

LETTER FROM TRUMP'S WASHINGTON

# “THE TRUMP EFFECT”: ON DEAL-MAKING AND CREDIT-CLAIMING IN TRUMP 2.0

*The once and future President is back to wielding leverage like a club, in the Middle East and on  
Capitol Hill.*

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January 16, 2025



Source photograph by Scott Olson / Getty

The long-awaited, painstakingly negotiated deal for a hostage swap and ceasefire in the war between Israel and Hamas had not even been formally announced, on Wednesday, when Donald Trump claimed credit for it. “This EPIC ceasefire agreement could have only happened as a result of our Historic Victory in November,” the once and future President declared on social media. “We have achieved so much without even being in the White House.” Minutes later, Trump’s incoming national-security adviser, Mike Waltz, seized on the boss’s statement in his own social-media post: it was, he said, proof of “The Trump Effect.” In an appearance on Fox News, Waltz elaborated, attributing the breakthrough to Trump’s repeated threats of “HELL TO PAY” if Hamas did not agree to release the hostages before he returned to office. “They believed President Trump when he said there would be all hell to pay, and any deal that was on the table would only get worse once he was in office.”

There was, of course, more than a bit of Trumpian bluster to it all, and not just because Trump and Waltz failed to mention Joe Biden, who had publicly outlined the deal’s terms back in May and who had spent the months since lobbying to make it happen. Waltz could barely contain his glee at the idea that there might soon be split-screen images of American and Israeli hostages being reunited with their families as Trump is being inaugurated, on Monday—an explicit echo of the dramatic scene from 1981, when the modern G.O.P.’s hero, Ronald Reagan, was sworn into office on the same day that Iran finally released the American hostages whose long captivity had helped seal Jimmy Carter’s electoral defeat. The prospect of a “Reagan moment,” as Waltz put it, was no doubt a big part of the deal’s appeal for Trump, who invariably speaks of his victories in sweeping historic terms.

To the extent that the Trump Effect was real—and, in my view, it absolutely

was—the warring party most subject to Trump’s threats was not Hamas but Israel’s Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Over the weekend, Trump had dispatched his new envoy for the Middle East, his billionaire friend and golf partner Steve Witkoff, to personally pressure Netanyahu into accepting the deal—over the objections of Netanyahu’s hard-right coalition partners—and Witkoff has been working side by side this week with Biden’s lead negotiator, Brett McGurk, in the marathon sessions that led up to the announcement. On Thursday, I spoke with a source who has been closely involved in the hostage talks. “I give a lot of credit to Trump and his people, because they’re the ones putting the hammer on Bibi on this,” he told me. “The thing that pushed Bibi over the threshold of agreeing to coöperate was actually Trump and his people sending very clear messages that that’s the expectation of the incoming President and that there will be consequences if Israel fails to reach a deal.”

The Trump Effect in the Middle East, in other words, is not that dissimilar to the Trump Effect we’ve seen here in Washington, where Trump has spent years demonstrating what political leverage can produce in the hands of someone willing to wield it like a club. All week on Capitol Hill, Republican members of Congress have been giving a master class in what this means in practice. On Tuesday, at a hearing for Trump’s embattled nominee for Secretary of Defense, the longtime Fox News host Pete Hegseth, G.O.P. senators who had initially voiced concerns about Hegseth’s past misbehavior were embarrassingly eager to accept his excuses for it. When Hegseth promised to abandon views that he has promoted for years, such as rejecting combat roles for women in the military, his testimony sounded about as credible as all those conservative Supreme Court appointees who claimed they were open-minded about *Roe v. Wade* only to win confirmation and swiftly vote to overturn it. But the Republican senators accepted Hegseth’s statements anyway, with a credulousness whose cringey-ness seemed to be the point: they have learned by now that Trump demands not just fealty but humiliating public displays of it. Soon after the hearing, Joni Ernst, the

Republican senator from Iowa, announced that she would vote to confirm Hegseth—Ernst who, back in November, made the mistake of loudly touting her skepticism, as a combat veteran and a survivor of sexual assault, about a nominee accused of rape who was described by his own mother, in 2018, as a man who “belittles, lies, cheats, sleeps around and uses women for his own power and ego.” Was it really just Hegseth’s outraged denials and the fact that his mother later recanted her words that proved so persuasive to Ernst?

A month ago, Hegseth and several other of Trump’s nominees, including his Russia-promoting choice for director of National Intelligence, his vaccine-skeptic choice for Health and Human Services Secretary, and his conspiracy-theorizing choice for F.B.I. director, appeared to face at least the possibility of tough confirmation battles. But now, amid an intense pressure campaign waged in public and private by Trump and his allies—including Elon Musk vowing to finance primary challenges against Republicans who don’t go along with Trump’s nominees—it’s likely that all of them will get through.

Bullying, accompanied by threats from the world’s richest man, is the Trump Effect in unvarnished form.

Another striking example of Trump as a politician whose default setting is to lean hardest on his own conservative allies—whether Netanyahu abroad or Republicans at home—came just hours after he claimed credit for the ceasefire in the Middle East. In a move that shocked and surprised many Republican members, House Speaker Mike Johnson fired the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Ohio Republican Mike Turner. Turner swiftly disclosed to CBS News’ Margaret Brennan the rationale that he had heard from Johnson: “concerns from Mar-a-Lago.” One of the loudest complaints about Turner among the MAGA faithful has been his support for Ukraine in its war against Russia—and his public criticism of a faction within his own party that he called pro-Russia. Johnson has the most tenuous hold possible on his Speakership, which gives Trump incredible leverage over him. How telling that Turner’s head is what Trump apparently chose to ask for.

Yet the ouster of Turner could come with adverse consequences, too. Some of it is simple political math: in the House, Johnson's margin of control is so thin that he can little afford to lose a vote on anything. What if Turner quits voting for the Party line? Or quits Congress outright? More substantively, Turner is far from the only Republican member of Congress who remains committed to Ukraine's defense—a reminder that the G.O.P. is deeply divided over many of Trump's signature policy issues. On China, Trump's nominee for Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, used his confirmation hearing on Wednesday to stress that China remains an almost existential-level threat to the United States; in 2022, he was one of the leading senators to introduce legislation calling for the Chinese-owned app TikTok to be banned from the U.S. Rubio and other China hawks in the Administration, though, will have to combat Trump's own instincts for accommodation—symbolized by Trump's election-season flip-flop from supporting a TikTok ban to seeking to halt it. On Wednesday, after Rubio's confirmation hearing, the *Times* reported that Trump had invited TikTok's C.E.O. to sit as an honored guest at his upcoming Inauguration.

Even the Israel ceasefire deal that Trump was so eager to tout this week is not the uncomplicated political win he would like it to be. In Washington, Senator Tom Cotton blamed “lame duck” Biden for trying to “cram down a bad deal on Israel”—right around the same time that Trump was taking credit for it. Cotton is a studiously loyal Trump acolyte, which makes his comment so revealing. Trump, in the end, has never fully embraced many of the ideological causes that motivate many of his backers in Congress, whether it's supporting Israel as an article of faith or wanting to ban abortion nationwide; his ideology is the ideology of racking up wins for himself. There's also the question of what, for Trump, actually constitutes a win: Let's not forget all the times in the first Trump Administration that the President announced some sweeping, world-historic deal only to see it fail to materialize. Remember him tweeting, “There is no longer a Nuclear Threat from North Korea,” after his hype-filled Singapore summit with Kim Jong

Un in 2018?

“The Trump Effect” is a great tagline for an incoming Administration whose leader is perhaps the biggest braggart ever to serve as President of the United States. But remember this as Trump returns to the White House a few days from now: his bottomless desire for credit means there is always the chance he’ll end up serving someone else’s bottom line. ♦