

Donald Trump: the would-be king

America is fated to wage a titanic struggle over the power of the president



image: Justin Metz

[Leaders](#)

February 22nd 2025

IN HIS FIRST whirlwind month in office, Donald Trump has made his base exultant and left his opponents reeling. With his blitzkrieg, Mr Trump is trying to turn the presidency into the dominant branch of government. The question is how far his campaign goes before he is checked—if he is checked—and where it will leave the republic.

That fight is over the fundamental character of America. The president says he is clearing out waste, fraud and abuse from the bureaucracy, but his opponents warn he is wrecking the federal government. He says he is bringing peace to the world and prosperity at home; they warn he is shattering the alliances that keep the West strong. He says he is making America great again; they warn he is frogmarching the country into a constitutional crisis, or even a Trumpian autocracy.

Mr Trump's every act demonstrates his belief that power is vested in him personally, and affirms that he is bent on amassing more. Ignoring the legislature, he is governing by decree. He asserts that the president can withhold money allocated by Congress. The framers had expected that branch of government to be the most powerful but this would diminish it. Because some of Mr Trump's 70 or so executive orders are, on the face of it, brazenly unconstitutional, he also appears to be seeking a [trial of strength with the judiciary](#).

Everywhere you look, it is the same. Government departments are being thrown into confusion, partly to demonstrate Mr Trump's personal authority over them. The *Washington Post* has reported that candidates for senior jobs in intelligence and law enforcement have been asked whether they endorse Mr Trump's false claim that he won the election in 2020. Mr Trump has also swept away post-Watergate safeguards designed to keep the Department of Justice at arm's length from politics. One of the department's first acts has been to ask prosecutors to drop corruption charges against Eric Adams, the mayor of New York City—though only for as long as he does what Mr Trump demands.

In foreign affairs, too, Mr Trump chafes to be rid of the obligations he inherited. America is quitting multinational outfits, such as the World Health Organisation, partly because they impose burdens. He has used the threat of tariffs to gain influence over foreign governments—this also empowers him at home by creating

supplicants seeking relief. As he breaks a taboo by [embracing Russia](#), he looks as if he is treating his alliance with Europe as something to bargain away.

You hear that such maximalist presidential ambitions are unprecedented. In fact, Mr Trump is hardly the first to want to dominate the republic. Franklin Roosevelt signed over 3,700 executive orders. In forcing through the New Deal, he spent six months trying to pack the Supreme Court. Power has been ebbing from Congress to the White House for the past three decades. There is a long Republican tradition calling for the restoration of true democracy by taking back power from bureaucrats. America has always been wary of being tied down by UN-type institutions.

Moreover, Mr Trump is entitled to set new goals for the bureaucracy. He also has a duty to make it honest and efficient. Bill Clinton's drive to streamline government cut over 420,000 federal jobs. As we argued last week, departments need shaking up—including the Pentagon, which is failing to prepare America for 21st-century warfare. And Mr Trump has every reason to seek peace in Europe and the Middle East, both to save lives and to free America to focus on its rivalry with China.

However, government is about means as well as ends, and here Mr Trump's critics are right to be alarmed. Bureaucratic shock therapy will bring a lot of harm before it does any good. Subjecting public servants to purity and loyalty tests will politicise the technicalities of running a complex modern economy. Subordinating justice to presidential whim corrupts the rule of law. His peace plan for Gaza would force Palestinians into permanent exile, a denial of their most fundamental rights. In each case Mr Trump has displayed wanton cruelty. Unfortunately, that is also a way of acquiring power—because humiliation embodies the idea that might is right.

And that belief is where Mr Trump will hit trouble. Take the courts. Just now, the president is mostly getting his way. Yet in a federal system where states have rights, and most citizens and investors still believe in the rule of law, the courts are powerful, even if they move slowly. The Supreme Court may give Mr Trump some of what he wants, but surely not all. Characteristically, he has pledged to abide by legal rulings, and then quoted Napoleon, saying: "He who saves his Country does not violate any Law."

Defiance of the Supreme Court would trigger a constitutional crisis and a second fight among officials, voters and financial markets over the future of the republic. New York is already seeing an inkling of this as federal prosecutors and New York [officials resign in protest](#) over the deal with Mr Adams.

Even without a constitutional crisis, reality will begin to bite. Whatever Mr Trump asserts, tariffs and budget deficits do in fact create inflation. The markets know that well, just as they know how businesses will suffer if the justice system becomes a vehicle for cronyism and retribution. America's bureaucracy provides vital services; if it breaks, citizens will go without. Americans may dislike the idea of aid, but what will they feel if they see little children being made to suffer in their name? Perhaps the voters currently endorsing Mr Trump's first month will not care about any of that. But do not bet on it.

In foreign policy Mr Trump is free to try to remake the world, and America may suffer a disastrous loss of influence to China and Russia before anyone can stop him. At home, by contrast, a fight is at hand and the president is still far from overturning America's constitutional order. Mr Trump, being who he is, will contemplate any extreme. But in these tempestuous times Republicans should remember the virtue of restraint—out of self-interest as well as patriotism. Should a Democratic president win office, the powers Mr Trump seizes could be used against them. ■