

Making the Unimaginable Mundane: Two Years of the Trump Presidency



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Donald Trump has presided over near constant domestic political uncertainty, an economy that ebbs and flows and a chaotic foreign policy. And yet the Republican President could still win re-election next year. **James D. Boys** reports on the first two years of an unlikely presidency.

Although the Trump presidency has operated in a near constant firestorm, there is a certain familiarity to events in Washington. Decades after President Nixon was forced to deny being a crook, Donald Trump has denied being a Russian agent. Years after both Nixon and Bill Clinton were accused of suborning perjury, President Trump now faces similar accusations from his former attorney, Michael Cohen. Just as the Watergate investigation made stars of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, now a series of investigations is making household names out of journalists such as Peter Baker, Susan Glasser, and Maggie Haberman. A President who appears to pride himself on not reading has reinvigorated the publishing industry, prompting a slew of memoirs and tell-all books, all offering apparent insight and analysis of this most unorthodox of chief executives.

In a little over 24 months Donald Trump has managed to make events that would have previously been deemed unimaginable appear rather mundane. Events, statements, firings, resignations, and revelations that would have undermined any previous administration have all somehow managed to be controlled, ignored, or brushed off with one apparent crisis being replaced by yet another, in an increasingly repetitive cycle of bizarre behaviour.

The scandals that swirl around Donald Trump have been brewing from his first hours in office and risk ensuring that allegations and recriminations dog the remainder of his time in office. As a consequence of the chaos that surrounds the Trump presidency two years into his

term, the task of separating fact from fiction is becoming all the more complicated, made increasingly difficult by the President's propensity to exaggerate, and on more than one occasion, manufacture information. The early admission by presidential advisor Kellyanne Conway that the Trump White House intended to adopt 'alternative facts' was an ominous indication of things to come both at home and around the world.

Record to date

During its first year in office, the Trump administration presided over the fastest 1,000-point increase in the history of the US Stock Market and a reduction in unemployment figures; it overhauled the US tax system, and successfully nominated Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court. In so doing, Donald Trump fulfilled several key campaign pledges. One year later, at the half-way point in his term in office, taxes remain cut and he has added a second justice, Brett Kavanaugh, to the Supreme Court. But at what cost? The tax cut for individuals has a sunset clause, which does not apply to corporations, exposing a clear rift in policy aspirations, while Kavanaugh's confirmation hearings descended into a debacle centred on historic allegations of abuse and assault that coincided with the #metoo movement. In the wake of Donald Trump's Access Hollywood tape, Kavanaugh's confirmation hearing appeared to confirm that a locker room mentality now extended to the courtroom of Trump's America.

The passage of tax cuts and the appointment of conservative justices, however, fail to be particularly Trumpian, since such moves would have doubtless

been instigated by any Republican president. The lack of overall party unity among Republicans was revealed by their inability to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act ('Obamacare') despite controlling the House, the Senate and the presidency. With the end to that lock on power following the 2018 midterm elections, hopes for legislative successes now appear even more remote, as Trump finds himself pitched against one adversary that he cannot seemingly dismiss with infantile nicknames and insults: Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi.

Pelosi appears to be a match for the President and has emerged apparently victorious from a prolonged government shutdown in the New Year, instigated by the White House in a flawed effort to generate over \$5 billion for a much-vaunted wall on the Mexican border. Trump had repeatedly pledged that it would be paid for by Mexico. Following the longest shutdown in the history of the US government, precisely nothing was accomplished other than the rescheduling of the State of the Union Address. The debacle appears indicative of the Trump approach to domestic policy: Make a much-heralded announcement in regard to contentious policy and then sit back and watch it collapse due to a total lack of political support, and an utter inability to muster a workable coalition on Capitol Hill.

On issues ranging from immigration reform to military parades through the streets of the nation's capital, his administration may eventually be studied as a model of how not to get things done in Washington. If and when those studies occur, students will have plenty to read, given the seemingly endless stream of tell-all memoirs released by former members of the Trump White House who have left the inner circle at a remarkable rate. For every departure there is, apparently, yet another memoir, all telling a similar tale of in-fighting, bickering and disharmony in the West Wing, all presided over by a disengaged, ill-informed Commander in



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Chief who reportedly spends his days tweeting, watching television and golfing.

The turnover at the White House and across the entire administration has been extraordinary, with no apparent end in sight. As of February 2019, Trump has lost two national security advisors, two chiefs of staff, three communications directors, a secretary of state, a White House counsel, a secretary of the Interior, an EPA administrator, a deputy chief of staff, a Homeland Security advisor, several deputy national security advisors, a VA Secretary, an FBI director, the White House staff secretary, a HUD secretary, a chief strategist, a deputy FBI director, an attorney general, a deputy White House chief of staff, a director of the National Economic Council, a UN ambassador, and a defence secretary. In addition, Mike Pompeo looks certain to step down as Secretary of State to run for the Senate in Kansas, while the administration only has acting secretaries at Justice, Interior, the UN, the EPA, and a stand-in as White House Chief of Staff. The turnover and the

constant stream of leaks and high-level briefings against the President and his senior staff only adds to the sense of chaos at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

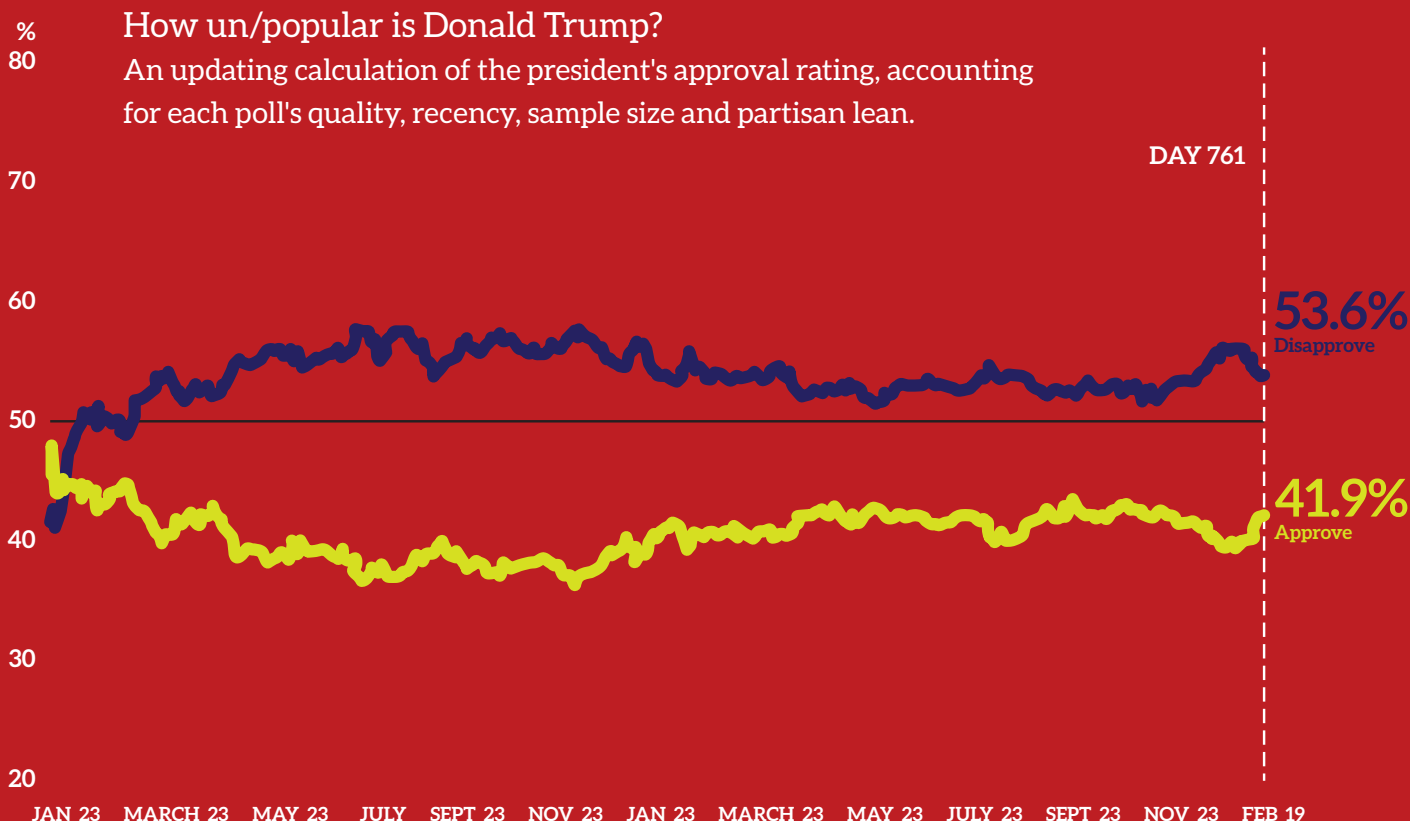
Trump's struggles

For a President who prides himself on the size of his crowds and the ratings that his various appearances generate, Donald Trump's inability to increase his popularity ratings must remain of concern, and raises doubts as to his ability to win re-election in 2020. His popularity remains stubbornly fixed at between 35-37 per cent, a figure that has been constant since the early primaries in 2016. Only in the final days of the election did this figure increase as reluctant Republicans turned out to vote against Hillary and ensure an unexpected victory in the Electoral College, though not in the popular vote. In 2016, Trump's victory was caused in part by the presence of third-party candidates running as Libertarians and Green Parties, which drew vital support from Hillary Clinton in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, and

Florida. It is notable that Trump is actively seeking to goad independent candidates ahead of the 2020 campaign, doubtless aware of his own polling status.

It must be remembered, however, that Ronald Reagan had similar polling figures at a similar stage of his first term, before winning re-election by a massive margin in 1984. Reagan's great success was due, in part, to his ability to avoid a challenge from within his own party for the Republican nomination. Recent US presidential history reveals that this is key to a successful re-election bid, since incumbents who faced primaries (Truman, Johnson, Ford, Carter, HW Bush) either dropped out of the race or were defeated in the subsequent general election. Party unity is therefore essential for Trump's re-election chance and, to date, this appears to be holding, despite initial speculation that Senator Flake of Arizona may emerge as a challenger.

Of course, Trump needs to remain in office if he hopes to seek re-election, and several probes into his affairs are a potential impediment to this. Most



attention is being paid to the investigation led by Robert Mueller, but of potential greater danger is the work being conducted in the Southern District of New York, where prosecutors have doggedly pursued Trump's former personal attorney Michael Cohen. Although 'impeachment' is perhaps the most over-used, least understood expression in current usage regarding the Trump administration, the President certainly appears to be in legal and political jeopardy as investigators get closer and closer to the Oval Office.

For the first two years of his presidency, Donald Trump was isolated from many political risks due to a Republican stranglehold on the House and the Senate that prevented any serious investigations from being conducted into his private affairs, business dealings or political manoeuvrings. This situation changed markedly with the results of the Midterm Elections that saw Democrats take control of the House of Representatives, granting them the ability to launch their own hearings into the President, his associates

and their various and assorted activities. Of course, as things currently stand, the Republican majority in the Senate would ensure that, much like for Clinton in 1999, an impeachment trial would be unlikely to remove the sitting president.

Foreign relations

The sense of chaos that defines Trump's domestic situation is also felt further afield. Overseas; few know what to make of Trump or how to predict what his next move will be. Long-standing allies of the United States have been humiliated or shunned, while traditional foes such as China and Russia have been courted in an obsequious fashion. In London, the feeling of national disdain for the President was evident in his visit last summer, during which Trump was unable or unwilling to travel by car and was instead moved from secure location to secure location in the Marine One helicopter to avoid the demonstrations that greeted his non-state visit. Such protests are likely to occur once more when the President arrives in the UK for a planned State Visit in June 2019 to coincide

with the 75th anniversary of D-Day.

Facing domestic political uncertainty, an economy that ebbs and flows, and with the 2020 election campaign looming, Trump is likely to be more visible on the world stage as he seeks to distinguish himself from his would-be challengers. A trade deal here, an arms agreement there, and stability in the markets could likely result in Trump's successful re-election, a move that would reflect recent trends in US voting intent, despite the recent government shutdown and his languishing poll numbers. This is a President that has been running for re-election since the first day of his presidency in 2017 and, thus far, no one has appeared who seems likely to standing in his way. With election day only a little over 18 months away, it's all still very much to play for in this unlikely presidency.

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