The Trump 2.0 Administration's First 80 Days

By Adam Garfinkle

SYNOPSIS

Voters who elected Donald Trump the 47th President of the United States of America are so far getting a different result from the White House than they expected. The Trump team is shaking up the bureaucracy, business, and society in ways that spite expectations and worry much of the MAGA core.

COMMENTARY

Many people, both within and outside the United States, are confused about what has been happening during the second Trump Administration's first three months in office. This is understandable, since most expected the new Administration to act like a government, on behalf of the critical populist mass who elected it last November 5, with the purpose, in their minds, of redeeming America from wayward elitists associated with the Democratic and Republican Parties of the pre-Trump era. They expected the government to make America great again.

How? The populist base was told during the campaign that a new Trump Administration would focus on reversing immigration policy and securing the borders; stemming inflation, lowering prices, and caring more about the micro-"Main Street" as opposed to the macro-"Wall Street" economy; and banishing from the culture what it construed as DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) discrimination against normal patriotic people like themselves.

The Trump voters have gotten some anti-DEI action and some spectacle-inflected deportations. But what they have really got is chaotic and swift elimination of dozens of government agencies and functions; tariffs and trade wars that promise to raise, not, lower, a whole range of product and service prices; a multi-pronged attack on the rule of law and environmental protection; the neutering of the Legislative Branch of government; the essential elimination of the independent, apolitical status of agencies

such as the Security and Exchange Commission, the Federal Communications Commission, the Federal Aviation Agency, and the Federal Reserve, is likely next; the intimidation of key civil society sectors such as the media, the universities, and the legal profession; the betrayal of Ukraine and the *de facto* end of NATO in favour of a pro-Russian foreign policy; and intimations of imperial aggrandisement against two of America's closest allies: Denmark and Canada.

What explains the yawning disjunction between what most Trump voters voted for and what they've now got? The answer: While the November 5 election was a populist displacement of a flagging status quo, a small group of well-prepared radical libertarians at the edge of the MAGA camp took control of White House policy.

The populist pulse within the odd but brilliantly assembled victorious Trump 2.0 coalition is viscerally anti-pluralist, anti-immigrant, and circle-the-wagons xenophobic. Some of it to the fringes oozes racism and anti-Semitism. It is communalist and largely Christian (by identity if not necessarily faith) in sentiment, is more comfortable in rural than urban settings, and is suspicious of corporate gigantism. It genuinely cares about the "little guy". It tends to nostalgia, looking back to presumed Golden Ages. Its rank-and-file is generally less well educated, does not deeply read magazines or books, gets all its "news" from screens, and so is not facile with abstractions and conceptual language. The tiny pro-Trump radical libertarian minority in the winning coalition shares none of these characteristics.

How did this tiny group within the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement manage to seize control of the White House?

First, through the logic of collective action. In short, when a few highly motivated and like-minded people know what they want, they can usually get it among a much larger but diffuse group that does not know precisely what they want and is not well-organised to find out.

Second, the tiny group of radical libertarians had a sympathetic, if not fully comprehending, ear in the President, and a programme of action set to launch and seize the nation's attention on January 21, thanks to some of its hive drones having quietly worked away at the Heritage and Claremont Institutes for many months before November 5.

Presidents rarely change their personality once they enter the Oval Office. Trump has been a casino owner, real estate developer, and reality-TV star. He remains all those things but now indulges the habits and routines that characterise them on a larger canvas. Trump is a master at gaining, holding, and manipulating attention. But more importantly, he knows no other model for thinking about large organisations other than that of a private for-profit business, of which he is CEO. In his own mind, Trump and his 13 billionaire associates in the new Administration have achieved a hostile takeover of the US Government; with Elon Musk as COO, at least for now, they are busily cutting costs in anticipation of stripping or re-purposing what is left of the "business" for their own money-making uses.

It follows that the evisceration of the government's capacity and will to regulate and tax is what DOGE (the newly formed Department of Government Efficiency) is about,

not enhanced "governmental efficiency". Nothing that the US Federal government has been doing for decades, and even much longer, that does not promise a positive revenue flow is off limits for the chopping block. This is why seemingly disparate Administration behaviours are actually all of a kind: destroying the personnel infrastructure of the Social Security Administration so it cannot efficiently "waste" company money; all but destroying the Departments of Health and Human Services and Education; suddenly cutting off US$12 billion worth of Federal healthcare grants to the states in a forced rush of unplanned and thus unplannable subsidiarity; defunding National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting System; defunding USAID, the US Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, all the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM) operations; using high tariffs to generate a corporate-government revenue flow even as they raise consumer prices; discussing in an unsecure Signal chat demanding payment from European governments and Egypt for freedom-of-navigation operations in the Red Sea, and otherwise viewing existing alliances as opportunities for shake-downs worthy of mafioso protection rackets; using diplomacy to leverage corporate-government investments in Ukraine, Russia, and even Gaza.

It all comes down to one thing: If given government operations cannot generate revenue to be divvied up among insider oligarchs, out they go in favour of redesigned functions and strategies that can.

Trump's highly idiosyncratic view of American government is not the result of study or thought, but others have formalised anew this very old way of thinking. If Trump is unaware of it, Peter Thiel and Elon Musk, among others, are not. The new formalisation constitutes the inner gnostic wisdom of the stealth radical-libertarian coup within the elected populist coup that has dominated the first months of the Trump 2.0 Administration.

Whether the Trump 2.0 Administration proves to be an extinction event for liberal democratic, rule-of-law governance remains an open question--and will likely remain open until the November 2026 midterm elections. Many who oppose and are resisting the Administration's anti-democratic aspirations think Trump's growing unpopularity will lead to the reversion of both Houses of Congress to the Democrats. But that depends on those elections being free and fair in states with Republican pro-MAGA governors, and on Democratic majorities, if they emerge, being actually able to take their seats in the face of another "Stop the Steal" lawfare-aided series of state-by-state Big Lies, next time possibly accompanied by physical threats to election officials and judges who would dare to do their jobs according to their oaths. We may even witness such officials and judges being arrested by MAGA-compliant police auxiliaries, led perhaps by pardoned J6 felons, for the "crime" of obstructing injustice. Time will tell; George Orwell will be watching.

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