

Carlos Lozada

## Trump Is on the Border Between Common Sense and Nonsense



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By [Carlos Lozada](#) Opinion Columnist

It will be “a revolution of common sense.”

That is how Donald Trump, early in his Inaugural Address, described the principle, or at least the slogan, that would animate his second term. It’s an exquisitely Trumpian formulation — tying the mayhem of an insurgent movement to the intuitive wisdom of ordinary people.

In Trump’s first weeks back in office, references to common sense littered his [executive orders](#) and his speeches to both domestic and [international audiences](#). He [cited](#) common sense when imagining that diversity programs caused a plane crash, when [seeking to ban](#) transgender athletes from women’s sports, when making the case against pennies and [paper straws](#). Trump was delighted to report that in a phone [conversation](#) with Russia’s leader, “President Putin even used my very strong Campaign motto of, ‘COMMON SENSE.’ We both believe very strongly in it.” And in his speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference this past weekend, Trump claimed that his popularity was not a response to his conservative outlook but to his sensible governance. “It’s about common sense,” he [said](#).

In the political arena, common sense is seductive, offering solutions that are both simple and obvious, not just acceptable to the people but emanating from them. It can often be right, but its rightness does not fully account for its allure. Common sense manages to be knee-jerk and authoritative at once, satisfying precisely because it seems so self-evident. Something becomes common sense not when we thoroughly understand it, but when *we just know it*.

There is an unmistakable appeal to Trump’s brand of common sense, as two out of three elections attest. Even some who may deem him reckless in pursuit of his objectives can find relief, perhaps glee, in his willingness to channel their views on border security or gender politics or D.E.I. training. Trump’s call for common sense resonates even further when contrasted with an opposition party that, influenced by its activist base, has embraced cultural and political convictions that counter the instincts of a good chunk of the voting public.

Despite its ubiquity, however, the president’s “common sense” lacks a fixed or straightforward meaning. Trump has been invoking the term for decades, and his interpretations have veered from reasonable to ideological to egotistical. Trump doesn’t want to do things just because they are common sense; he also calls things common sense just because he wants to do them. The more unorthodox or radical his positions, the more he coats them in that soothing balm.

**Nods to common sense** — whether from popular presidents or celebrated pamphleteers — are an enduring American tradition. In his [farewell address](#), Ronald Reagan said that the so-called Reagan revolution amounted to “a rediscovery of our values and our common sense.” In his efforts to counter gun violence, Barack Obama [argued](#) that background checks were “pretty common-sense stuff.” Franklin D. Roosevelt called for “bold, persistent experimentation” in the face of economic crisis. “It is common sense to take a method and try it,” he said in a 1932 commencement address.

If common sense is background music for American politics, Thomas Paine’s 1776 pamphlet provides the title track. Paine said he would rely on “nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense” to make the case for the colonies’ independence from the British crown. The irony of Paine’s “Common Sense” is that what its author endorsed — rebellion against royalty and in favor of a democratic order that could “begin the world over again” — was hardly common sense at the time. Paine wished that it would become so, and his writings fired the hearts of rebellious colonists. “The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth” than the American Revolution, he said, because the American cause was “the cause of all mankind.”

Trump’s earliest references to common sense were decidedly less ambitious, centering on the everyday savvy that yields financial success. In “The Art of the Deal,” published in 1987, Trump attributes his father’s early accomplishments to “his night courses and his basic common sense,” and he writes that some pricey consulting firm “doesn’t hold a candle to a group of guys with a reasonable amount of common sense and their own money on the line.” And in a 2004 book, “How to Get Rich,” Trump ties Warren Buffett’s investing prowess to his common sense, a piece of advice as logical as it is unactionable.

Trump adapted his common-sense appeals when he entered the political arena. In “The America We Deserve,” published in early 2000 during his flirtation with Ross Perot’s Reform Party, Trump wrote that “the guidance of common sense” required government to steer clear of what it couldn’t do well and stick to things like infrastructure projects and public safety. He imagined an almost self-correcting system: “Whenever things get so far out of hand, common sense comes back into play,” Trump wrote. “All that’s needed to fix what’s wrong with government is to get it back to its limited, but vital, mission.”

This conventional rendition of “common sense” — the one held by a business-minded, small-government conservative — did not produce much for its purveyor. (Pat Buchanan, not Trump, would secure the Reform Party’s 2000 nomination.) So years later, when entering the 2016 presidential race, Trump unveiled a new and more aggressive version of the idea.

In his 2015 speech at Trump Tower kicking off his campaign, Trump claimed that Mexico was shipping drug traffickers and rapists to the United States — and then he added a dash of gut-level wisdom. “I speak to border guards, and they tell us what we’re getting,” he said. “And it only makes common sense. It only makes common sense. They’re sending us not the right people.” Here, common sense becomes self-affirming, an excuse to believe what you assume to be true.

Throughout that race, Trump resorted to “common sense” to distinguish himself from the Republican field. “I have, you know, a great record of being a conservative,” he [told](#) NBC News in early 2016. “But I’m also a common-sense conservative.” Trump said common sense informed his views on the border and on veterans, but most of all it left him beholden to Republican orthodoxy. “I’m honest, whether it’s Republican or not Republican,” he said. “I say common sense, but I’m honest.”

Assurances of honesty come standard in the common-sense package. Those who disagree with you are not just wrong about matters of vital national interest; they are knowingly wrong. That makes them traitors and cowards, whereas Trump, unafraid to speak simple truths aloud, is a tribune of the people.

In the days following the mass shooting at an Orlando nightclub in June 2016, Trump called for the profiling of Muslims in the United States. “I think profiling is something that we’re going to have to start thinking about as a country,” he told CBS News. “You know, I hate the concept of profiling. But we have to start using common sense, and we have to use, you know, we have to use our heads.”

Note that pretense of reluctance: Trump would rather be guided by his better angels, of course, but ultimately he must rely on that common sense we all share. It's an effective rhetorical strategy, calling for religious or ethnic stereotyping under the cover of grudging rationalism.

During his first term, Trump invoked common sense to justify all manner of positions. Mere profiling of Muslims was soon insufficient; now the United States should turn away people seeking to enter the country from several Muslim-majority nations. "Some things are law, and some things are common sense," the president [said](#). "This is common sense." When Brett Kavanaugh, Trump's second Supreme Court nominee, faced accusations of sexual misconduct, Trump [asserted](#) that "Due Process, Fairness, and Common Sense are now on trial!" And at a rally days before the 2018 midterms, Trump made common sense an all-purpose rationale: "This will be the election of Kavanaugh, the caravans, law and order, tax cuts, and common sense. Common sense."

That echo was more than a tic; it rendered common sense a summation of all that came before, and a pretext for whatever flies under the banner of Trumpism. Including, as became apparent by end of his first term, political violence.

**Perhaps Trump's most egregious use** of the term came when, in an interview with Jonathan Karl of ABC News, he looked back on the Capitol riot of Jan. 6, 2021. Reminded that some of his supporters had chanted "Hang Mike Pence!" that day, Trump offered his default explanation. "Because it's common sense, Jon," he said. "It's common sense that you're supposed to protect. How can you — if you know a vote is fraudulent, right? — how can you pass on a fraudulent vote to Congress?"

When a mob's fantasy of executing a sitting vice president is cast as a suitable response to manufactured grievance, when violent outrage over a legitimate vote is just another entry in the common-sense canon, then there is scant difference between common sense and nonsense. But that is the common sense that Trump promotes: an assortment of popular policies, culture-war scapegoating, sanctioning violence and antidemocratic impulses. Different aspects may appeal to different audiences, but together they stoke Trump's base, expand his support, intimidate his opponents and augment his power.

Unlike in 2016, when Trump's invocation of common sense separated him from mainstream Republicans, it now helps him claim mastery over them. "Forget about conservative, liberal," Trump said to Bloomberg News shortly before the 2024 vote. "We're, let's say, conservative, but we're really a party of 'We need borders. We need fair elections. We don't want men playing in women's sports. We don't want transgender operations without parental consent.' It is 99.9 percent common sense. It really is common sense. I say we're really a party of common sense."

No surprise that the official 2024 Republican Party platform hailed "common sense" more than a dozen times. (Its preamble is titled "America First: A Return to Common Sense," and it introduces various policies with the same words: "Common Sense tells us ...") And in the 2024 vice-presidential debate, JD Vance assailed Tim Walz, the Democrat's No. 2, for his deference to expert opinion, citing the failures of bipartisan consensus on trade and manufacturing. "We're not going to stop it by listening to experts," Vance [said](#). "We're going to stop it by listening to common-sense wisdom, which is what Donald Trump governed on."

That wisdom is now defined as whatever the president and his advisers and supporters proclaim it to be. Trumpian common sense even makes governing simple, Karoline Leavitt, the White House press secretary, told reporters: "It's easy to do a good job when you are acting on common sense and you are speaking the truth." Fox News has [embraced](#) the "common sense" rallying cry, binding the network ever tighter to the president. And in a recent Oval Office appearance alongside the president, Elon Musk justified massive cuts to the civil service and his efforts to control federal payments systems in the same terms. "It's just common sense," Musk [said](#). "It's not draconian or radical."

It is more radical than Musk lets on. The purging of experienced civil servants from the executive branch is not just a cost-cutting measure; it means to subtract expertise, monitoring and verification from the exercise of government. When that happens, the administration's definition of "common sense" is all that remains.

**In a recent social-media post**, Trump quoted a line attributed to Napoleon (but likely adapted from a 1970 movie about him): “He who saves his Country does not violate any Law.” Trump has made [similar statements](#) before — in 2019, for example, he declared that the Constitution gave him “the right to do whatever I want as president” — yet the recent post may be his most forceful claim to power so far.

It is one thing to argue that the Constitution, the supreme law of the land, grants the president ever expanding powers. It is another to declare that the nobility of the president’s intentions — *I am saving the country!* — supersedes any law whatsoever. In both his Inaugural Addresses, Trump foresaw a “glorious destiny” for America, a destiny that he now believes he is meant to fulfill by divine right. “My life was saved for a reason,” Trump said in the second address. “I was saved by God to make America great again.”

Trump promised us a revolution of common sense, and he is delivering some of it, no doubt. But the president is also harnessing popular passions to accumulate power and diminish accountability. “Long live the king!” Trump recently said of himself, a quote that the White House [posted](#) on X, along with an image of a smiling Trump sporting a king’s crown.

Just some tacky trolling? Maybe. But the trappings of authoritarianism are part of Trump’s revolution, too, and for all their kitsch, they may prove lasting. Trump’s common sense means he “tells it like it is,” even when it isn’t.

**Almost 250 years ago**, Thomas Paine also envisioned an American revolution, but it was an uprising aimed at stripping power from a leader, not imbuing him with it. In “Common Sense,” Paine had much to say about leaders who “look upon themselves born to reign, and others to obey.”

Writing about King George, that “Pharaoh of England” and “inveterate enemy to liberty,” Paine declared that the monarch is not “a proper man to say to these colonies, ‘*You shall make no laws but what I please.*’” He could have been writing of Trump, who, by disregarding constitutional principles and remaking justice as a tool of convenience and retribution, proves himself similarly ill-suited to govern.

“It is the pride of kings which throws mankind into confusion,” Paine wrote, warning of the risks of armed conflict under royal rule. He could have been writing of Trump, who muses about seizing foreign lands, who turns longtime allies into rivals and who paints opportunistic enemies as friends. Trump’s “America First” is not “the cause of all mankind” that Paine described, but a cause unto itself, and it throws the world into confusion.

“It only remains to know which power in the constitution has the most weight, for that will govern,” Paine wrote of English law. “And though the others, or a part of them, may clog, or, as the phrase is, check the rapidity of its motion, yet so long as they cannot stop it, their endeavors will be ineffectual; the first moving power will at last have its way.” He could have been writing of Trump, who, by [bullying](#) a pusillanimous Congress and [denigrating](#) judicial prerogatives, seeks to remake the executive into the first mover — perhaps the only one — among the powers of government.

“Emigrants of property will not choose to come to a country whose form of government hangs but by a thread, and who is every day tottering on the brink of commotion and disturbance,” Paine wrote. He could have been writing of Trump here, too. The president has not merely placed America on the brink of daily commotion and disturbance; he has already taken the plunge.

Trump imagines himself the common-sense revolutionary of our time, a fearless disrupter of American history. But Trump is not the rebel. He is the crown.