

Trump Has Become What He Feared

Conversazione tra Jonathan Bernstein e John Guida

President Trump is routinely called powerful and also weak. He holds an iron grip on the G.O.P., helping to dispatch such perceived enemies as Senators Bill Cassidy and John Cornyn, and Representative Thomas Massie.

But on Wednesday, a handful of House Republicans [voted](#) to try to rein in the president's war-making capacity in Iran. Republicans in the Senate have resisted his "weaponization" fund and refused to kill the filibuster, an obstacle to passing the SAVE Act. And a judge ordered his name to be pulled from the Kennedy Center.

So, powerful or weak? Jonathan Bernstein, a political scientist and writer of the [Good Politics/Bad Politics](#) newsletter on Substack, makes sense of this apparent contradiction in a written conversation with John Guida, an editor in Times Opinion. It has been edited for length and clarity.

John Guida: President Trump presents a conundrum. He seems both powerful and weak. His record in Republican primaries appears formidable.

Jonathan Bernstein: First of all, his dominance within the Republican Party is a bit overrated. For one thing, a lot of his primary-endorsement successes are pretty hollow. He often, as he did in the Texas Senate race, waits until a leader emerges. He clearly was the main actor in purging Thomas Massie, but it's not clear in those other cases whether he was the main actor or if other party leaders — especially those in Republican-aligned media, such as local talk-show hosts — were the key players.

It's hard to compare Trump to other presidents because they generally didn't try to do such things — for good reason; it risks a lot of blowback. In other words, bullying can get Trump some things that other presidents don't get, but only at costs that other presidents haven't had to bear.

Guida: So you think his winning is both overblown and in pursuit of questionable goals. But you have [written](#) that he is also losing “a lot” — “far more than any other modern president.” How do you make sense of this?

Bernstein: All presidents lose. Trump loses more often, on more things, than most. I usually begin by following the analysis of Richard Neustadt, the presidency scholar who wrote the 1960 classic “Presidential Power.” Neustadt advised presidents to increase their influence by building a strong presidential reputation and by doing what they can to be popular with voters. Trump has consistently done neither.

The most important tool to achieve those things, for Neustadt, is information. Presidents have more access to useful information than anyone they deal with. Trump, by all accounts, ignores it. Instead, he’s built his second presidency around the goal of keeping himself, as much as possible, from not having to confront information that might contradict his impulses. And that leaves him unable to negotiate deals with friends or enemies abroad, or to adjust his policies at home to account for realities other politicians must live in.

Guida: Could you give examples of where you see Trump losing? You’ve often noted this in his dealings with Congress, right?

Bernstein: Just this week, he had several setbacks. The House embarrassed him with a war powers vote that would end the war in Iran — and then immediately after that they took a procedural vote to move ahead with support for Ukraine. That’s extraordinary. In the modern House, the majority maintains strict control over the agenda, but a handful of Republicans were willing to defect and basically give Democrats agenda control on both of these foreign policy issues. Normally a president would have found a way to defuse that revolt, but he’s so alienated some of those Republicans, and his word is so worthless, that he’s not really able to, even if he tried. Then over on the Senate side, Republicans revolted against his “weaponization” slush fund and against his ballroom. They removed funding for ballroom security from the spending bill they’re working on.

Congress is important, but this is going on everywhere — especially in the courts, where Trump’s Justice Department has squandered the presumption of trust that judges have always had for administration statements. Misleading, if not lying to the courts

— or to Congress, bureaucrats, state-level politicians, or foreign nations — might yield some short-term victories. Maybe. But over time, it’s a losing move. Reputation matters.

Guida: The conventional story of Trump 2.0 is that Republicans in Congress have done nothing to oppose the president and have instead enabled his agenda. You are suggesting that this narrative is not true, or at least not complete.

Bernstein: Yeah. He’s won a few real victories: He was able to get some wildly inappropriate nominees confirmed early on, including Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. And I suppose it’s a victory of sorts that he’s done a lot of impeachable things and no Republicans are looking to impeach him.

But a lot of things that pundits — and Trump! — count as “his” victories are really just traditional Republican policy goals that any Republican Congress would have passed. The One Big Beautiful Bill of 2025 was a real achievement, but it was more a Congress achievement than a presidency one. This isn’t unusual: “Obamacare” could just as accurately be nicknamed “Pelosicare”; George W. Bush’s tax cuts were just what happens when Republicans have unified party government, not a particular Bush achievement.

It is true that Trump has boosted the anti-immigrant wing of the Republican Party, and another Republican president might not have secured massive funding for ICE and the Border Patrol. But again, it’s hard to know whether he deserves the credit for that or if it’s really more of a victory by the nativist wing of the G.O.P., regardless of the president.

Guida: What do you think of the idea of “[negative agenda setting](#)”? The political scientist Matthew Glassman used the term to describe how Republicans in Congress often avoid confrontation with Trump by *not* doing things — if they never take an action on something, say a vote, poof, it’s gone. Because they never have to go on record voting against Trump personally, they can take control over the agenda.

Bernstein: Glassman is correct. A good example that he talks about is Trump’s recent budget proposals, which were pretty much ignored by Hill Republicans. Another is Trump’s repeated demand that the Senate eliminate the filibuster. Senate Republicans

have been eager to punch new holes in the filibuster when it blocks things they really care about. But not when it's mainly something Trump wants, such as the voting restrictions bill.

As Trump's unpopularity among voters starts to really sink in, Senate Republicans seem to be more willing to go public. That's what's been happening over the last month. But there are still lots of things, from nominations to specific budget requests, that just disappear. And as Glassman points out, Trump doesn't really seem to care about the details of policy. A more engaged president would make a point of fighting for some of these things — or not propose them in the first place after realizing Congress would resist them.

Guida: Gabe Fleisher, who writes at the Wake Up to Politics newsletter, called Trump 2.0 the “[sandcastle](#)” presidency, in part because of its reliance on executive orders. Do you think the accomplishments of the president's second term will be less enduring because he has not effectively engaged the full range of power in Washington?

Bernstein: There are a lot of things Trump has tried to do that haven't happened, and plenty more that do not yet have deep roots. Future elections will make a huge difference in what takes.

Still, Trump has managed to do a lot of damage that will be truly hard to undo. [Legal talent has drained](#) from the Justice Department. The same thing is happening virtually everywhere in the federal Civil Service, especially after work force cuts. It's going to take time to rebuild, and we really don't know what the federal government will look like in 10 or 15 years. It's going to be hard for any future president to recover from the foreign policy debacles, too. Will Canada fully trust the United States any time soon? Will NATO? Will our trading partners?

Guida: How does the Supreme Court in particular fit into the broader Trump-era Republican legacy?

Bernstein: Republican-appointed justices have had a majority on the Supreme Court since the early 1970s, and over time Republicans have become better and better at choosing partisan, ideological judges who deliver for the G.O.P. agenda. The court decisions are actually the biggest wins of the Trump years — rulings that ripped up the

Voting Rights Act, invented presidential immunity and embraced what I see as a thoroughly unconstitutional “unitary executive.”

If those things last, they really do change the constitutional order in important ways, converting a system of separate institutions sharing powers into one in which the presidency is reborn as the main branch of government — and full citizenship is restricted in ways that it hasn’t been since the days of Jim Crow.

But we’ve also hit a point where Democrats are likely to fight back the next time they get a chance, with court-packing or other major reforms seeming the least-bad choice. One thing Trump has created is a Democratic Party eager to fight — and that may even, in time, undermine the 50 years of successful G.O.P. gains in the courts.

Guida: Republicans have achieved many of the goals of the postwar conservative movement — as you pointed out, many by way of Supreme Court decisions. Overturning *Roe v. Wade*, weakening the Voting Rights Act, soon perhaps bringing the “deep state” under presidential control. What do you see as the political project of the Republican Party at this point?

Bernstein: The Republican Party at this point is deeply dysfunctional. Conservative media holds far too much influence, and that leads to the party as a whole having very little interest in policy — and very little incentive to win elections, because small, intense audiences are where money can be made. As it turns out, that doesn’t prevent Republicans from winning elections when the fundamentals run their way. They still benefit, for example, when a Democratic president is in the White House during a spike in inflation. But it makes governing extremely difficult, as we’ve seen especially in the House over the last few years.

It also has made Republican presidents consistently unpopular — since the takeover of the party by Newt Gingrich and his fellow radicals during the George H.W. Bush presidency, Republican presidents have been underwater in public opinion polls (the one exception was George W. Bush after Sept. 11). Trump has hardly had a week where his approval exceeded his disapproval.

The main policy effect of all this is that it’s created room in the party for antidemocratic agitators, with Trump at the head of the pack. I don’t know how the party gets out of that.

Guida: We hear a lot about “attention” as a critical part of politics. Trump clearly has a talent for commanding it. Do you agree it is important? Is it a form of direct power, or a useful tool, or something else?

Bernstein: Trump’s main politically relevant skill is that he’s actually a really good reality TV star. He’s very good at grabbing attention. That can help a president set the agenda. Political scientists have found that presidents aren’t very good at changing what people think, but they can be good at changing what people think *about*.

With the power to set the agenda, skilled presidents can get things done: by pressing Congress to vote on something they would rather not vote on or by pressing the bureaucracy to pay attention to their directives.

Trump is an inept president, so he mostly squanders the attention he gets — and at least half the time, he winds up drawing attention to things that don’t help him at all.

Here’s the thing. We never know what’s really going on in a president’s head, but it seems to me that Trump thinks winning elections is like winning a prize — the United States of America — to do with as he pleases. But what actually happens in elections is that the voters hire you to do a job. It’s a job with some 340 million bosses. And like all jobs, it has constraints and obligations.

Trump, as far as I can tell, just doesn’t see that. Which, among other things, seems to mean that he actually gets worse at all of this as he goes along.