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Trump Is on a Path to Failure

By Ross Douthat

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In May 2017, just a few months into the first Trump administration, I [wrote](#) a column arguing that his incapacity was so obvious and destructive that he should be removed from office via the 25th Amendment to the Constitution.

This was a popular column, but its argument did not hold up well. Trump's first-term White House remained abnormally chaotic, and Trump remained, well, himself — but relative to the initial months, his presidency stabilized sufficiently that the claim of incapacity and the call for constitutional intervention didn't fit the facts. My column had been written in a spirit of "this can't go on." But it did go on — and more than that, it went on with better outcomes in economic and foreign policy than I had thought possible, to the point that within a few years of Joe Biden (who became a more exemplary 25th Amendment case!), voters were nostalgic for Trumpian results.

There have been many moments like that for observers of the Trump phenomenon — moments when it seemed his faults were leading to some irrevocable crash, or when it seemed he was finished politically forever. Time and again, those judgments have proved premature; time and again, Trump has tempted fate and lived to tell the tale.

Which is why, when he returned to office, I vowed to avoid premature declarations of catastrophe. I would criticize, but I wouldn't act as though everything was irrecoverable for at least the first year.

This week has sorely tested that resolve. None of Trump's first-term policies carried the comprehensive risks involved in his great trade war — the threat of recession at the very least, the potential threat to America's global position and basic solvency as well. Even with the suspension of the country-by-country tariffs, the scale of the China trade war and the general uncertainty created by the Trump whipsaw portend economic pain without a clear path to a rebound.

That's a very bad place to be for a president who has always depended on good economic vibes, and it's happening against a backdrop of other wrong turns and disappointments. I wrote in December about the [need for a fruitful balance](#) between Trumpism's populist and techno-libertarian factions, between the spirit of JD Vance and the spirit of Elon Musk. I was imagining, say, pro-family tax policy jointed to abundance-oriented deregulation — but instead, the balance so far consists of reckless trade war on the populist side and Musk's crusade to reduce government head count without

apparent regard to government capacity. It's a synthesis of sorts, but not a happy one.

Meanwhile everything the administration does, it does with a dose of tough-guy excess, as though determined to alienate any part of its coalition that isn't fully committed to the MAGA cause. It's not enough to pursue deportations; we need to deport people to a prison in El Salvador without convicting them of any crime. It's not enough to ask our NATO allies to bear more burdens; the ask has to come with a snarl, a trade war and a fixation on Greenland. It's not enough to purge D.E.I. programs; we have to hack away at scientific research and humanitarian aid as well.

This all makes for a very bad trajectory, and the fact that Trump survived bad trajectories before doesn't mean that this one is destined to reverse. Maybe this time he's too cocooned and unrestrained, too surrounded by flatterers, too confident in his place among history's decisive figures (someone should tell him about their often unhappy endgames) to steer toward stability and popularity.

But if he or his advisers did want to steer differently, we're still at a moment when the course correction would be relatively simple. The economy isn't yet in recession, and Trump is underwater but not yet deeply unpopular. That means he has options now that he won't have if things get worse; it means he can still pursue his preferred policies if he does so with less reckless disregard.

He can have tariffs; he just can't have the tariffs of "Liberation Day," with their scale and cackhanded design. He can have deportations; he just has to accept the limits imposed by moral decency and the Supreme Court. He can have a version of the Department of Government Efficiency, just refocused on deregulation, where it should have been focused from the start. He can have yes-men and flatterers; he just needs some people in his cabinet to say, "Sir, maybe not."

He can even pine for Greenland and woo its denizens. He just can't threaten to go seize it.

Throughout his time as the dominant force in our politics, Trump has showed a capacity for what you might call temporary discipline, linked to a crude survival instinct and a sense of the prevailing winds.

If those instincts are still with him, this is the time to listen to them — and to remember that while fortune has her favorites, nemesis always waits.

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The Atlantic

**This Is Why Dictatorships Fail:
The authors of the Constitution separated powers for a reason.**

By Anne Applebaum

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He blinked. But we don't really know why.

Whether it was the stock market cascading downward, investors fleeing from U.S. Treasury bonds, Republican donors jamming the White House phones, or even fears for his own portfolio, President Donald Trump [decided yesterday](#) afternoon to lift, temporarily, most of his arbitrary tariffs. This was his personal decision. His "instinct," as he put it. His whim. And his decision, instinct, or whim could bring the tariffs back again.

The Republicans who lead Congress have refused to use the power of the legislative branch to stop him or moderate him, in this or almost any other matter. The Cabinet is composed of sycophants and loyalists who are willing to defend [contradictory policies](#), even if doing so makes them look like fools. The courts haven't decisively intervened yet either. No one, apparently, is willing to prevent a single man from destroying the world economy, wrecking financial markets, forcing this country and other countries into recession if that's what he feels like doing when he gets up tomorrow morning.

This is what arbitrary, absolute power looks like. And this is why the men who wrote the Constitution never wanted anyone to have it. In that famously hot, stuffy room in Philadelphia, windows [closed for the sake of secrecy](#), they sweated and argued about how to limit the powers of the American executive. They arrived at the idea of dividing power between different branches of government. As James Madison wrote in "[Federalist No. 47](#)": "The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary in the same hands ... may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny."

More than two centuries later, the system created by that first Constitutional Congress has comprehensively failed. The people and institutions that are supposed to check executive power are refusing to restrain this president. We now have a de facto tyrant who thinks he can bend reality to his will without taking any facts or any evidence into consideration, and without listening to any contrary views. And although the economic damage he has caused is easier to measure, he has inflicted the same level of harm to scientific research, to civil liberties, to health care, and to the civil service.

From this wasteful and destructive incident, one useful lesson can be drawn. In recent years, many people who live in democracies have become frustrated by their political systems, by the endless wrangling, the difficulty of creating compromise, the slow pace

of decisions. Just as in the first half of the 20th century, would-be authoritarians have begun arguing that we would all be better off without these institutions. “The truth is that men are tired of liberty,” said Mussolini. Lenin spoke with scorn about the failings of so-called bourgeois democracy. In the United States, a brand-new school of [techno-authoritarian thinkers](#) find our political system inefficient and want to replace it with a “national CEO,” a dictator by a different name.

But in the past 48 hours, Donald Trump has just given us a pitch-perfect demonstration of why legislatures are necessary, why checks and balances are useful, and why most one-man dictatorships become poor and corrupt. If the Republican Party does not return Congress to the role it is meant to play and the courts don’t constrain the president, this cycle of destruction will continue and everyone on the planet will pay the price.

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