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The Fading Trump Presidency

di Yascha Mounk

Predicting Donald Trump's political demise has typically been a fool's errand. Some of my smartest friends have declared his definitive fall from grace again and again, only to be proven wrong each and every time.

If you watch MSNBC or listen to NPR, you may over the past decade have believed that Trump's presidential campaign is a hopeless publicity stunt; that the Republican Party is about to turn on him because of the *Access Hollywood* tape; that he has no chance of winning against Hillary Clinton; that his presidency will be so chaotic that he'll be forced to resign within his first year in office; that Robert Mueller's investigation into his relationship with the Kremlin will result in his impeachment; that his mishandling of the COVID pandemic will make him toxic to voters; that his loss against Joe Biden has ended his career for good; that he is about to be impeached over the January 6 riot at the Capitol; that he is sure to lose the race for the Republican nomination against Ron DeSantis; that he is sure to lose his bid for reelection against Joe Biden; that he is sure to lose it against Kamala Harris; and so on.

Ten years into Trump's political career, the most avoidable mistake pundits can make is to underestimate his powers of survival and resurrection.

And yet, I have come to the tentative conclusion that this time may, finally, be different. For the past decade, Trump has dominated American politics like no other president in living memory; now, signs of that era coming to a close are suddenly multiplying. It is, as Saturday's appalling assassination attempt on the president reminds us, impossible to see around the next historical corner. But it sure seems as though Trump's hold over the country is finally slipping. This, to misquote Winston Churchill, no longer feels like the end of the beginning; it may be the beginning of the end.

A minority of Americans has always been drawn to Trump because of his most extreme actions and statements. They loved his coarseness, reveled in his taunts, and unhesitatingly embraced his radicalism. This group made up a significant share of his most devoted base—but it was never big enough to explain how he could have won two presidential elections.

Many of the voters who twice put Trump over the top have, all along, had a more conflicted view of him. Trump swore that he would make Americans far richer. He would cut taxes and curb inflation. The costs of health insurance would fall. There would be peace in the Middle East. The country would return to its former grandeur. It is not hard to see why those who were inclined to believe that he might actually turn these promises into reality, at least to some extent, found them to be very enticing.

During his first term, Trump did celebrate some genuine successes, from Operation Warp Speed to the Abraham Accords. But when he predictably failed to bring about most of his outsized promises, he proved shrewd at making up excuses. He had only just taken power. The deep state was standing in his way. The “Russia hoax” had made it impossible for him to govern. The global pandemic had messed everything up. The share of Americans who were genuinely excited about Trump [shrank rapidly towards the end of his first term](#); and yet, the thought that it might be worth giving him a second chance in 2024—even if he just delivered on some tiny fraction of his promises—lingered in the minds of a surprising number of voters.

But the fulfillment of promises can’t be deferred forever without voters starting to lose patience. As Viktor Orbán [learned to his chagrin in Hungary](#), there comes a time when leaders are measured by their results rather than their rhetoric. And that time has now come for Donald Trump.

The immediate reasons for Trump’s travails lie in his ill-fated war with Iran. The contention that foolish “foreign entanglements” had repeatedly led America astray was central to his political persona from day one. In his second inaugural address, he [announced](#) that “we will measure our success not only by the battles we win, but

also by the wars that we end, and perhaps most importantly, the wars we never get into.” This makes it especially damaging that he pursued a war of choice in Iran without bothering to make a coherent case for it to the American public or ensuring that there would be a real exit strategy. The one major promise that Trump actually honored in his first term was that he would start no new major wars; that too now looks like empty self-promotion.

The knock-on effects for Trump’s other areas of traditional strength have been brutal. Americans voted out Joe Biden’s Democrats in good part because of the persistently high level of inflation after the pandemic, which had been fueled by the administration’s generous stimulus programs. Now, Trump’s failure to anticipate that Iran would choose to block oil tanker traffic through the Strait of Hormuz has led to a renewed spike in inflation, putting the president’s approval ratings on inflation and the cost of living [underwater by a remarkable 40 points](#).

Trump is also in trouble in some historic areas of strength that are less directly connected to the war in the Middle East. Most Americans grew furious with Biden’s inability to control immigration at the southern border. But in his second term, Trump has embraced a deportation policy that is so pointlessly cruel that, in many polls, a clear majority of Americans now [disapproves](#) of his handling of the issue.

The result is becoming increasingly clear in the data: Overall support for Trump is at or near record lows.

Trump has often been far more popular with the American public than his detractors cared to acknowledge; today, his approval ratings are genuinely dismal. Nearly 58 percent of Americans disapprove of Trump’s job performance (most of them strongly) while only 39 percent approve (most of them weakly), according to statistician [Nate Silver’s polling tracker](#). His net approval is as low today as it was in the immediate aftermath of the January 6 assault.

In the past, Trump has been hated by liberals, seen as divisive among independents, and (the complaints of a [small band of principled columnists](#) notwithstanding) enjoyed popular support among conservatives. Declines in Trump’s poll numbers were usually precipitated by independents abandoning him. Today, Trump remains

toxic among liberals, has come to be viewed negatively by most independents, and is newly divisive among conservatives.

Trump's ironclad grip over the Republican base is starting to loosen. In the past, conservative critics of Trump have usually complained that he has sold out the views and values associated with figures such as Ronald Reagan. Now, criticism of Trump within the conservative camp is for the first time being framed as a betrayal of the supposed values on which the MAGA movement was founded. Some of the biggest influencers on the American right, such as Candace Owens and Tucker Carlson, have recently expressed regret for supporting Trump. For the first time since 2016, his hold over the MAGA movement may actually be weakening.

The political costs from these developments are likely to compound over the course of the coming months. Betting markets give Democrats about a 6-to-1 edge to win the House of Representatives in midterm elections this November; despite a daunting electoral map, they also have slightly more than even odds to take control of the Senate. If Trump's party really does suffer a serious shellacking in the midterms, his inability to push major legislation through Congress and the impending end of his term will further weaken his control over his own party. With attention turning toward the 2028 primaries, the White House may suddenly see its power slipping away, as happened after the 2006 midterm elections, in which Democrats took control of both houses of Congress, rendering George W. Bush largely powerless during the last years of his term. Sooner than we can now imagine, Trump may come to be seen as a lame duck.

When Trump was reelected with a bigger, younger, and more diverse electorate in 2024, it seemed as though he might actually manage to impose his vision and his values on the country. In the first months of his second term, the administration was moving with impressive speed. Resistance to its ascendancy was conspicuous by its absence. It felt as though America might stand at a genuine tipping point.

The window of opportunity for Trump to reshape the country in a significant way was, I think, real. But he responded to the cultural excesses of the Democratic Party—and

the broader progressive establishment with which it is increasingly associated in the public mind—with even more extreme cultural excesses of his own, provoking a broad counter-reaction which extended well beyond those who partook in resistance marches during his first term. Therefore, it now seems increasingly safe to say that he has squandered it. Trump's second term will leave behind an America that is weakened, cheapened, and fractious; but it seems increasingly unlikely that he will leave behind an America shaped in his own image.

This is cause for optimism, an indication that America has proven to be more resistant to the appeal of authoritarian populism than many feared. It would take someone who is much more popular and disciplined than Trump to change the country in a fundamental way.

And yet it is far too early to celebrate. Trump will, after all, remain in office for another 32 months. That is enough time to do a lot of damage to democratic institutions, to engage in a great deal of corruption, and perhaps to start more reckless wars. In all likelihood, a President Trump who is starting to sense that the tide is turning against him will turn out to be more, not less, dangerous to the American republic—and the world.

Some danger will persist even after he leaves office. When demagogues leave office—even when they are booted from office in disgrace—it rarely spells the end of their movement. Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro lost his bid for reelection and was imprisoned for trying to impede the peaceful transfer of power, and yet [his son Flávio](#) has close to even odds of becoming the next president of Brazil, according to prediction markets. Alberto Fujimori was hounded out of Peruvian politics due to massive corruption and human rights abuses nearly three decades ago, and yet his daughter may be [about to lead](#) the country.

In Brazil, Peru, and many other democracies around the world, voters may decide to give populist movements a second (or third or fourth) chance because they were so disillusioned with the hapless alternatives. Given that the popularity of the Democratic Party remains at record lows, it would be deeply naive to rule out a similar future for the United States.

Trump looks likely to start fading from American politics over the coming years. But the broader threat of Trumpism may well outlast its creator.