

# THE **TRUMP** PRESIDENCY

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## CHAPTER ONE

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# A Combative Style

In the November 2018 midterm elections, American voters delivered a blow to the Trump administration, switching control of the House of Representatives from Republicans to Democrats. With committee chairs changing hands, Democrats now promised to conduct far-reaching investigations of Trump, from his alleged collusion with Russia in the 2016 election to his tax returns and business dealings prior to (and after) becoming president. The day after the midterms, Trump addressed a White House news conference in his usual combative style. Despite loss of the House, he pointed to Republican gains in the Senate and characterized the election as close to a total victory. He mocked Republicans who had rejected his support on the campaign trail—and lost. He called a CNN reporter “a rude, terrible person.”<sup>5</sup> When asked if his embrace of the label “nationalist” encouraged white supremacist groups, he attacked the reporter for asking what he called a racist question. He warned that if House Democrats insisted on investigating him, “then we’re going to do the same thing [to them], then government comes to a halt and I blame them.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly, Trump had no intention of admitting defeat. His aggressive response to the election setback was typical of his governing approach from the start.

### **Wading into Controversy**

Trump seems to delight in baiting his critics and wading into controversy. His campaign slogan, Make America Great Again—shortened to MAGA on his supporters’ bright red ball caps—

was a deliberate jab at former president Barack Obama and the Democrats. Trump felt they had weakened the United States and that it was his job to restore the nation's military and economic might.

As a presidential candidate, Trump made headlines daily with his campaign speeches and pointed remarks to the media. His statements were either refreshingly candid or outrageously mean-spirited, depending on his listeners' viewpoint. He referred to immigrants from Mexico and Latin America as criminals, rapists, and drug dealers. He blasted longtime allies in Europe for not spending more on North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) defenses. He vowed to scrap trade agreements in favor of new ones more favorable to America. Above all, he promised a new era of success and prosperity. "We're going to win. We're going to win so much," he told supporters at a May 2016 rally in Billings, Montana. "We're going to win at trade, we're going to win at the border. We're going to win so much, you're going to be so sick and tired of winning."<sup>7</sup>

Many times Trump seemed to cross the line with a reckless comment, leading to predictions that his campaign was finished. For example, in July 2015 he lashed out at Senator John McCain. As a US Navy pilot in the Vietnam War, McCain had been shot down, taken prisoner, and tortured by the North Vietnamese. Of McCain, one of Trump's most outspoken Republican critics, Trump said, "He's not a war hero. He's a war hero because he was captured. I like people that weren't captured."<sup>8</sup> Critics were outraged that Trump, who had avoided military service, would attack a highly decorated former prisoner of war. Yet somehow Trump survived the controversy. Opinion writers like CNN's Chris Cillizza saw this as a startling change in American politics—and not one for the better:

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**"We're going to win at trade, we're going to win at the border. We're going to win so much, you're going to be so sick and tired of winning."<sup>7</sup>**

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—Trump speaking at a 2016 rally in Billings, Montana

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Everyone who knew anything assumed that attacking McCain's five years spent as a prisoner of war in Vietnam—a time that left the Arizona Republican with lifelong wounds—was a death sentence of Trump's political ambitions. . . . Except it didn't destroy Trump. For all the hand-wringing and predictions of doom for his campaign, he just kept right on going—first to the Republican presidential nomination and then to the White House. For many of his supporters, Trump's broadsides against McCain were music to their ears—finally someone was standing up to the political establishment in Washington! . . . But what Trump's comments about McCain should remind us of is this: Whether there is political gain to be found in dishonoring a lifelong public servant, it is simply wrong. It is not who we are—or who we should be.<sup>9</sup>

## **Aggressiveness and False Claims**

Any thoughts that Trump might soften his rhetoric as president were soon dashed. If anything, he has been more combative in office than on the campaign trail. He relentlessly promotes himself and trashes his enemies. He calls Democratic senator Bernie Sanders “Crazy Bernie” or “the Nutty Professor.” Democratic senator Elizabeth Warren,

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**“But what Trump’s comments about McCain should remind us of is this: Whether there is political gain to be found in dishonoring a lifelong public servant, it is simply wrong. It is not who we are—or who we should be.”<sup>9</sup>**

—CNN opinion writer Chris Cillizza

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ren, who made headlines for claiming Native American heritage, is “Pocahontas.” He has tried to bully federal judges, foreign leaders, corporate chief executive officers (CEOs), lawmakers in both parties, agency heads, and union bosses. He has blasted the *New York Times* as a failing enterprise and labeled Ann Coulter, a conservative critic, as a “wacky nut job.”<sup>10</sup> Trump even attacked basketball superstar LeBron James after James criticized him during an interview on CNN.





Waving “Make America Great Again” signs, Trump supporters rally in Georgia in 2018. The president’s campaign slogan states his view that America has become weak and needs to be restored to greatness.

Trump’s aggressive self-promotion often includes false claims. He declares victory even when he falls short, and he blames setbacks on opponents’ lies or cheating. As political analyst Peter Baker notes:

In Mr. Trump’s world, there is a fine line between victor and victim. The president often veers back and forth, eager to be seen by others as the former even as he sees himself as the latter. To Mr. Trump, winning is always the goal, whether it be in business, politics, policy or even investigations, but even when he is on top, he lapses into anger and resentment, convinced that he has been unfairly treated and determined to strike back.<sup>11</sup>

## Controversy in Charlottesville

Trump's refusal to back down when challenged by critics often leads to more controversy. One episode early in Trump's presidency drew accusations of racism from Trump's opponents. In August 2017 neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups held a Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The rally began as a protest against removal of a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee. However, the far-right groups were intent on spreading a message of hate, marching with torches and chanting racist and anti-Semitic slogans. Counter-protesters, including black-clad members of Antifa (for "antifascist"), gathered to oppose the racist marchers. Confrontation turned to violence, and one of the neo-Nazis ran his car into the crowd, killing a young female counterprotester. In his comments on the incident, Trump blamed both groups for the violence. He also said, "But you also had people that were very fine people on both sides." Even members of Trump's own party expressed outrage about his statement.

However, Trump partisans believe the president has been treated unfairly on Charlottesville. They point out that his remarks on "very fine people" were followed by this: "And I'm not talking about the Neo-Nazis and the White nationalists, because they should be condemned totally." Regardless, the Charlottesville incident continues to cloud his term in office. Former vice president Joe Biden, in announcing his run for the White House, pointed to Trump's words after Charlottesville as the defining moment of his presidency.

Quoted in James S. Robbins, "Trump's Charlottesville Comments Twisted by Joe Biden and the Media," *USA Today*, April 26, 2019. [www.usatoday.com](http://www.usatoday.com).

After the election, Trump claimed his margin of victory in the Electoral College was the largest ever, when actually it was modest by historical standards. He insisted his loss in the popular vote was due to millions of illegal ballots cast for Hillary Clinton, although neither he nor anyone else ever provided proof of this. He asserts that his economic plan has created the greatest turnaround in American history, although he inherited a growing



economy from his Democratic predecessor. Trump also says immigration is harming America and foreigners are invading in large numbers, when government figures show foreign workers boost economic activity. He has called climate change a hoax and portrayed Democrats as radical socialists. When his claims are challenged, Trump simply moves on to another topic.

Fact-checkers at the *Washington Post* assert that Trump had made more than ten thousand false or misleading claims in office as of June 2019. Journalists try to correct the record, but some fear that repeating his misstatements only helps spread his message. As for Trump's loyal core of supporters, they love his aggressive rhetoric and are not fazed by his falsehoods. Some contend that what the media reports as lies are often political views on which people may disagree. At any rate, polls in the spring of 2019 showed Trump's approval ratings on the rise. His approval fluctuates from 45 percent to 50 percent—a fairly solid mark for such a divisive president.

### **The Twitter Habit**

Another thing that exasperates Trump's opponents is his constant use of Twitter. For Trump, however, Twitter is an important weapon in his arsenal. He uses it to reach his audience directly, without media filters. His Twitter feed has more than 60 million followers, which is 45 million less than Barack Obama's. Trump is not bashful about tweeting, posting 2,227 tweets in 2017 and increasing the number to 2,843 in 2018. All that Twitter activity strikes Trump's critics as foolish and unpresidential. During the 2016 campaign Trump seemed to agree, tweeting, "Don't worry. I'll give it up after I'm president. We won't tweet anymore. I don't know. Not presidential."<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, as with so many things, Trump changed his mind about Twitter.

He often begins tweeting early in the morning, promoting his agenda, attacking enemies, making jokes, and boasting about his record. On March 13, 2018, he even announced the firing of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson via Twitter. A typical tweet from

July 2018 laid into one of his favorite targets, the national media: “The Fake News Media is going CRAZY! They are totally unhinged and in many ways, after witnessing first hand the damage they do to so many innocent and decent people, I enjoy watching. In 7 years, when I am no longer in office, their ratings will dry up and they will be gone!”<sup>13</sup>

Trump’s tweets often touch on whatever is in the news. In April 2019, when Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, France, was in flames, Trump tweeted advice on how to put out the fire. (Paris firefighters rejected his suggestion.) According to the political website Politico, about half of Trump’s tweets promote his own success while about a third rip into his adversaries.



*Special Counsel Robert Mueller speaks publicly about the Russia investigation in 2019. He concluded that Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential election, but he left open the question of whether Trump had obstructed justice during the investigation.*

# SOURCE NOTES

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## FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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**Donald J. Trump for President** ([www.donaldjtrump.com](http://www.donaldjtrump.com)). This website for the 2020 presidential campaign presents a brief biography of President Trump, a list of campaign promises along with reports on Trump’s efforts to keep them, news and updates about Trump, and a schedule of campaign rallies and fund-raising events.

**Donald J. Trump/The White House** ([www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)). The official White House website features biographical and other information about the president and members of his administration. The site also includes speeches and policy memoranda on such issues as the economy, national security, the federal budget, immigration, and the opioid crisis.

**Politifact: Donald Trump’s File** ([www.politifact.com/personalities/donald-trump](http://www.politifact.com/personalities/donald-trump)). This website maintains a scorecard on the veracity of Trump’s remarks in speeches, interviews, and tweets. His words are analyzed and given ratings of True, Mostly True, Half True, Mostly False, False, and Pants on Fire. The site also checks the truthfulness of comments about Trump and his administration.

**US Department of Justice** ([www.justice.gov/storage/report.pdf](http://www.justice.gov/storage/report.pdf)). Volumes I and II of the “Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election” by Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller III can be found here. The redacted report, released in March 2019 by the special counsel’s office, appears in full. Related court documents, including indictments and plea agreements stemming from the investigation, can be found at [www.justice.gov/sco](http://www.justice.gov/sco).



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