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## Trump's Unprecedented Program of National Self-Destruction



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

It's always been something of a shock to return to the United States after a stay in Europe or northeast Asia. Things just run better in those parts of the world. The public transportation is fast and efficient. The medical services provide universal care. Infrastructure isn't in a state of decline. Green spaces are well maintained. Industrial agriculture doesn't dominate the countryside.

Sure, there are exceptions. Japanese bureaucracy, British trains, Italian unemployment, South Korean work hours: these are nothing to boast about. But in general, the United States ranks

pretty low in quality of life compared to its European and Asian competitors. In the *U.S. News and World Report's* Quality of Life index, the United States is a middling 22 out of 89 countries, below Belgium, Japan, and Ireland. It's tied for seventeenth place in the latest UN Human Development Report, below Hong Kong, Singapore, and Canada. That's pretty lousy marks for the largest economy in the world.

Returning from South Korea this week, I was once again reminded of the continual slippage of the United States. Passport control at Logan Airport was short-staffed. I had to navigate the virtually incomprehensible maze of South Station in Boston to find the bus terminal. Then there was the four-hour bus trip to cover the 92 miles to get back home. By comparison, the 167-mile trip from Seoul to the southern city of Gwangju—where I participated in a conference last week—took me a mere two hours by express train.

On top of the general entropy the United States has been experiencing since the 1970s, there's the Trump factor. Whatever additional time I had to wait on the passport line at Logan bears no comparison whatsoever to the horrifying experiences of Canadian and Western European tourists detained at the border, residents with green cards or travel permits taken into custody and readied for deportation, and the Venezuelans, Afghans, and Haitians whose Temporary Protected Status has been summarily revoked.

The quality of life for anyone but permanent residents in the United States has thus dropped to near zero.

Lest you feel excluded from the general slide downward under Trump, his attacks on government services is having a negative effect on everyone living in this country. The recently rechristened (by me) Department of Government Chaos, Revenge, and Patronage is making sure that the United States falls even further in the global rankings of quality of life. This Department—and all the accompanying executive decrees—are accelerating the free fall of the United States to the status of what Trump famously labeled a “shithole country,” a place that people all over the world are increasingly trying to avoid.

Jeez, do I have to spell it out?

### **The Politics of DoGCRaP**

It's common for Americans to criticize their government. A joke that Ronald Reagan made famous was: “The nine most terrifying words in the English language are ‘I’m from the government and I’m here to help.’” Americans typically disparage federal help even as they receive their Medicaid benefits. They don't understand that federal dollars support infrastructure like roads and bridges. They don't see that federal money supports education, public media, and research that improves their overall health and wellbeing.

As Joni Mitchell put it in her song “Big Yellow Taxi”—“Don’t it always seem to go/That you don’t know what you’ve got ’til it’s gone?”

Now that Donald Trump and his minions are eviscerating the federal government, Americans are suddenly starting to realize that the 10 most terrifying words in the English language are: “I’m from the Trump administration and I’m here to help.” (Psych!)

The three key elements of Trump’s effort to deconstruct government are chaos, revenge, and patronage. The budget cuts are designed to send federal programming into a death spiral that generates unprecedented chaos. Trump is targeting in particular all the elements of society that did him wrong: the liberal media, law firms that brought suit against him and his businesses, institutions like the Kennedy Center and the National Institutes of Health that indirectly challenge his lack of competence and credentials. Finally, because the federal government controls a considerable amount of money, Trump is doing all he can to loot public resources for the benefit of himself and his friends.

None of this is going through the proper channels. Congress has been transformed in the Trump era into a vestigial branch of government, an American appendix. Government lawyers are trying to argue that the administration doesn’t have to abide by any court decisions, even those of the Supreme Court. Internal resistance might ordinarily throw sand into the gears of Trumpism. But Trump is busy throwing the sand-throwers out of the civil service.

### **The Four Rs of National Self-Destruction**

Let’s examine the mechanisms by which the Trump administration is chipping away at the foundations of American democracy.

Republicans have always been interested in “regulatory reform,” otherwise known as deregulation, otherwise known as canoodling with corporations. Given the sheer difficulty of pushing through any type of governmental change, past Republican administrations (and some Democratic ones) have largely engaged in a form of nip-and-tuck, slicing away here and sewing things back together there. Trump is not interested in cosmetic surgery. He prefers the guillotine approach.

As *The New York Times* reports:

Across the more than 400 federal agencies that regulate almost every aspect of American life, from flying in airplanes to processing poultry, Mr. Trump’s appointees are working with the Department of Government Efficiency, the cost-cutting initiative headed by Elon Musk and also called DOGE, to launch a sweeping new phase in their quest to dismantle much of the federal government: deregulation on a mass scale.

If he can't eliminate an agency altogether—as he has tried to do with the Voice of America's parent agency, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Department of Education—Trump is embracing the strategy of “death by a thousand cuts.” As agencies reel from cuts in staff, in funding, and in the regulations themselves, the business world is liberated to do whatever it wants.

In many cases, regulations are dying simply because the administration is forcing agencies to stop enforcing the laws, which is like local police no longer monitoring speeding or issuing tickets. “At the Environmental Protection Agency, Trump officials have scaled back enforcement of rules intended to curb air and water pollution from power plants, oil refineries, hazardous waste sites and other industrial facilities,” *The New York Times* reports. “At the Transportation Department, enforcement of pipeline safety rules has plunged to unprecedented lows since President Donald Trump's inauguration.”

At the pettiest level, the administration is just making it impossible for government employees to do their jobs, for instance by cutting off the supply of printer toner or placing a \$1 limit on government credit cards. Government labs can't do their work because the administration refuses to approve new purchases.

Which brings us to the second R: a reduction in research.

### **Going after Scientists**

The United States has long been a leader in research and development, measured by amount of money invested and number of patent applications (at least until around 2019, when it was surpassed by China). Donald Trump is determined to undermine U.S. leadership in research by changing the rules governing grantmaking. So, for instance, the administration established a cap on indirect costs that the National Institutes of Health covers in its grants. That might seem like a trivial change, but it will strip many research institutes of their capacity to do work. As one institute director told NPR, “Cutting the rate to 15% will destroy science in the United States. This change will break our universities, our medical centers and the entire engine for scientific discovery.”

In early May, the administration froze all grants issued by the National Science Foundation. New rules will be applied to determine whether new proposals align with “administration priorities” (i.e., proving that the world is flat, the 2020 election was stolen, and fluoride in the water system causes Marxism). The administration is also using the charge of “anti-Semitism” to threaten research funding at major institutions like Harvard, Columbia, and Princeton.

The administration's overall budget proposal reveals an even greater determination to destroy the federal programs that fund scientific research. As *Nature* points out, the proposal would cut all non-defence spending by 23%, but it targets the US National Science Foundation (NSF) for a 56% funding reduction, and would slash the budget of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) by roughly 40%. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) would be hit by a 55% cut as the administration seeks to eliminate what it calls "radical" and "woke" climate programmes. On the day the budget was released, the EPA announced plans to dismantle its primary research division.

It's no surprise that scientists are looking to relocate abroad. Welcome to brain drain, Trump-style.

### **Retribution and Remuneration**

Donald Trump doesn't hide his intentions. During the 2024 campaign, he promised his followers that "I am your retribution." It could have been a line from a villain in a superhero movie (though, of course, his followers heard it as a line from the superhero instead).

In late April, NPR reported on its investigation into the Trump administration's implementation of retribution. He has gone after disloyal members of his first administration, political opponents, law enforcement officials who investigated Trump, lawyers who tried to convict him, and universities that have stood up to him (Harvard). He has instructed a range of agencies to carry out what can only be termed a "witch hunt," the term that Trump falsely used to describe the campaigns to bring him to justice.

Ed Martin, the interim U.S. district attorney for Washington, DC, participated in the January 6 insurrection and later defended the perpetrators in court. Those perpetrators are all free, thanks to one of Trump's executive orders, and Martin is going after the people who jailed them. More than a dozen of the prosecutors on those cases have been fired, in a letter signed by Martin.

Two days after this NPR report appeared, Trump issued an executive order freezing all federal funding for NPR.

The flip side of this drive for retribution is the campaign to reward followers. Autocrats always rule in this manner: one hand giveth, the other taketh away.

The primary beneficiary of Trump's largesse is, of course, himself. He has made money off his meme coin and crypto more generally thanks in part to investments from Gulf states. His businesses—hotels, golf courses—have benefitted from U.S. government expenditures as well as those of foreign governments. He even netted \$40 million from Amazon for a documentary about Melania Trump.

It's not just the Trump family. Elon Musk is poised to make billions in government contracts for satellites, rocket launches, and, most lucratively, the "Golden Dome" boondoggle. Musk also tagged along on Trump's trip to the Middle East and signed billions of dollars in contracts.

Trump allies on Wall Street were not happy when the market took a dive after his "Liberation Day" tariffs were announced. The market has recovered some of that wealth, but the real remuneration will come with Trump's threatened privatizations. The postal service, Social Security, Amtrak: these all could be transferred to private hands over the next four years. Then there's the asset-stripping that is taking place as the government sells off federal properties.

Remember what happened in Russia during the privatization mania of the 1990s? The new Yeltsin government sold off state enterprises for a song. Billions of dollars were transferred out of the country to foreign banks, and a new class of oligarchs emerged from the rubble. Guess where Russia is today on the Quality of Life index? Off the charts—and not in a good way.

### **How Will It End?**

Perhaps the average Trump supporter hates universities, scientists, and NPR. Perhaps they don't ride Amtrak. Perhaps they don't go abroad to discover just how un-great America really is by comparison.

But Trump's destruction of government will eventually hit home for them as well. They'll face sticker shock at WalMart, thanks to the tariffs. They'll encounter problems getting their Social Security checks or their Medicare benefits. They'll die because life-saving vaccines are no longer available.

Will they understand, by the time of the mid-terms, that everything Trump says is a 180-degree swerve from reality? The witch hunt he decries has become the witch hunt he directs. The efficiency gains and budget cuts he promises have become a huge increase in the national debt?

And MAGA, in the end, is just a load of DoGCRaP.

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