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Only the beginning : Trump is a revolutionary. Will he succeed?

He has already done lasting harm to America



Full text:

THE HYPERACTIVE first 100 days of Donald Trump's second term have been the most consequential of any president this century, and perhaps since the time of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Before the inauguration Americans wondered what sort of government they were getting. That debate is now over. Mr Trump is leading a [revolutionary project](#) that aspires to remake the economy, the bureaucracy, culture and foreign policy, even the idea of America itself. The question for the next 1,361 days is: will he succeed?

Mr Trump's presidency has been popular with his voters. His [approval](#) among Republicans is at 90%. He has faced little resistance as he has charged ahead on all fronts, attacking the civil service, law firms, universities, the media and any institution he associates with the Democratic-leaning elite.

As with any revolution, MAGA has a method and a theory. The method is to bend or break the law in a blitz of executive orders and, when the courts catch up, to dare them to defy the president. The theory is one of unconstrained executive power—the idea that, as Richard Nixon suggested, if the president does something then it's legal. This has already undermined things that actually make America great: a view of the national interest large enough to take in paying for AIDS medication in Africa; a sense that independent institutions have their own value; a belief that your political opponents can be patriots; and faith in the dollar.

If this revolution is unchecked it could lead towards authoritarianism. Some MAGA intellectuals admire Hungary, where Viktor Orbán exercises control over the courts, the universities and the media. And America does indeed leave some room for a would-be authoritarian. Congress has created a lot of exceptions to normal rules which can be activated by the president declaring an emergency, and Mr Trump is making full use of them—witness his delight at the president of El Salvador's ability to lock people up without trial. Although MAGA cannot control the media, it can intimidate their corporate owners—and, besides, fragmentation has diluted the press's power to check the president. Congress is supine because Republicans owe him their jobs, and they know it. One worry is that the courts will stand their ground, only for the administration to defy their rulings. Another is that, fearing this, the Supreme Court may try to preserve its authority by pre-emptively caving in.

Yet there is another, more likely, scenario in which the extremism of the first 100 days stirs up powerful forces of resistance. One such force is investors in the bond market and the stockmarket. Though they were broadly enthusiastic about Mr Trump's election, they have been his most effective opponents—not out of political conviction, but because they deal in reality. They are rightly alarmed about the economy being poisoned by tariffs. Uncontrolled budget deficits and incompetent policy could lead to a crash of the dollar.

Faced with distress in the markets, Mr Trump has backed down twice in the past month, first over imposing “reciprocal” tariffs, and this week over [firing Jerome Powell](#), chairman of the Federal Reserve. And as Elon Musk promises to spend less time bulldozing the bureaucracy in order to tend to his ailing electric-car business instead, Mr Trump has hinted that he wants to find a way out of the unsustainable and ill-thought-through trade war he has launched against China.

Another source of resistance could be voters, including Republicans, if the economy does badly. Although Mr Trump has succeeded in suppressing illegal immigration, his national approval rating has already fallen further and faster than any other president’s, beating his own first-term record for annoying Americans. Our modelling suggests his approval rating is now below 50% in every swing state he won in November.

Most Americans do not want a revolution. Many like the sound of bringing manufacturing back home, but only a quarter say they would work in those new factories. They like the idea of fair trade, but they do not want chaos. None is keen on inflation. Mr Trump, like other presidents, may see a narrow election win as an invitation to pose for Mount Rushmore, but it does not give him the right to rule by diktat, shut agencies created by Congress, suspend *habeas corpus* or grab Greenland.

Eventually, bad polls will impinge on elected officials. America is a federal system that is too big and has too many rival centres of power to become Hungary (whose population is about the same as New Jersey’s). Congress, too, could become a problem for Mr Trump. Republicans have a thin majority in the House and were able to pass a budget framework only because a couple of Democratic representatives had died. Betting markets give Democrats more than an 80% chance of winning back the House next year. Control would enable the Democrats to frustrate Mr Trump, even if he continued to govern by executive order. In the Senate, Republicans are seven votes short of the 60 needed to avoid a filibuster. Those constraints are real.

The last source of resistance is the courts. The law moves slowly, but the Supreme Court has already handed down a 9-0 ruling in the case of a man wrongly deported to El Salvador. As with other institutions, the courts have less to fear from the defiance of an unpopular president. The administration may yet lose cases on tariffs, on the president’s ability to fire officials and close agencies without congressional backing, and on Mr Trump’s scattergun use of break-glass emergency provisos such as the Alien Enemies Act. If that happens, his theory of executive power will be discredited.

Even on the most optimistic reading of the MAGA revolution, Mr Trump has already done lasting harm to America’s institutions, alliances and moral standing. And if he is thwarted by investors, voters or the courts, he is liable to lash out against institutions with even greater ferocity. Using the newly politicised Department of Justice, he may persecute his opponents and stir up the fear and conflict that give him licence to operate. Abroad, he could cause alliance-wrecking provocations in, say, Greenland or Panama. There is no going back to the way America was 100 days ago. Only 1,361 days left. ■