

How the Swamp Drained Trump

A year after arriving in Washington promising to hand power back to the people, the president has instead given the city's insiders precisely what they wanted.



Brendan Smialowski / AFP / Getty

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ON A DRIZZLY JANUARY AFTERNOON one year ago, a newly sworn in President Donald J. Trump stood on the steps of the United States Capitol, doing his best to terrify America's ruling class.

“Today, we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another, or from one party to another,” Trump declared, peering out at a sea of supporters, “but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C., and giving it back to you, the people.”

From Washington to Wall Street and beyond, a deep sense of unease permeated gatherings of high-status respectables at the dawn of the Trump presidency. The situation seemed dire: A madman had been swept into office in a wave of populist rage directed at them—and in that hallucinatory moment, it felt as if he was capable of anything. Would he tank their stock portfolios with a single tweet? Imprison their favorite *New York Times* columnists? Start a trade war with China, or a nuclear war with North Korea? And what to make of this mysterious movement he now marshaled?

Elites were tormented by visions of torches and pitchforks on the horizon—red-capped zealots encircling their co-ops, crashing through their gated subdivisions, banging down the doors of their brownstones. At a dinner party early in Trump's first term, I heard a well-appointed Washingtonian fret that the #MAGA army might literally march on the nation's capital to visit violence and destruction on its inhabitants. At another event, a top executive at a *Fortune* 500 company pitched me on monetizing the insights I'd gleaned from



boards all over the country right now that are terrified of Trump’s Twitter feed,” he said with great enthusiasm. “They’re trying to figure out how to stay on his good side and get what they want out of him.”

A year later, it seems clear they didn’t need my services—they figured Trump out all on their own.

For all his anti-establishment bluster, Trump has proven to be a paper tiger as president. Instead of cracking down on Wall Street plutocrats, he’s appointed them to his cabinet and given them tax cuts. Instead of browbeating world leaders, he’s let them flatter him into submission with theatrically obsequious state visits. Instead of locking out the sneering media elites, he’s pantingly courted the approval of *New York Times* reporters and book-writing dandies from Manhattan. And while he hobnobs in Davos with the globalist glitterati, the ragtag team of loyal lieutenants who set out in 2016 to upturn the established order with Trump has been largely shoved to the sidelines or purged altogether from his White House.

In some ways, of course, those initial fears of anarchy have been validated. The first year of Trump’s presidency has been defined by chaos. But more often than not, it’s the kind of chaos that threatens the vulnerable while sparing the powerful. When the federal government shut down on the anniversary of his inauguration, some of the president’s boosters tried to cast it as a heroic stand for Trumpism—the populist disruptor bending Washington to his will. In truth, it was the product of the same infighting, dysfunction, and galloping incompetence that have kept the 45th president from advancing the transformative agenda he promised.

Indeed, while Trump’s “populism” has manifested itself primarily in performative spasms of culture war, the most substantive policy victories of his first year in office have gone to the donor-class conservatism of Paul Ryan and his fellow swamp creatures in the congressional leadership. As it turns out, all they had to do was ask nicely.

It is perhaps the central irony of the Donald Trump story: The Queens-born billionaire who could never win the respect of the taunting insiders on [the other side of the river](#) led a bitter revenge march to the White House, ranting and raving and railing against the “haters”—and then giving them what they wanted the moment they said *please*.

ON CAPITOL HILL, LAWMAKERS looked at the arrival of President Donald Trump—with his mercurial moods, pliable priorities, and warring staff—and saw an opportunity. Never before had an Oval Office occupant seemed so vulnerable to a simple charm offensive. Shortly after his election, congressional sources said, a consensus began to form within the Republican caucus that any member willing to engage in a bit of ego-stroking had a good shot at gaining the president’s ear. And so commenced The Great Ingratiation of 2017.

In this Washington-wide scramble to cozy up to Trump, some Republicans took straightforward approaches. They held their campaign fundraisers at his eponymous D.C. hotel. They trekked to his golf course to pose for grinning pictures on the green and pitch him on their pet issues. They got themselves booked on his favorite cable-news shows and praised him effusively for this *historic victory* or that *act of decisive leadership*.

Others, meanwhile, opted for more creative acts of courtship. In perhaps the most famous instance, House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy assigned a staffer to sort through packs of Starbursts and fill a jar with just the pinks and reds so that he could present the president with his favorite flavors. This bit of brown-nosing was widely ridiculed when it was first [exposed](#) in *The Washington Post*—but those familiar with the dynamic between Trump and Congress saw it as a masterstroke.

“That was smart, and clearly it was something that Trump remembered,” said Doug Heye, a veteran Republican strategist who spent more than a decade on Capitol Hill. In Heye’s view, party leaders have simply been adapting their legislative strategy to meet the demands of current political realities. “Donald Trump wasn’t elected to be the detailer-in-chief, so when he won he had a Congress ready to move legislation that, if not identical to his policy positions—which could be fluid—were generally in the same ballpark,” he said, adding, “We know that flattery will get you everywhere in this administration.”

At times, the fawning praise from lawmakers seemed to serve a specific legislative purpose. When, for example, Republicans were hustling to pass their polarizing tax bill in the final frenzied weeks of 2017, Utah Senator Orrin Hatch, who chairs the finance committee, made a point of showering the president with praise in a press gaggle. “I’ll say this for ya,” Hatch told reporters, bypassing a question about Trump’s recent retweets of anti-Muslim videos. “He’s one of the best presidents I’ve served under ... He’s not afraid to take on the big mouths around here.”

When immigration talks began to heat up on the Hill, South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham—who had spent years working on the issue—abruptly dropped his barbed criticisms of the president and took on a conciliatory, even admiring, tone. Graham made no effort to conceal the reasons for this sudden shift. “You could be dark as charcoal and lily white, it doesn’t matter as long as you’re nice to him,” Graham told CNN. “You could be the pope and criticize him, it doesn’t matter, he’ll go after the pope. You could be Putin and say nice things, and he’ll like you.”

It is an article of faith among savvy Trump-watchers that this president is, at his core, a “transactional” operator. That’s right in a sense, but it belies the nature of so many of his transactions. Often, it seems, the most powerful bartering chip a lawmaker has to offer the Trump White House is not a vote for a given bill or a pledge of support for a given policy, but rather an expression of personal affection for Trump himself. Even Democrats have seen signs that such a strategy could work for them. During a one-on-one meeting with Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer—a famous schmoozer and fellow New Yorker—Trump came remarkably close to signing onto an immigration deal that would have been viewed as a betrayal by many in his base.

People who know him well say the president has taken special pleasure over the past year in watching the parade of pols who once greeted his candidacy with scorn line up to kiss his ring. The nastier you have been to him in the past, the more delighted he is when you want to make up.

“He’s a sucker for compliments,” said one former campaign aide, who requested anonymity to speak candidly about Trump. “It’s not even that hard. If you come to him with the right attitude and the right

constantly veering from one position to another, always a victim of his last conversation. But while the former aide conceded that this might not be ideal, the aide also empathized with his craving for respect.

“He’s faced such an onslaught of criticism, especially these past couple years,” the aide said. “So, he’s prone to be receptive to someone who shows appreciation for him. It’s an understandable human need.”

That may be true—but is it what his supporters thought they were voting for?

ASK SAM NUNBERG WHO’S TO blame for the swampification of the Trump White House, and he’ll bitterly rattle off a list of cabinet officials, family members, and presidential advisers.

A longtime Trump adviser who helped launch the billionaire’s presidential campaign, Nunberg now sees establishment spies and sell-outs infecting every level of the administration. He refers derisively to the president’s chief economic adviser as “Gary ‘Carried Interest’ Cohn,” or alternately, “Mr. Goldman Sachs.” He seethes that National-Security Adviser H.R. McMaster has “never missed giving a speech at a George Soros-funded event in his life.” Defense Secretary James Mattis is, in his view, a “John McCain type of Republican (which is to say, the bad type); and Ivanka Trump, Jared Kushner, and their cohort of cosmopolitan allies are “a bunch of Democrats.” (If you’re having trouble making sense of these insults, it’s likely because you don’t speak *Breitbart*—suffice it to say, they are not minor slurs.)

“It’s Washington as usual!” Nunberg fumed to me in an interview. “It’s a little perverse and *Twilight Zone*-ish.”

It would be easy to dismiss this criticism as jealousy. Nunberg was unceremoniously pushed out of the campaign early on amid an internal power struggle, and despite years of advising Trump, he was never offered a job in the White House. But his grim diagnosis of the administration echoes the complaints of many early Trump-backers.

Among the nationalist ideologues who staked their hopes on his presidency, there’s a widespread fear that Trump is being captured and co-opted by the “globalist elite.” While his loyalists are quick to praise what they regard as his greatest accomplishments—such as withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and instituting a travel ban on several majority-Muslim countries—they also acknowledge that the population of true-believing Trumpists in the White House is shrinking. For every Stephen Miller or John Kelly in Trump’s orbit, there are dozens of résumé-polishers and this-towners who have no interest whatsoever in draining the swamp. And without a robust policymaking apparatus dedicated to advancing the ideas formerly championed by the likes of Steve Bannon, it has only gotten easier for the establishment forces in the West Wing to handle the president.

As *The Wall Street Journal* recently outlined in its “[How-To Guide](#)” for dealing with the commander in chief, each would-be Trump-whisperer has developed his or her own technique. When Trump wants to take serious trade action against other countries, for example, advisers will sometimes come up with reasons to stall, “hoping he’ll forget what he wanted done and move on to something else.” When Trump is weighing defense options, Mattis will gently steer him with a combination of flattery and Jedi mind tricks. “He says

‘Your instincts are absolutely correct,’ and then gets [Trump] to do the exact opposite of what his instincts say,” a source told the *Journal*.

One person close to the White House, who requested anonymity to describe internal dynamics, told me that Trump is so fully buffeted by handlers like this that some days the best chance he has of hearing from an adviser who actually shares his instincts is a late-night phone call with one of the primetime Fox News hosts. “Unless he’s talking to Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, or Laura Ingraham after their shows,” the person said, the president’s populist allies can’t “get to him.”

In retrospect, Nunberg said, he can see how Trump would be uniquely vulnerable to being wooed by the rich and powerful. Though he ran in 2016 as a foe of the billionaire donor class, Trump had spent much of his professional life before that trying (and tragically failing) to convince America’s corporate chieftains that he was more than just a cartoonish TV personality—that he was one of them. The resulting sense of victimhood he carried with him might have made for fiery stump speeches on the campaign trail, but it also meant that once he won, he was tickled to learn that real-life titans of industry like Exxon-Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson actually wanted to come work for him. To Trump, Nunberg said, they were like “big shiny toys” to be collected and proudly displayed—eliciting *oohs* and *ahhs* from all who beheld his glittering cabinet.

As an example, Nunberg pointed to Cohn’s appointment as director of the National Economic Council. During the election, Trump had routinely invoked Goldman Sachs as a bogeyman, but after winning, he jumped at the chance to hire the firm’s chief operating officer. “I’m not surprised that the president was susceptible to hiring someone from Goldman,” Nunberg told me. “I mean ... Gary Cohn voted for Hillary Clinton—let’s cut the shit.” (Cohn has [said](#) he remains a registered Democrat, but has not publicly discussed his vote in 2016.) “But [to Trump], Goldman is the top of the top in investment banking. Goldman is the richest of the rich. Trump thought it was amazing that he got to hire Gary.”

Trump was similarly enamored of the investment banker Wilbur Ross when he joined the administration as Commerce Secretary. “Wilbur is so famous on Wall Street that he only needs one name,” Trump once gushed to White House visitors, [according](#) to *Axios*. “You don’t even need to say his last name; you just say Wilbur and they know who you’re talking about.”

Given the kind of team Trump had assembled, then, it is perhaps not surprising that the signature legislative accomplishment of his first year in office included massive tax cuts for corporations and rich people. He didn’t pitch it this way to voters, of course. In the weeks leading up to the passage of the tax overhaul, he repeated the claim that “the rich will not be gaining at all with this plan.” But inside the walls of his beachfront estate in Florida—mingling with people who had shelled out \$200,000 for Mar-a-Lago memberships—he couldn’t resist showing off just a little.

Within hours after signing the bill into law, CBS News [reported](#), Trump told attendees, “You all just got a lot richer.”

returned to the same bitter refrain: *The world is laughing at us.*

In 1987, the world was laughing at us for providing free protection to Japan's oil tankers as they passed through the Persian Gulf. Shortly thereafter, the Chinese were laughing at us because of our weak trade policies. In the decades that followed, Japan, OPEC, India, Mexico, Iran, Russia, the Taliban, "the Persians," the Arab League, Saudi Arabia, and "our enemies" all took turns laughing at us for various failures of nerve and exhibitions of dumbness.

"Every day in business I see America getting ripped off and abused," Trump wrote in his 2011 book, *Time to Get Tough*. "We have become a laughingstock, the world's whipping boy, blamed for everything, credited for nothing, given no respect. You see and feel it all around you, and so do I."

Trump's promise to voters in 2016 was simple: Put him in the White House, and he would bring a swift end to all this laughter. He would crack down on Beijing over currency manipulation, twist arms in Riyadh over oil prices, and blow up any multilateral trade deals he deemed unfair to U.S. workers.

But this hard-charging posture began to melt the moment Trump's phone started ringing after the election. With heads of state and political leaders calling from around the world to congratulate him, Trump "tossed aside" the carefully honed protocols for such conversations, and chose to giddily wing it instead: He was, a senior transition official told *The New Yorker*, just "excited that important people were calling him."

Over the next year, many world leaders would prove adept at exploiting the American president's peculiar form of status anxiety for their gain. Some appealed to Trump by loading up his state visits with flamboyantly glitzy trappings. In Saudi Arabia, he was driven around the Murabba Palace grounds in a gold golf cart; in China, his welcome party included celebratory cannon fire, military bands, and young children with pompoms shouting, "Uncle Trump!"

Chris Ruddy, CEO of the conservative media company Newsmax and a friend of Trump's, told me that the president's chummy relationships with many foreign leaders presents a welcome contrast with his predecessor. "They love his engagement," Ruddy said. "You have to remember that for the past eight years, Obama was fairly lazy. He was not on the phone with members of Congress of his own party, let alone world leaders ... I am hearing that they are very appreciative of that." The State Department's official tally of presidential travel lists 120 trips abroad for Obama, including 25 in his first year, and 10 so far for Trump. But Trump's admirers place great faith in his back-slapping interpersonal style.

Not everyone is so sanguine in their assessment. Dan Kurtz-Phelan, a former State Department official and the executive editor of *Foreign Affairs*, told me world leaders have developed a kind of shared playbook for dealing with Trump. They suck up aggressively (often mentioning the size of his electoral-college victory), seek to cultivate allies in the administration wherever they can find them, and practice "selective listening"—essentially training themselves to tune out unproductive presidential outbursts on Twitter and elsewhere.

The overall strategy has proven remarkably successful, said Kurtz-Phelan. "I guess I'm somewhat surprised

they want to.” Maybe, he mused, the president simply lacks the convictions to change the world. “With past presidents, it was harder for flattery to change policy from black to white over the course of two hours.”

The theoretical merits of Trump’s approach will continue to be debated in U.S. foreign-policy circles, but after one year in office there aren’t many credible observers who would say this president is taken *more* seriously on the world stage than his predecessors were. Polls show that global trust in American leadership plummeted to historic lows in 2017. China is facing virtually no pressure from Trump on key issues like human rights and intellectual property, while longtime allies have been left to [wonder](#) about the resilience of their relationship with the U.S. And if all this is supposed to add up to an America First doctrine, few Republicans are able to make sense of it.

“I know some people profess to see the outlines of some grand strategy, but I don’t see it,” said Eric Edelman, who served in the State Department under George W. Bush. Instead, he said, Trump’s approach to foreign policy has “reflected the first year of his presidency writ large—which is to say it’s been very chaotic.”

THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC FORUM in Davos, Switzerland, is the kind of thing that Donald Trump never got invited to before he became president. In fact, the famously exclusive annual meeting for the geopolitical elite and the respectable rich (or “Davos Men,” as they are often referred to, with varying degrees of irony) epitomizes the establishment that Trump rose to power railing against. It was only natural, then, that when Trump announced he was going to address the forum this year, many assumed he would take the opportunity to deliver a campaign-style tirade against the globalist system-riggers in the audience.

The world had been laughing at us all these years, after all. Here, finally, was Trump to shut them up.

But from the moment Air Force One touched down in Switzerland, it seemed clear that Trump did not see himself as a gate-crasher. His invitation to Davos had been like the lifting of a velvet rope, and in this rarified setting, he was on his very best behavior—respectful, responsible, even grateful for his VIP treatment. Taking the stage to a rousing rendition of the Coburg March played by the Swiss Honor Guard, Trump declared America “open for business,” and [lathered approbation](#) on the attendees.

“Represented in this room are some of the remarkable citizens from all over the world,” he said. “You are national leaders, business titans, industry giants, and many of the brightest minds in many fields. Each of you has the power to change hearts, transform lives, and shape your country’s destinies.”

It might have felt like a moment of triumph for the president. But in Trump’s lifelong quest to gain entry into favored crowds like this one, he’s never been able to escape the gnawing fear that behind the obsequious smiles lurks a fundamental lack of respect. It’s that fear that makes him so vulnerable to flattery by the ruling class—and it haunted him on that day in Davos, too.

In the Q&A session that followed Trump’s speech, the forum chairman Klaus Schwab asked him how his business background informed his approach to governing. Trump’s answer drifted, almost involuntarily,

into a thoroughly uncouth riff about the “nasty” and “mean” and “vicious” and “fake” press that he has to contend with in politics.

And yes, the audience ended up [booing the president](#)—but first they did something much worse. They laughed at him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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