture war is, for them, a real war, or very close to it, and in real wars, rules have

to be broken and enemies have to be destroyed.

“We’re not reasonable,” Bannon told my colleague David Brooks last year. “We’re unreasonable because we’re fighting for a republic. And we’re never going to be reasonable until we get what we achieve. We’re not looking to compromise. We’re looking to win.”

“Many people truly believe their country is under siege,” the psychologist I reached out to told me, “and they must abandon compromise to save their country. Decency, faith, compassion, and respect are irrelevant in wartime. If one believes their livelihood and legacy is threatened, there is no time for curiosity or compassion.”

My *Atlantic* colleague Jonathan Rauch wrote to me that one thing that’s surprised him is, among Trump’s supporters, “the sheer energy that’s generated by transgression. The joy of breaking stuff and hurting people. It’s a million-volt battery.” He added: “I don’t think this ends after Trump. He has raised a half generation of ambitious men and women who have been (de)socialized by his style. The most successful businessman in the world is a troll. It’s just what smart people do.”

**I** N HIS FIRST BOOK written as president of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, Václav Havel—a playwright, human-rights activist, and dissident whose words shook the foundations of the Soviet empire—meditated on politics, morality, and civility. He emphasized, again and again, “the moral origins of all genuine politics.”

Some people considered him naive, a hopeless idealist, but he pushed back. “Evil will remain with us,” Havel wrote, “no one will ever eliminate human suffering, the political arena will always attract irresponsible and ambitious adventurers and charlatans. And man will not stop destroying the world. In this regard, I have no illusions.”

Havel went on: “Neither I nor anyone else will ever win this war once and for all. At the very most, we can win a battle or two—and not even that is certain. Yet I still think it makes sense to wage this war persistently. It has been waged for centuries, and it will continue to be waged—we hope—for centuries to come. This must be done on principle, because it is the right thing to do.”

[Read: A gala for right-wing revenge](#)

This 20th-century voice of conscience, who was arrested, tried, and convicted of subversion and spent years in jail as a political prisoner before he became president, wrote this near the end of an essay in *Summer Meditations*:

So anyone who claims that I am a dreamer who expects to transform hell into heaven is wrong. I have few illusions. But I feel a

responsibility to work towards the things I consider good and right. I don't know whether I'll be able to change certain things for the better, or not at all. Both outcomes are possible. There is only one thing I will not concede: that it might be meaningless to strive in a good cause.

Our republic and its ideals are supremely good causes. We should strive to protect them, which begins by speaking out for them, and by trying to do, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, what Havel did during his ennobling and consequential life: to once again give depth and dimension to notions such as love, friendship, compassion, humility, and forgiveness. To refuse to live within the lie. And to awaken the goodwill that is slumbering within our society.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

---

**Peter Wehner**

Peter Wehner is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*.

---

[About](#)

[Contact](#)

[Podcasts](#)

[Subscription](#)

[Follow](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) [Your Privacy Choices](#) [Advertising Guidelines](#) [Terms & Conditions](#) [Terms of Sale](#) [Responsible Disclosure](#) [Site Map](#)

[Do Not Sell Or Share My Personal Information](#)

TheAtlantic.com © 2026 The Atlantic Monthly Group. All Rights Reserved.

This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google Privacy Policy and Terms of Service apply