

MONTH ONE OF DONALD TRUMP'S "GOLDEN AGE"

Pennies, plane crashes, and constitutional crises as Washington enters its Dark MAGA era.

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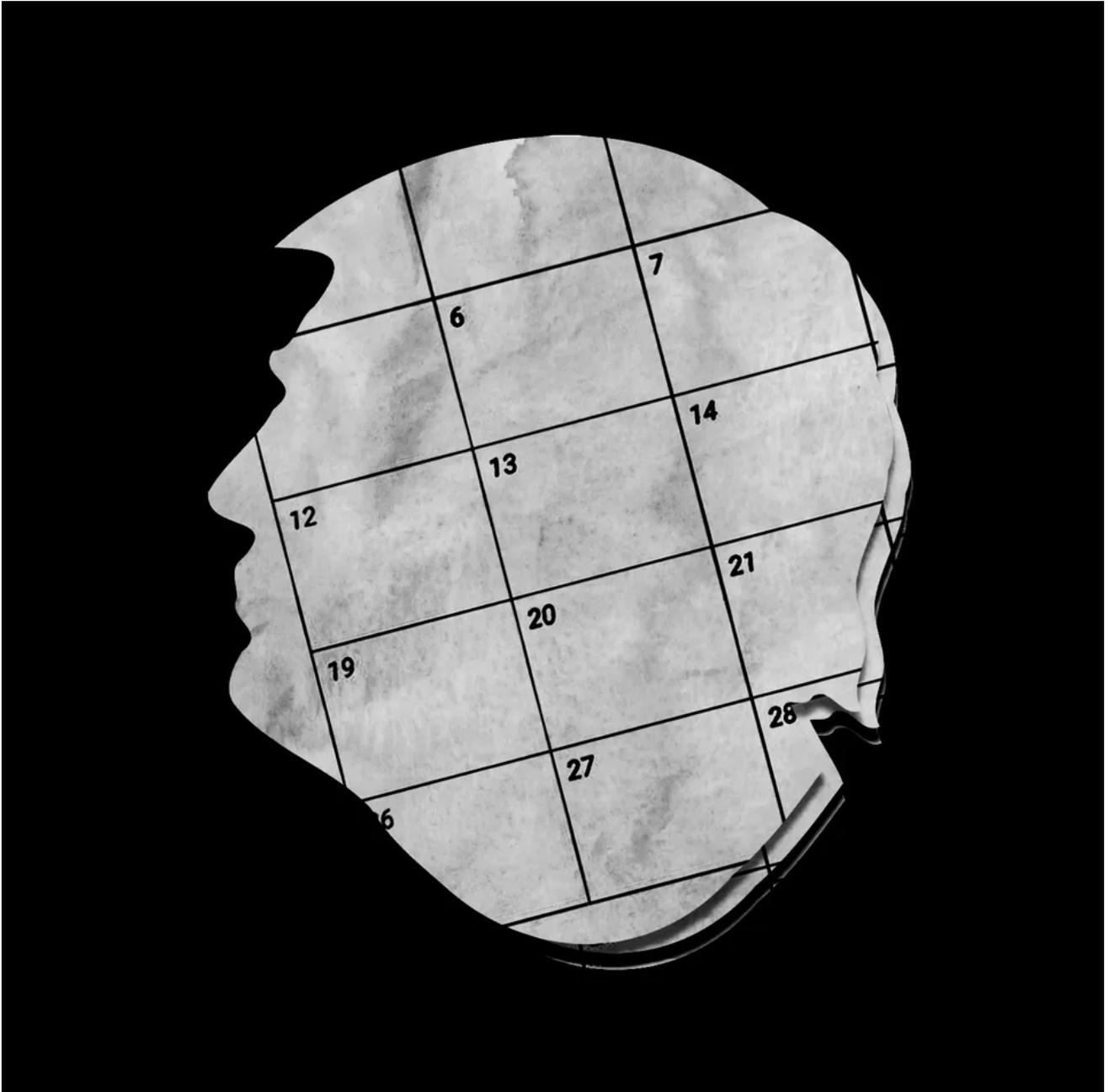


Illustration by Nicholas Konrad

It seemed as if the inaugural festivities had barely ended by the time the first articles of impeachment were introduced. Al Green, a congressman from Texas, brought them “for dastardly deeds proposed and dastardly deeds done.” (“They are still a work in progress,” Green’s press secretary added.) Donald Trump had been President for two weeks, and Washington was flailing to respond to the new Administration’s tactics, which were to “flood the zone with shit,” as Steve Bannon once put it. The notion of a President’s first hundred days was a quaint, bygone metric; this White House released a memo commemorating the first hundred hours of Trump’s second term—the “kick off” for America’s new era. Trump had promised to retake the Panama Canal and to possibly acquire Greenland, imposed a barrage of tariffs, fired more than a dozen inspectors general and federal prosecutors, suggested shutting down FEMA, halted global land-mine-clearance programs, and ordered migrants to Guantánamo Bay. For every new regulation proposed, ten would be repealed.

“I’m getting really tired of winning,” a consultant said to me the weekend after Trump was sworn in. He had convened a mixer for aspiring Administration workers and D.C. newcomers; many in the room were hungover and sniffing, in the early stages of a post-Inauguration flu. A political strategist who attended one of the inaugural balls referred to half-joking speculation, stoked by the podcaster Shawn Ryan, that China had released a “brain-fog bioweapon” into the ballroom. “Everyone I know is suffering from this right now,” he said. Government Web sites were going dark, egg prices went so high they became a meme, and dead bodies were being pulled out of the river in Washington. But nothing would impede Trump’s “golden age,” as he kept calling it. Members of Congress ate smashburgers emblazoned with the word “TRUMP” at a Party retreat held at

the President's golf club in Doral, Florida; one lawmaker had proposed a constitutional amendment that would allow the President to seek a third term. Trump often raised the issue himself. "They say I can't run again," he had recently mused. "Then somebody said, 'I don't *think* you can.' Ooh . . ."

“**W**elcome to the circus,” one reporter said to another, as we waited in the White House briefing room. It was January 30th, and Trump was about to hold his first press conference as President. The night before, a Black Hawk helicopter had collided with an American Airlines jet about to land at Reagan National Airport; there was an explosion in the sky as both aircraft plunged into the Potomac. All sixty-seven people on board were killed.

Trump's rants often open with a brief gesture at unity. After taking the podium, he asked for a moment of silence for the victims and families. "Real tragedy," he said. "This was a dark and excruciating night . . . that icy, icy Potomac. It was a cold, cold night, cold water." He went on, "We do not know what led to this crash, but we have some very strong opinions and ideas, and I think we'll probably state those opinions now." He suggested that the crash had happened because people with "psychiatric disabilities," "complete paralysis," and "dwarfism" were being hired at the Federal Aviation Administration. "Not your fault!" he said to Sean Duffy, his newly confirmed Secretary of Transportation.

The woman in front of me, who wore a sparkly pantsuit and sneakers, was making a shaky video on Facebook Live, occasionally switching to selfie view. She blew a kiss to her phone camera. "It's nice to have a real President," the guy next to her whispered. The man on my other side was texting, "Who are these bozos." Trump's press secretary had opened the briefing room to "new media," such as podcasters and influencers. "I'm amidst the establishment," Natalie Winters, the White House correspondent for Steve Bannon's "War Room" podcast, told me. "It's like segregation has ended. I've

taken their sacred space.” Diver teams were still searching for bodies in the freezing river. “I can’t imagine people with 20/20 vision not seeing what’s happening up there,” Trump said.

On February 4th, Trump announced that the U.S. would take a “long-term ownership position” in Gaza, which he called the “Riviera of the Middle East.” The next day, Democratic lawmakers were protesting outside U.S.A.I.D. headquarters. Elon Musk and his DOGE team had spent the weekend feeding the agency, which provides international humanitarian aid and development assistance, “into the wood chipper,” as he put it on X. Employees were now locked out of the building. Hakeem Jeffries, the House Minority Leader, admitted early on that Democrats would need to be judicious about their resistance; they were being overwhelmed by executive actions and shocking appointments at a rate designed to force them into submission. The U.S.A.I.D. protest felt a little late; soon after it ended, workers scaled the building to remove the large metal letters that spelled out the agency’s name, pulling them off one by one and leaving them in a pile, like a used arts-and-crafts project. In the mostly empty federal plaza, a woman yelled, “Shame!”

A half mile or so down the road, at the White House, Trump was in the East Room, sitting at a wooden desk, with rows of school-age girls and coaches standing behind him. He was preparing to sign an executive order called “Keeping Men Out of Women’s Sports,” which sought to ban trans student athletes from women’s and girls’ athletic programs. He asked the group to gather around him. “Every day, we’re ending the extremism of the last four years,” he said. He looked around at how crowded the room was. “I actually offered to build a ballroom for the White House. . . . I offered to do it to the Biden Administration,” he said. “I’m going to try and make the offer to myself.” The executive order, he said, was part of a “sweeping effort to reclaim our culture.” Everyone filed out as the Marine Corps band played “Girls Just Want to Have Fun.”

On the campaign trail, Trump said that he would “save a fortune for our country” by putting a stop to unnecessary spending. “We’re going to bring back Presidential impoundment authority,” he noted, at a rally last spring. “Nobody knows what it is.” Now, in office, he was doing it—refusing to spend money allocated by Congress for purposes enumerated in law. Journalists and elected officials were scrambling to understand the impoundment powers. PBS, in its primer: “It’s a concept that’s normally so dry, so esoteric and so distanced from Americans’ everyday lives that your eyes may start to water as you try to recall whether this was ever covered in school.”

On February 6th, after an all-night vigil in the Senate, Democrats failed to prevent Russell Vought from being confirmed as the director of the Office of Management and Budget, which administers federal spending. Vought had previously led Project 2025, the staffing and policy program that Trump and his allies denied association with during the campaign. Meanwhile, teachers and federal workers who had supported Trump posted on TikTok and Facebook Live in distress—U.S.D.A. food inspectors and National Park Service staffers, among others, hadn’t realized how deep the cuts would be. Vought, in his policy writings and public speeches, has consistently promised to inflict “trauma” on the “administrative state.” The Constitution, he has written, is “a revered document that is no longer in effect. . . . The Right needs to throw off the precedents and legal paradigms that have wrongly developed over the last two hundred years.” The potential limits of Presidential authority weren’t a concern. “Everything we do is legal,” he said recently.

Before sunrise, when Democrats were still holding the Senate floor in protest of Vought, people under umbrellas were streaming into the National Prayer Breakfast. The event originated the year before Dwight Eisenhower added “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance. Trump announced that the spirit of the country was up forty-nine per cent. “The spirit is as high as it’s been,”

he said. “That’s the biggest increase in the history of whatever the poll was.” He said that, after he was nearly shot in Butler, Pennsylvania, his own son Don, Jr., had “gained some religion. . . . He went up twenty-five per cent. And, if you know him, that’s a lot.” Trump felt that the spirit of the country was “probably the hardest thing to get back.” He went on, “The rest is easy. The rest is easy.”

That evening, I ran into a neighbor and her husband coming home from a funeral. She had worked at U.S.A.I.D. and for the Treasury for decades. “I’m watching thirty years of my career being destroyed,” she said. “It’s all for nothing.” A memo with the subject line “Fork in the Road” had gone out to most of the federal workforce, inviting resignations and laying out severance terms. Her husband, a longtime federal employee, told me that he had taken the offer. Across the government, chaos and confusion took hold as the deadline approached. There were happy hours all over town with drink deals for federal workers trying to sort through it; many also took to Reddit: “Did anyone accepting the Resignation not receive confirmation?” “Does anyone know if the VA is still keeping a dedicated lactation space or have we loosened those reigns given the recent shots fired at DEI and such?” “Who now has access to our DNA Profiles?”

Others seemed to welcome the old order being thrown to the wood chipper. “Trump may have saved my career,” a friend, who is a federal employee, texted me. She had wanted to leave her job forever. She sent the “resign” e-mail, and received a confirmation note addressed to another person’s name. “I hope she wanted to resign, too,” she laughed.

On February 7th, I went to the White House, where Trump was hosting Shigeru Ishiba, the Japanese Prime Minister. The night before, a twenty-five-year-old DOGE staffer named Marko Elez had resigned after the *Wall Street Journal* found some of his old social-media posts. (“Just for the record, I was racist before it was cool” ; “Normalize Indian hate.”) As we

waited to be let into the East Room, Musk was collecting results from an X poll about whether to bring Elez back. (Eighty per cent of the hundreds of thousands of respondents voted to rehire him.) Vice-President J. D. Vance replied to Musk, “We shouldn’t reward journalists who try to destroy people. Ever. So I say bring him back.” Musk posted a saluting-face emoji, adding, “He will be brought back. To err is human, to forgive divine.”

Trump and Ishiba began their press conference, and a reporter asked, “Is there anything you’ve told Elon Musk he cannot touch?” Trump replied, “We haven’t discussed that much. . . . I think everything is fertile.”

Democratic congressmen had just sent letters to Trump’s chief of staff, Susie Wiles, expressing outrage that DOGE engineers had access to Treasury payment systems, which contain personal information such as Social Security numbers. Why did DOGE even need that? “Well, it doesn’t,” Trump said. “But they get it very easily. I mean, we don’t have very good security in our country, and they get it very easily.”

The lingering question, ever since Musk showed up in the Trump family photo at Mar-a-Lago just after the election, has been when his new friendship with the President will go sour. (Musk spent much of the first weeks of the transition at Trump’s Palm Beach club; when he left, Trump wrote, on Truth Social, “Where are you? When are you coming to the ‘Center of the Universe,’ Mar-a-Lago. Bill Gates asked to come, tonight. We miss you and x! New Year’s Eve is going to be AMAZING!!! DJT.”) In Trump’s first term, Bannon, then his chief strategist, appeared on the cover of *Time*. Trump was displeased; Bannon left the White House soon after. Now Musk was on the *Time* cover, cast as President Musk, behind the Resolute desk. Trump was in the Oval Office with Ishiba when a reporter asked how he felt about it. He paused. “Is *Time* magazine still in business?” he asked, despite having recently sat for a photo shoot with the publication. “Elon is doing a great job.” Musk tweeted, “I love @realDonaldTrump as much as a straight man can love another man.”

On the way back to Washington from the Super Bowl, Trump ordered the Treasury—in a post on Truth Social—to stop minting new pennies. By then, there was such an onslaught of calls to congressional offices that phone lines on the Hill were jammed to the point of failure. On February 10th, Trump was in the Oval Office getting rid of paper straws. “I don’t think that plastic is going to affect a shark very much as they are eating, as they are munching their way through the ocean,” he said. On the first day of his term, Trump had ended remote work for the entire federal government; the morning he signed the straw order, cars sat in standstill traffic all the way across the bridge to Navy Yard, which was short five thousand parking spaces. On Fed Reddit, some wondered if Musk would make Tesla-only lanes to reduce congestion.

On February 11th, Musk joined Trump in the Oval Office. Musk had been holed up in the Secretary of War Suite of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building for several weeks, communicating with the public mostly by posting online. Now Trump wanted him to meet the press. The President presided grandly from behind the Resolute desk, with Musk standing to the side, his hands clasped in front of his chest. Musk’s four-year-old son, X Æ A-Xii (he goes by X), stood in front of him, in a tan coat. X was making sounds with his mouth. Trump turned to the boy. “X, are you O.K.? This is X, and he’s a great guy, high-I.Q. individual.” The President asked Musk to speak, like one member of a science-fair group project turning to his geek partner to explain the details.

“At a high level, you say, What is the goal of DOGE? And I think a significant part of this Presidency is to restore democracy,” Musk said. “Are we in a democracy?” His son interrupted by burbling. “I tell you, gravitas can be difficult sometimes,” Musk joked to the reporters. “If there’s not a good feedback loop from the people to the government,” he said, “and if you have rule of the bureaucrat, if the bureaucracy is in charge, then what meaning does democracy actually have?” Trump tried to nudge him toward some

actual news items. “Could you mention some of the things that your team has found, some of the crazy numbers?”

Musk’s favorite anecdote was about an old limestone mine in Pennsylvania that was now used by the contractor Iron Mountain to process retirement paperwork for the federal workforce. He started on what was almost his own version of the classic Trump weave, like when the President gets going on dishwashers or showerheads at a rally:

We were told the most number of people that could retire, possibly in a month, is ten thousand. . . . Why is that? Well, because all the retirement paperwork is manual, on paper. It’s manually calculated, then written down on a piece of paper. Then it goes down a mine. I’m like, “What do you mean, a mine?” Like, yeah, there’s a limestone mine where we store all the retirement paperwork. You look at a picture of this mine. We’ll post some pictures afterwards. This mine looks like something out of the fifties because it was started in 1955. It looks like it’s, like, a time warp. And then the speed—the limiting factor is the speed—at which the mine-shaft elevator can move determines how many people can retire from the federal government. And the elevator breaks down sometimes, and then nobody can retire. Doesn’t that sound crazy?

Musk’s son made his way onto his shoulders, pulling at his father’s Dark MAGA cap. “Some of the things that I say will be incorrect and should be corrected,” Musk said. “I thought my son might enjoy this, but he’s sticking his fingers in my ears and stuff.” After the meeting ended, Steve Cheung, the White House communications director, posted a collage of media coverage the meeting had generated: “FULL SPECTRUM DOMINANCE.”

That night, it snowed. Secret Service dogs took to the White House lawn to practice catching snowballs in their mouths. “There’s a sense we’re living through times we’ll understand only in retrospect,” Peggy Noonan had recently written in the *Journal*. At a party on Embassy Row, I talked to a person who said that he hoped to soon get a job in the Administration. He told me, “Other than this idea of who is a citizen of this nation, which I think will change, this whole thing is almost more like a

conceptual art movement than politics. Or like pornography—you know it when you see it.”

There was growing debate among legal scholars and journalists about whether the country was in a constitutional crisis. Karoline Leavitt, the White House press secretary, came to the briefing room to offer another view. “Many outlets in this room have been fearmongering the American people,” she said. “In fact, the real constitutional crisis is taking place within our judicial branch, where district-court judges in liberal districts across the country are abusing their power to unilaterally block President Trump’s basic executive authority.” States were launching constant legal challenges against Trump’s actions, hoping to win nationwide injunctions. A conservative law clerk had told me, “It seems like the courts will have legitimate action. They can pause things for fourteen days. So it just messes up our momentum.”

On Valentine’s Day, White House staff came through the press area to pass out long bulleted lists of the week’s achievements. The Administration had just fired hundreds of employees at the National Nuclear Security Administration, not realizing that they oversaw the country’s nuclear-weapons stockpile. An article from ZeroHedge, a right-wing blog, cited an apparent surge in certain Internet search terms to show that “political elites were in panic mode”: “Washington DC searches soar for ‘Swiss bank’, ‘offshore bank’, ‘wire money.’ . . . Search terms ‘Wipe’ and ‘Erase’ also moved higher in recent weeks. Wipe hard drives? Well, yes, the search term ‘wipe hard drive’ across the DC metro has gone absolutely parabolic.” The following week, the official White House Instagram account posted a video of ICE agents shackling deportees. (The only sound in the video is the roar of airplane engines and the clinking of chains; the caption was “ASMR.”) Outside the Kennedy Center, protesters performed a series of an anti-Trump interpretive dances.

Early one morning, a Trump supporter posted a video of the White House:

“He’s already up working. 5:30am. Oval Office lights on. Sun isn’t even up yet.” The lights in the video weren’t from the Oval Office. It almost didn’t matter that it wasn’t true—even supporters whose own lives had not materially improved in the way they’d hoped since Trump took office said that they loved what it all stood for. An R.N.C. delegate in Pennsylvania, whom I’d met early in the campaign, told me that he hadn’t been tracking the Presidency too closely, but he knew that Trump was going to release the Kennedy-assassination files, and that was enough. “Guess what? This country has not been told the truth,” he said. “It’s a new time for openness and transparency.” He went on, “Everything’s been on the up and up, other than the plane crashes.” A former Trump-caucus captain told me he just wished there were more mass deportations.

On Presidents’ Day weekend, the crowd at the Daytona 500 cheered as Trump took a lap of the speedway in his motorcade. He had pinned a new post on Truth Social, a quotation sometimes attributed to Napoleon: “He who saves his country does not violate any law.” At the one-month mark of his Presidency, Trump hosted a Black History Month event in the East Room. “Should I run again?” he asked the attendees. “What do you think?” They chanted, “Four more years.” The day before, Trump had written online, in reference to himself, “LONG LIVE THE KING!” ♦



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