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▶▶ Trump and the Assault on American Democracy

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Editor's Note: This is the first in the occasional publication of Opinion Briefs that will be a subset of the JSGS monthly Policy Brief series.

▶▶ Introduction

The President is an egomaniac. The Vice President a pseudo intellectual. The U.S. government is being assaulted recklessly by Elon and his Musketeers. The once-proud Republican Party of Eisenhower, Reagan and George H.W. Bush has collapsed into a compliant MAGA Party. Half the cabinet members and agency heads are manifestly unqualified for high office. The president's close advisors are mostly intellectual extremists and kooks. Such is the state of the United States federal government under Donald J. Trump.

Say what you like about Canada's political crowd – now in the process of change – its members for all their limitations do not fit these descriptions. Under Donald Trump, the United States is mystifying and/or alienating allies, cozying up to dictators, leaving or demeaning international organizations, slashing foreign aid – all to the quiet satisfaction of China, supposedly the United States' long-term enemy, whose influence in the Third World will fill the vacuum of the departing Americans. It has come to this: The United States voted recently in the United Nations against a resolution naming Russia as the aggressor in

the Ukrainian War, thereby partnering with such stellar democracies as Russia itself, Hungary, Syria, North Korea, Belarus, Eritrea and Nicaragua. All of the United States' traditional allies (except Israel) voted the other way, as did a huge percentage of other countries.

As if that vote represented a low point in U.S. foreign policy, how about the dressing down in the Oval Office that the president and vice-president Vance administered to Volodymyr Zelensky, the elected and heroic president of Ukraine, whom Mr. Trump had called a "dictator" and blamed for not seeking peace. In fact, Mr. Zelensky's exhausted country would love peace, but not a sort of Carthaginian Peace that Russian president Vladimir Putin and his friend Trump might impose. Indeed, Trump's performance looked more like that of a Mafia Don than anything resembling a United States president seeking a fair peace deal.

Canadians must face an unpalatable fact: the Trumpian Doctrine of America First, much mouthed by MAGAites, amounts to might-is-right, power politics above all, summarized in a quote from Thucydides now so frequently applied to the Trump administration as to have become an instant cliché: "*the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.*" There were times when

the United States stood with other democracies, preached democratic virtues, believed that allies were, to use a military term, force enablers. However for the Trumpistas, and especially the president, traditional allies (Canada among them) have been leeching off America's good graces, piling up huge trade surpluses to America's detriment, feasting upon America's munificence, spending far too little to defend themselves, so that the time has now come that allies are going to be taught a lesson: the United States does not really need you in contrast to previous U.S. administrations, Republican and Democrat.

Today's Trump bewildering administration reflects social, political, cultural and judicial trends that have been coursing through the veins of the United States for many years. It would be to misunderstand the depth of these trends to imagine that they will disappear soon. Yes, Donald Trump might die in office for he is 78 years old. But even if he survives this term, it is inconceivable that a man so consequential and egotistical could remain silent. Self-admiration, after all, has been his trademark, and that will only end at the grave. Thereafter, what he has done to his party and his country will long endure, especially the fixed idea of the U.S. as a self-pitying colossus, preyed upon by others.

Trump has remade the Republican Party in his image to such an extent that the word "Republican," although still widely used, is a misnomer, for the word "republic" that once connoted civic virtue has disappeared from Trump's party. World views and policies that defined the old party have been supplanted: free trade replaced by managed trade (aka tariffs); long-standing alliances by transactional, shifting arrangements; Russia gone from adversary to potential partner; allies as burdens rather than helpers. What does tie Trump's Party to old Republicans is a fervent passion to cut taxes, while promising to reduce the deficit and the country's ballooning national debt, the burden of which can be masked by the US dollar being the world's reserve currency. Trump, like his Republican predecessors, has again promised this sorcerer's trick: lower taxes to bring higher growth bringing revenues to reduce the huge deficit. This fiscal magic that started with Ronald Reagan has never produced the promised result, in large part because Republican and now MAGA legislators could not, and still cannot, summon the courage to face defeat by cutting the biggest spending items let alone (heaven forbid) raising taxes on their wealthy supporters.

Now comes a new sorcerer, Elon and his Musketeers, young ideologues mostly, issuing orders, firing people, eliminating whole programs, all without congressional scrutiny despite Congress' constitutional authority for raising revenue and spending, another example of the enfeebled authority of institutions other than the Presidency in Trump's Washington. In a triumph of image over reality, Musk is given free reign on television, even at cabinet meetings, to wax on at length about his and his associates' accomplishments – except that many of his pronounced cuts have been hugely exaggerated, in keeping with his own ego. This Musketeers' assault proceeds without any sense of direction from the President who just wants to cut spending, somehow, somewhere outside the sacred programs feared by all politicians:

defence, Social Security and the two public health programs. When asked what all this effort is about, the President opines: to eliminate "fraud, waste and duplication" without offering concrete examples of these ills. It's a bit like his tariff policy: no sense of real direction nor understanding of international trade, just a means, he hopes, to get "free" money by placing tariffs on foreigners' imported goods to pay for his tax cuts.

Elon Musk's presence – one might say his pre-eminence – reflects another characteristic of Trump's Washington: the influence of billionaires who poured huge sums into his campaign, large contributions into his Inaugural parties and received invitations to Trump's Florida residence. They will profit from the tax cuts on the wealthy such as themselves, weaker regulations and enfeebled institutions to enforce them (The Environmental Protection Agency has already been gutted). Indeed, it is the irony of Donald Trump's career in the private sector and in politics that despite his *faux* populism, he fawns over wealth, flaunts his own, and organizes government to those who already have much.

►► A new gilded age

As such, his is a new gilded age that should remind everyone of F. Scott Fitzgerald's line that "*the rich are very different from you and me.*" Or another Fitzgerald line about the rich: "*They were careless people. They smashed things up ... and let other people clean up the mess they had made.*" One of the deepest of ironies in contemporary America is that the ascendancy of MAGA, with so many working-class supporters who dream of better days ahead for themselves, will leave the already better-off disproportionately benefiting from Trump's *faux* populism. As New York Times columnist David Brooks recently observed, a real populist, as opposed to a false one, would worry about closing huge gaps in literacy, education test results, incomes, and life's chances between rich and poor in a society that by the standards of the Gini Coefficient that measures inequality is by far the least equal among Western nations.

There have been massive dislocations in the American economy, especially a hollowing out of cities and regions once "great" but now shadows of their former selves. The MAGA party promises a restoration of that past glory without any plans for re-opening the coal mines of West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, the steel mills of Pittsburgh or the factories of upper New York State. Factories are gone, their goods either being made cheaper abroad or produced in the U.S. South where unions barely exist. Here is where the Trumpian dream of a revival through tariffs blends the promise to "do" something with the assertion that "foreigners" have taken jobs through unfair practices, and the idea that jobs will return because companies will re-locate to the U.S. to avoid tariffs. Miraculously, all these dreams will be realized pain-free -- and the government will reap money to pay for tax cuts -- whereas in the real world of economics, the tariffs and the retaliatory ones imposed by other countries on U.S. exports will slow growth and raise inflation. A looming conflict – bet on it -- will pit the Trumpistas' ideology against the Federal Reserve that will wrestle with inflation by raising interest rates, thereby easing growth and then be verbally horse-whipped by the President.

The profound changes in cultural attitudes underlying MAGA's success are now being thoroughly assessed by scholars and journalists. One study among many is sociologist Arlie Hochschild's book *Strangers in Their Own Land* which explains to her, a devout liberal, why people in the Louisiana Bayou country do not see government as a help in combating local pollution from the oil industry, poor results from the school system, shaky health-care protection. After spending months with people there, she concludes – and this analysis can be stretched across swaths of the country – that affirmative action programs for minorities put them ahead of local (white) folks on the upwards escalator of the American Dream, environmental regulations risk jobs, churches not governments produce social cohesion, and “elites” in Washington or up North or somewhere else look down their noses at them, their pride and values reflecting strong religiosity.

▶▶ Age of upheaval

Resentments over economic loss, or fear that loss is coming in an age of upheaval and shifting world trade patterns, imbue MAGA supporters with unease and resentments. And why not, especially with China having leaped ahead of the U.S. in electric cars, critical mineral development, clean technologies (while still burning massive amount of dirty coal), chips and certain computers? Beijing must be thrilled that President Trump dislikes clean energy and wants to curb its use, preferring to “drill, baby, drill” rather than prepare the economy for the day after tomorrow. On top of which, China's Belt-and-Road program puts Chinese money into infrastructure projects in dozens of countries, including in the U.S.'s own hemisphere, thereby tying them more closely to China. If there is one binding sentiment in a highly polarized U.S. political environment, it is antipathy towards China's growing military might, economic success, government-sponsored industrial policy, trade practices. What the Biden administration started – tariffs on Chinese products – will be augmented under Trump.

To economic dislocation can be added cultural changes that MAGA supporters dislike, even despise – changes enshrined in university hirings of minorities, government jobs apportioned by race or gender, media focus on disgruntled minorities – all perceived to be at the expense of the beleaguered white majority. These sentiments exist *sotto voce* in Canada as the endless drumbeats of Indigenous demands and complaints, echoed by the English-Canadian cultural elites, the Trudeau-led Liberal Party and the CBC English network, wear away at the national fabric, now being revived by the widespread patriotic reaction to Trump's indignities towards Canada. The reaction against “diversity and inclusion” programs began growing before Trump arrived among the general (white) population where these programs were and are viewed as a kind of reverse discrimination. Trumpistas have inveighed against these programs, and now with their leader in charge these are being systematically eliminated by the Musketeers and might well be further litigated before a Supreme Court that has already ruled against them.

Diversity rules are by definition highly polarizing since they can pit one group against another in a society politically and culturally riven down to the level of school and library boards where arguments flare over curriculum and book selections, health boards where, for example, in Southwest Florida most of the councils have removed fluoride from the water, municipal councils, and of course, state legislatures and their committees. (In one Florida county, the Republican leader who had rented a bus to take insurrectionists to Washington for the January 6 assault on the Capitol brushed aside evidence from doctors and dentists that fluoride does not cause brain and bone damage, declaring “you can't trust people in the white coats.”) And, of course, this polarization is reflected in the U.S. media as cable television, websites and social media funnel consumers to information that reinforces their biases. Those familiar with Fox News – some of whose personalities joined the Trump administration – might be surprised to learn that there are many smaller outlets on the political right that portray Fox as too “liberal,” not supportive enough of the president, not furious enough about the “liberal elites” ruining the country. And, of course, the president has his own social network that he uses to lacerate his opponents as if the election campaign was still underway.

▶▶ Weakening of democratic norms

There is much justifiable hand-ringing in academic and legal circles about the weakening of democratic norms and institutions in the United States, especially the “checks” that are supposed to “balance” unfettered exercise of power. Many books and learned articles are being written about this danger, but one foretold much in 2018: *How Democracies Die* by Harvard professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. Their book was not about the United States per se, but their country was the subtext. The authors looked at how regimes that had been democratic morphed into authoritarian ones in Hungary, South America and elsewhere. Some of what they found is worth reflecting upon when examining the contemporary United States.

For example, they found the drift to authoritarian rule was abetted when the leader's political party refused to stand up against his assaults on democratic institutions, which would certainly apply to Trump's four years of lying about the results of the 2020 election that he lost. Another tell-tale sign: big business leaders who benefit from government largesse make their peace with the leader in exchange for preferential treatment, and so become complicit in the regime. (See Putin's Russia or Madero's Venezuela). And still another tell-tale: the leader begins to squeeze the media, which is now unfolding in Washington where the administration, not the press gallery, will control access to the White House briefing room; the Associated Press is being banned from briefings because it refuses to change its description of the Gulf of Mexico to Trump's insistence on Gulf of America; instructions are given to the State Department to cease subscriptions of *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, *The AP*, *Politico* and other outlets deemed unfriendly by the administration; and edicts from billionaire owners of *The Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* to make editorial policies more “balanced;” that is, more sympathetic to the administration.

In American parlance, limitations on executive power are called “guardrails.” Courtesy of two Supreme Court rulings – Buckley versus Valeo (1976) and Citizens United (2010) – there are no limits on election spending in practice although such limits exist in theory. That court, six conservative judges and three liberals, is highly partisan. For example, it discarded a previous ruling legalizing abortion nationally producing thereby a patchwork of abortion laws across the country. Another ruling greatly expanding executive power to the delight of the Trumpistas, thereby weakening a guardrail. It has fettered the administrative authority of regulatory bodies. A few of the Trump administrations early decisions decimating government agencies and departments, thereby throwing tens of thousands of employees out of work, might make it to the Supreme Court. If the past be any guide, most of the plaintiffs will lose based on the precedent of expanded executive power.

So, if the Supreme Court is a wobbly guardrail, what about lower courts? Centrist and even liberal judges hold sway in some of those courts, but as we saw during the president’s four years of exile when he succeeded in delaying and appealing many adverse decisions, it could be years before cases arrive at the highest court. But what about the political opposition to Trump? Moderate Republicans are almost an extinct species. Those who might dissent from the President are scared he will turn his invective on them, thereby jeopardizing their chance to be re-nominated let alone re-elected. There are little peeps of dissent – as when a few “Republican” Senators whispered that in fact Russia did invade Ukraine thus starting the war, a position opposite to Mr. Trump’s. Peeps do not mean serious opposition. As for the Democrats, they lost the trifecta: the presidency, the Senate and the House of Representatives. Their only hope is that the chaos of the Trump administration, and the likely negative fallout from forthcoming trade and tax policies, will turn off sufficient Americans to allow Democrats to re-capture a majority in the House in two years, thereby erecting at least one guardrail.

Canadians, if they do not understand already, must appreciate that their once friendly neighbor is no longer so friendly. Indeed, the president seems to have a special animus towards Canada, or at least to departing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his former finance minister Chrystia Freeland. All that trekking by “Governor” (as the president calls him) Justin Trudeau to Florida after the election. All that hustling to Washington by cabinet ministers and provincial premiers. All the work by Canadian diplomats. All that new spending to secure the border. All attempts to correct falsehoods from the president who has a distant relationship with facts petered out amid the new political dynamic in Washington.

The president was right repeating one serious gripe: Canada’s feeble defence spending. But even when, or if, that spending rises, as it definitely should, remember what happened to poor British Prime Minister Keir Starmer. Just before leaving for Washington, he announced Britain would quickly raise defence spending to 2.5 per cent of GNP with money taken from foreign aid, only to be told by the president that perhaps a 5 or 6 per cent of GNP would be appropriate. This was the Trumpian “art of the deal,” meaning you push someone or a country into a desired change only to raise the ante.

This is an unsettling country next to which Canadians are destined to live. Canadians always prided themselves in knowing the United States better than anyone else. That was conceit because we never knew the country as well as we thought we did, or as we needed to. Never has that been more evident than today.



For more than 40 years Jeffrey Simpson wrote for The Globe and Mail, 32 of which as national affairs columnist. He also appeared frequently on television and radio in English and French and is the author of seven books, one of which won the Governor-General’s award, another the \$50,000 Donner Prize for the best book on public policy, entitled Chronic Condition a comprehensive examination of the Canadian health-care system. He won the National Newspaper award twice, and the National Magazine award for column writing. He also won the Hyman Solomon Award for excellence in public policy journalism, the Arthur Kroeger Award for contributions to public discourse, and

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