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From Amoral Politics to Immoral Politics: The Influence of the Trump Administration

من لا-أخلاقية السياسة إلى السياسة غير الأخلاقية في ظل إدارة ترمب وأثرها



This article examines the impact of sustained exposure to the rhetoric and practices of US President Donald Trump's administration on public moral values and ethical norms, in the United States and elsewhere, distinguishing between amoral politics and the justification of immoral political discourse and conduct. Adopting a critical analytical approach, it explores how the relentless disregard for the truth, power politics (might is right), exploitation of power for personal and partisan gain, contempt for the law, and embrace of racism can normalize political behaviour that once warranted accountability. It discusses the limits of political satire as a response or a purely utilitarian critique of such practices absent an independent moral critique. The study concludes that over time the discourse and practices of the current administration may dull the public's moral sensibility and erode the standards that govern the exercise of power and accountability.

Keywords: Morals and Politics, Democracy, Liberalism, Power Politics, Normalization of Amorality, Trump Administration.

يبحث هذا المقال في أثر التعرّض المتواصل لخطاب إدارة الرئيس الأميركي دونالد ترمب وممارساته في القيم والأعراف الأخلاقية السائدة في المجال العمومي في الولايات المتحدة الأميركية وخارجها، انطلاقاً من التمييز بين الاعتبارات الـ لا-أخلاقية الخاصة بالسياسة وتبرير الخطاب والممارسة السياسية غير الأخلاقيين. ويتناول من منظور تحليلي نقدي، كيف يمكن لتكرار ممارسات الاستخفاف بالحقيقة، وتسخير السلطة والمال العام للمصالح الشخصية والحزبية، والاستخفاف بالقانون، والعنصرية، أن يحوّل ما كان يُعد تجاوزاً يستدعي المساءلة إلى سلوك مألوف في الحياة السياسية. ويناقش المقال حدود الاكتفاء بالسخرية من هذه الممارسات أو تقييمها وفق حسابات المنفعة والنجاح، من دون إخضاعها لنقد أخلاقي مستقل. ويخلص إلى أن الضرر لا يقتصر على السياسات ذاتها، بل يمتد إلى احتمال تآكل الحس الأخلاقي لدى الجمهور بفعل الاعتياد عليها، وتآكل المعايير التي تضبط ممارسة السلطة والمساءلة عنها، وهو ما يتطلب استعادة النقد الأخلاقي للسياسة، وعدم اختزال الحكم على الأفعال السياسية في نتائجها أو موازين القوة والمصلحة.

كلمات مفتاحية: الأخلاق والسياسة، الديمقراطية، الليبرالية، سياسات القوة، تطبيع الـ لا-أخلاقية، إدارة ترمب.

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Introduction: A Quasi-Philosophical, Practical Observation

This essay deals with a specific instantiation of the complex relationship between ethics and politics without delving into theoretical definitions of concepts in moral philosophy and the many theories that explain the sources of moral values, the rules of ethical behaviour, and the distinguishing characteristics of ethical conduct. Since moral philosophy is not a science in the strict sense of the term, it necessarily entails a prescriptive dimension. This brings with it a challenge: people generally do not act in accordance with a specific moral philosophy. Human behaviour is complex and precedes moral philosophical speculations. Even in cases of a conscious moral choice, where an individual is aware of the moral options at the moment of action, motives vary from person to person and even from action to action for a single individual. The moral justifications invoked to rationalize an action retrospectively likewise differ. A person's ordinary, everyday behaviour is intimately bound up with reflexive judgments based on preconceptions, habits, fear, identity-based affiliation, empathy, apathy, the promise of tangible or intangible gain, values, or any combination of the above. These judgments are shaped by natural predispositions, social norms, and prevailing values, as well as internalized ideas of virtue and vice. After all, individuals do not every day confront a moral dilemma that is resolved by philosophical reflection on the nature of good and evil or by the application of a specific moral philosophy.

There is no point in judging immoral political conduct by the yardstick of any one moral philosophy, especially the kind of political conduct considered in this essay, which justifies immoral policies based on the firm belief that politics is inherently amoral. Such conduct typically violates the moral precepts of all ethical doctrines because it pursues ends based on rules unrelated to morality, even if, briefly or unintentionally, it coincides with what some people deem ethical. Certain political ends

and practices breach the tenets of all schools of moral philosophy, whether deontology with its proscriptive rules, virtue ethics, or consequentialism. If these behaviours are pursued in governance for a prolonged period, and justified with immoral rationalizations, they may influence public values and moral sensibilities.

Politics is not morality, and its considerations – power, interests, security, order – are not moral values per se. Nevertheless, politics can be linked to morality or at least claim to serve values like public security (the right to life), equality, and liberty. It is thus valid to distinguish between a politics that makes such claims – which allows for a rational discussion of the gap between moral words and immoral deeds and the relationship between ends and means, and permits holding politicians accountable for their words – and a politics that wholeheartedly embraces amorality, believes that the end justifies the means and might makes right, views power as a privilege for rulers and their cronies, and equates force with success which is considered good and weakness with failure defined as bad.

Deontology holds that lying is prohibited and truth-telling is a moral obligation. While a politician's failure to disclose the full truth in certain circumstances might be tolerated, outright lying is not. If lying by a government is tolerated, it is presumably out of respect for other prohibitions or obligations that take contextual precedence over truth-telling, such as preserving life, national security, or the public good. But the systematic, deliberate disregard for the truth as a public norm, and the use of lying as a political strategy or a means of personal glorification, violates not only fundamental moral prohibitions but also the tenets of more permissive moral doctrines like consequentialism and utilitarianism, which politicians often invoke to justify their actions. The erosion of the standard of truth has dire consequences for social life and human communication, particularly when the incessant lying of the world's most powerful political leader coincides with a flourishing disregard for truth on social media, and the consequences for the moral fabric of society are unfathomable. Even from a

utilitarian perspective, the benefits derived from policies are measured by the standards of the rulers rather than the ruled.

A non-rhetorical observation: there exists a form of pointless lying driven solely by the liar's nature; lacking any clear purpose, it is not necessarily harmful. For example, someone may lie to you about their job, background, or university degrees, even though you have just met them and may never see them again, meaning there is no motive for the lie. In such cases, the lie might simply be a vocalization of the liar's fantasies of who they wish they were, or an attempt to leave a specific impression to no tangible benefit, or it may have no purpose at all. What, for instance, could be the motive for President Trump's falsehood about being pulled from the rubble and having his life saved after the 9/11 terrorist attacks? There is no reason for it, nor any benefit to be gained, even by his own standards. Perhaps it is just a public expression of his deep-seated desire to cinematically emerge from the debris or be a superhero leading the rescue efforts, all without feeling pain or getting his clothes dirty. The image exists only in his imagination, but, still, he cannot stop himself from voicing what plays out in his mind. Yet even this type of lie, though politically harmless, erodes public norms of truth-telling. Another illustrative example is Trump's claim early in his second term that he had ended seven long-running wars. Concerning easily verifiable facts, his repeated assertions were obviously not true.⁽¹⁾ Politically speaking, no direct harm resulted from his bluster, by which he was angling for the Nobel Prize, though the awards administrators could easily detect the lie. The political damage, however, is outweighed by the moral harm of lying with such ease.

If we distinguish individual virtue, which adds the virtues of benevolence, charity, and magnanimity to deontological proscriptions, from virtue in public

office, it is because the latter is limited to civic virtue, which regards authority as a public trust regardless of whether the officeholder possesses personal virtues. From the perspective of civic virtue, political power is a temporary mandate derived from the people, not one's personal property. When policies subordinate the national interest to personal or familial financial interests or any form of cronyism – to compensate the ruler for perceived personal slights by political and cultural elites – they violate the fundamental ethical duty of trust in managing the affairs of state and tear down the boundaries between private wealth and public funds.

In the context of hostility towards and incitement against so-called elites and the establishment, it is essential to note the following⁽²⁾: business magnates and populist politicians have assumed power in some democratic states by playing up their status as outsiders untainted by the corruption of ruling elites. But after taking office, they engage in worse corruption and misconduct, with the marked difference that they do not hide it. Populist vulgarity abhors hypocrisy.

From the perspective of public morals, the is worse than hypocrisy because a hypocrite who conceals his corruption is at least conforming with social norms that consider it a vice. Hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue, as François de La Rochefoucauld put it.⁽³⁾

This sort of immoral political rhetoric, behaviour, and practice has flooded the public sphere since Donald Trump's launched his election campaign in June 2015 and throughout his first term in office (2017–2021), but he was nevertheless re-elected in November 2024. Disregarding economic and social factors, the Democratic Party's failure to mount an effective challenge, and other reasons to explain voting behaviour, this suggests that broad segments of the public have become so inured

1 Ivana Kottasová "Checking in on the 'Seven un-Endable Wars' Trump Did (Not) End", *CNN*, 24 September 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy1Cbl>.

2 I discussed this topic in: Azmi Bishara, *Fī al-Ijābah 'an Su'āl: Mā al-Sha'biyyah?* [What is Populism?], (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2019), p. 30.

3 François de La Rochefoucauld, *Collected Maxims and Other Reflections*, E. H. Blackmore, A. M. Blackmore, and Francine Giguère (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 63.

to these practices that their moral sensibility has been blunted. The impact has been broadly felt outside the United States as well due to the keen global interest in American political news, a tendency that has been further amplified by the president's obsession with his presence in traditional and social media.

I. The Normalization of Immoral Politics and the Need for a Moral Critique

At the special Republican Party midterm convention held on 9–10 September 2026,⁽⁴⁾ Trump declared that he would send \$5,000 to every American adult if his party won majorities in both chambers of Congress: "Here is my promise: If the Republicans win the House of Representatives and the United States Senate, both of them, I will issue a dividend to every adult citizen in the United States of America for \$5,000".⁽⁵⁾ He was silent on the funding source for this boon – so reminiscent of royal largesse – and its legal basis. Borrowing the term "dividend" from the world of investment, Trump likely sought to make citizens feel, even for a fleeting, illusory moment, like they were shareholders. Of course he dubbed the payment the "Trump dividend", reflecting his notorious compulsion with attaching his name to objects, buildings, events, and policies. Previously, after a White House address on 17 December 2025, he announced a "warrior dividend" of \$1,776 for some 1.45 million troops ahead of Christmas, saying the funds came from the tariffs he had imposed on other nations. In fact, administration officials revealed that the money was drawn from the \$2.9 billion Congress had already allocated to the Pentagon for military housing

allowances.⁽⁶⁾ In other words, he took funds already earmarked for soldiers and turned them into a grant to spotlight his own generosity. Even before that, he had promised \$2,000 to every American as a tariff dividend, a pledge that prompted Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent to remark, "We need legislation for that".⁽⁷⁾

Under different circumstances and in other historical eras, Trump's promised dividend would have triggered a storm of controversy, demands for the president's resignation, and legal action. Not only was it an overt electoral bribe using public funds, it also used the power of the presidency – an office meant to represent all citizens – for the benefit of a specific party. It is a long-established custom that upon taking office, US presidents, and leaders in democracies generally, become leaders of the nation and its people, not merely leaders of one party's constituency. Yet Trump's announcement was met with the kind of reactions that have become characteristic of his tenure: scathing political satire, which is certainly warranted, and more pragmatically minded criticism that evaluates policies based on circumstances, feasibility, and outcomes, at best applying pragmatic consequentialist or utilitarian standards when calculating the costs, benefits, and results of such measures. The cost of the Trump dividend has been estimated at approximately \$1.2 trillion by the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget (CRFB). The CRFB projects that it would raise the federal deficit from 5.8% of GDP in 2026 to 9.4% in 2027. Maya MacGuineas, the committee's president, described the proposal as "fiscally dangerous, economically backwards, and fundamentally unserious", adding, "While pandering is all too tempting to politicians, the reality is that the more goodies

4 Joe Gruters, the head of the Republican National Committee, said the convention would be a "Trump-a-palooza", demonstrating the centrality of Trump to the proceedings.

5 Eric Bradner, "Trump Makes an Extraordinary Offer of \$5,000 Payments, and Other Takeaways from RNC Convention's First Night", CNN, 10 September 2026, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGQS>.

6 John Ismay and Ali Watkins, "Trump's 'Warrior Dividend' for Troops Will Be Paid for by Pentagon Housing Funds", *The New York Times*, 18 December 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHhB>; Haley Fuller, "Pentagon Uses Military Housing Funds for \$1,776 'Warrior Dividend'", *Military.com*, 23 December 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGEg>.

7 Ben Berkowitz, "Trump's \$2,000 tariff check requires new law, Bessent says", *Axios*, 16 November 2025, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybH4Z>.

politicians promise, the more ordinary Americans will pay the price at the grocery store, on their mortgage statements, or in the burden they leave their children".⁽⁸⁾ MacGuineas fulfilled her technocratic duty by assessing the measure's cost, but she stopped short of offering a moral critique of the bribery or the use of public funds to serve a specific party through a presidential initiative.

This type of rhetoric, which is unconcerned with ethics or the law, has become commonplace. Responses to the president's critics do not defend or justify the rhetoric itself. Instead, they typically entail aggressive, defamatory counterattacks with the aim of intimidating dissenters and deterring others from criticizing the president. This rhetoric is best understood as an integral part of the culture of the White House and the political mindset of Trump and his second-term inner circle, who are focused on mollifying him and catering to his moods.

The nature of the looming threat to political life is gradually becoming clear. The risk is that news consumers, in the United States and elsewhere, will become habituated to such practices and rhetoric, viewing them as a normal feature of politics. Trump's tenure, particularly his second term that began on 20 January 2025, has seen a near-daily torrent of expressions, statements, policies, and actions that have upended established norms and challenged common understandings of propriety, acceptability, and decorum.⁽⁹⁾ I specify the second term because he did not have such a firm grip on government during his first term. Back then, he faced opposition from more competent politicians and technocrats in his own administration, and many people dismissed his presence in the White House as a fluke. His re-election, however, showed that he should be taken seriously, after

attempts to trivialize or mock him failed to prevent his return to power. He also did not exhibit the same level of self-assurance in his first term as he has in his second. Internationally, mockery has given way to anxiety, and mitigating his harms has become a central element of the foreign policy of world leaders and governments. Indeed, the policies of certain states cannot be easily explained without considering the need to insulate themselves against Trump.

In his second term, Trump has become confident of his ability to do whatever he pleases, believing that no checks or limits can constrain the president of the United States. He believes this because he has a Republican majority in both houses of Congress at his beck and call, and a right-wing majority on the Supreme Court that he personally helped shape in his first term,⁽¹⁰⁾ which has effectively neutralized constitutional oversight by temporarily placing the institutions meant to perform that role under the control of a single political current. But perhaps even more importantly, his confidence stems from his own conviction that he has the capacity, and thus the right, to do anything without resistance. Such a scenario was never envisioned by the framers of the US constitution, who could not imagine that a president possessed of Trump's special talents, coupled with a lack of all inhibitions and this degree of exhibitionist narcissism, would ascend to power at a time when one political faction controlled all three branches of government, even as the independence and personal integrity that once allowed individual lawmakers to challenge acquiescence to a single party or ideology have mouldered. This is a combination no constitution could readily anticipate, and in any case, no constitutional framework of institutional checks can compensate for a total lack of moral restraints. Were it not for some judges who still insistently cling to

8 Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, "\$5,000 Dividends Would Cost \$1.2 Trillion", 10 September 2026, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHvI>; Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, "'Election Dividends' Would Explode Deficit and Worsen Inflation", 10 September 2026, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGSn>.

9 Of course, by challenge, I mean violate; this is not a revolution against social conventions and mainstream culture like that seen in previous historical eras.

10 In his first term, Trump appointed three Supreme Court justices: Neil Gorsuch (2017), Brett Kavanaugh (2018), and Amy Coney Barrett (2020), cementing a conservative majority of six of nine total justices. This same court ruled in *Trump v. United States* on 1 July 2024 that President Trump enjoyed broad immunity from criminal prosecution for official acts. See: Supreme Court of the United States, *Trump v. United States*, No. 23-939, 1 July 2024, p. 6, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGFL>.

the spirit of the law, the system of institutional checks on elected politicians would be dead.

A prime example of Trump's confidence in his ability to do what he wants was his public demand in September 2025 that Attorney General Pam Bondi prosecute his opponents, saying, "We can't delay any longer". Within weeks, Bondi, an acting prosecutor with no prior prosecutorial experience, had secured indictments against former FBI Director James Comey and New York Attorney General Letitia James, only for a federal judge to dismiss them on 24 November 2025, ruling Bondi's appointment unconstitutional.⁽¹¹⁾

Trump's statements come rolling in night and day, filling the airwaves and making analysis superfluous. Countless articles have been written about his actions and policies, the battles he wages, and his stances towards Western liberal democracies. Recent works covering his tenure, such as *Regime Change: Inside the Imperial Presidency of Donald Trump* by New York Times journalists Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan,⁽¹²⁾ offer little more than additional behind-the-scenes anecdotes of the type we have already heard, seen, and read so much of, only confirming our expectations. Trump's frankness exceeds that of modern-day individuals. It is not only that he has no hesitation about expressing an opinion: he has no filter whatsoever, saying whatever crosses his mind at any given moment with utter indifference to the harm he does to individuals or groups. He is not bothered by his preening masculine vanity or that what he says at night contradicts what he says the next day. What matters is that he makes his presence felt and keeps the public talking: no one else can be the centre of attention or conversation. It is thus difficult for any single book to encompass everything that spews forth from him. And because there are no limits on what he might say or do, serious journalistic exposés can unfortunately no longer

offer fresh insights. To say that his words and deeds are unpredictable is incorrect. The exact opposite is true: no one is surprised by anything he does because we expect anything and everything from him.

What, then, is the point of wading into this subject at all? The answer is that the impact of this era on political culture, including public ethics and perhaps ethics more broadly, requires reflection. The crucial factor here is the office itself. Trump would be unimportant were he not the president and had remained just a flamboyant businessman who craves the limelight, constantly on the lookout for the next opportunity for tax evasion. But the crisis of American liberal democracy propelled him to power with 312 Electoral College votes and some 77.3 million popular votes (49.8%) in the last presidential election,⁽¹³⁾ thus reviving questions about the fragility of democracy in the face of ignorance and populism. He ascended to what is undoubtedly the most important political office in the world, which makes whoever holds it, regardless of their competence or moral character, immensely important.

Returning to a point I made above, Trump's rhetoric and conduct inspire two main types of response: biting mockery and pragmatic assessments of the success or feasibility of his policies, neither of which addresses their moral import. The never-ending discussion of the president's actions and reactions – across media and social networks, and in everyday conversations at social gatherings, cafés, and workplaces – permeates psyches and may gradually extinguish moral sensibility of many people who are constantly and sometimes unconsciously exposed to them. Exhausting the capacity even of some moral people for shock or anguish, they succumb and becoming inured to the deluge, assimilating it all as easily as we breathe. One exception is radical opposition,

¹¹ Ella Lee, "Judge Dismisses DOJ Criminal Cases against Comey, James", The Hill, 24 November 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy1ClA>.

¹² Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan, *Regime Change: Inside the Imperial Presidency of Donald Trump* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2026).

¹³ Federal Election Commission, "Official 2024 Presidential General Election Results", 16 January 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHxd>. According to data compiled by the FEC from state elections offices, Trump received 77,302,580 votes (49.80%) compared to 75,017,613 (48.32%) for Kamala Harris, winning by roughly 1.5 percentage points.

individual or collective, that ceaselessly protests the moral transgressions entailed by Trump's policies and refuses to normalize or submit to them.

Ridicule of a ruler's narcissism and political ignorance is certainly justified, but while it may influence certain circles, it typically speaks to those who already oppose Trump. Its real importance is that it alleviates the distress caused by rulers' words and deeds for individuals who are troubled by them, unsure how to respond, and find no comfort in the analyses of pundits. Ridicule lets us vent our anger. People need to be liberated from their isolation and release pent-up frustration to stave off chronic depression. Even while laughing, however, we know that it is not funny. As we are beset from all sides by absurd antics, concrete political, economic, social, and foreign policy agendas are being diligently implemented on the ground, effecting real change. Note that Trump in his second term is implementing everything he initiated in his first but had no time to see through or was prevented from executing by Congress. This is not the rule of a single individual. It is rule by an alliance made up of four formidable forces: ideological conservatives hostile to liberalism, diversity, and women's rights; extremist Zionists; business leaders counting on neoliberal policies; and extremist Christian evangelicals.

It is crucial to take note of Christian fundamentalists' willingness to set aside moral judgments for political considerations – a hallmark of extreme political religiosity – and to consider the ethical implications of this for religious communities. In a 2018 interview, evangelist Franklin Graham, son of the renowned preacher Billy Graham, articulated his decision to abandon moral judgment of Trump's personal conduct because of political-religious considerations, thereby publicly severing radical evangelical political religiosity and ethics: "Now people say 'Well Frank but how can you defend him, when he's lived such a sordid life?'" – he did not dispute the characterization of sordid – "I never said he was the best example of the Christian faith. He defends the faith.

And I appreciate that very much".⁽¹⁴⁾ Graham pointed out that the Bible, and specifically the Old Testament, is filled with deeply flawed figures whom God nonetheless used to achieve his purposes. It is no coincidence that the evangelical preacher would refer to the Old Testament, as he would find no such justifications in the New Testament. Specifically citing King David, who, according to the Old Testament, committed adultery and murder, and Moses, Graham argued that no political leader is perfect and that voters are choosing a president, not a pastor.⁽¹⁵⁾ He also claimed that Trump had privately apologized to his family for his past behaviour. Emphasizing his and Trump's mutual interests, Graham argued that the alternative – a "godless progressive agenda" – posed a threat to the nation far greater than Trump's personal flaws. For Graham, concrete outcomes – the appointment of conservative judges, the protection of religious freedom, and the enforcement of anti-abortion policies – outweigh a candidate's personal history and morality.⁽¹⁶⁾ Trump not only made, and began to fulfil, pledges to evangelicals; he made commitments to the other three parts of his coalition as well. He does not act on mere whim, as some people believe.

Criticism of Trump's policies based on a cost-benefit analysis, whether regarding Canada, Venezuela, immigration, or the conflict with Iran, is necessary, impactful, and substantive. The exorbitant costs of his policies, ultimately borne by the public, may serve to peel off some of his supporters.

But neither of these two lines of criticism touch on the central issue of this study: the ethical dimension.

14 Axios, "Franklin Graham: Trump 'Defends the Faith'", 25 November 2018, accessed 18 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGTS>.

15 MSNBC, "Reverend Franklin Graham Assails U.S. Moral Character, Praises President Donald Trump | MSNBC", YouTube, 22 January 2018, accessed 18 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHkKB>.

16 Vivian Salama, "Evangelist Franklin Graham Says Democratic Politics Have Turned Against Religion", *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 May 2024, accessed 18 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGHg>; Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "'Still the Best Candidate': Some Evangelicals Still Back Trump Despite Lewd Video", *The Washington Post*, 8 October 2016, accessed 26 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy1D4k>.

Assessments of Trump ignorance, arrogance, and narcissism, and his love of the spotlight and abundant statements to the press; the proliferation of journalistic and academic "fact-checking" sites; and evaluations of the costs and failures of his policies – none of these address the unethical nature of his policies and purposes, or their impact on moral values and standards. By this I mean the following key elements of the current Trump administration's policies, which will be discussed in the remainder of this essay: a declared belief in the principle that might makes right, the frank embrace of racism, disregard for the rule of law, the influence of money on policy, and indifference towards democracy.

II. A Declared Belief in the Rightness of Power and Its Prerogatives

President Trump and his inner circle believe so ardently in power politics that they speak out loud – in what amounts to a programmatic or even ideological declaration – the sentiments that businessmen only whisper in their private, male-only gatherings on golf courses or over happy hour drinks. This is Trump's cultural milieu: a world where people are divided into winners (the rich) and losers (the poor), and where the winners inherit the earth and feel no sense of solidarity with the oppressed, the exploited, or the weak. For them, the oppressed are not victims of injustice but of their own weakness, failure, and laziness within a competitive society. This mindset extends to international politics, where nations, too, are divided into the strong and the weak, and leaders into failures and strongmen. This mentality shows a preference for the powerful regardless of their stances, such that a successful dictatorship is considered a form of strength and thus justified as long as it is powerful. At a campaign rally in Georgia on 26 March 2022, Trump described Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, and Kim Jong Un as "smart", asserting that "the smartest one gets to the top" and noting that Xi "runs 1.5 billion people with an iron fist". He characterized Putin

as "savvy" and the plan to invade Ukraine as "genius", while portraying former President Joe Biden as weak and unable to stand up to strong authoritarian leaders. He reiterated this sentiment at a rally in Pennsylvania in September 2022. Noting that the press criticized him for calling Xi smart, he added: "He rules with an iron fist 1.5 billion people, yeah I'd say he's smart".⁽¹⁷⁾ Xi may indeed be intelligent, but that is not an important characteristic of an authoritarian regime. It is simply that Trump admires strongmen. At a dinner for the National Republican Congressional Committee on 8 April 2025, hours before new tariffs were set to take effect, Trump boasted that nations were "calling us up, kissing my ass. They are dying to make a deal, 'Please, please, sir, make a deal, I'll do anything,'" to the laughter of the audience.⁽¹⁸⁾

Entire countries have watched their leaders silently endured insults from Trump to avoid antagonizing him. This puerile bullying cannot be ignored, as it suggests a fondness for demonstrating strength by humiliating others – the very conduct parents and teachers discourage in schools. This is a distinct trait of his, and it is indicative of neither courage nor self-confidence.

But the crucial point is that Trump's brand of power politics is nakedly imperialistic. After imposing tariffs on Canadian imports, Trump called for Canada's annexation as the fifty-first state. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney responded in the Oval Office on 6 May 2025 that Canada was "not for sale".⁽¹⁹⁾ During the airstrikes on Venezuela, which culminated in the arrest of President Nicolás Maduro and his extradition to New

17 Brad Dress, "Trump Says Putin 'Smart,' But Made a 'Big Mistake' Invading Ukraine", The Hill, 26 March 2022, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybH7Z>; Xander Landen, "Trump Repeats Praise of 'Smart' Putin, Touts Xi's 'Iron Fist' Rule of China", *Newsweek*, 4 September 2022, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGuE>

18 CNN, "Trump Brags Other Countries Are 'Kissing My A**' to Negotiate Tariffs", 9 April 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGVn>.

19 Rob Gillies and Josh Boak, "Canadian PM Mark Carney and President Donald Trump Agree to Disagree about Canada Becoming the 51st State: 'It Won't Be for Sale. Ever.'", *Fortune*, 7 May 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHm6>.

York for trial on 3 January 2026, Trump boasted about seizing Venezuela's oil and invited American companies to start tapping it.⁽²⁰⁾ Throughout the war launched by the United States and Israel against Iran on 28 February 2026 – when the initial strikes killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and a large part of the Iranian leadership – Trump has ceaselessly bragged about American might, the types of weapons employed, and the need for Iran to capitulate. He even gloated about Israel killing most of the Iranian leadership.⁽²¹⁾ The media discussed at length the implications of the killings for Iranian politics and Iran's capacity to produce new leadership, but it rarely criticized the act of killing another state's leaders. At the same time, even the suggestion that Iran might be plotting to assassinate the US president was met with profound revulsion and disbelief.

Most international relations scholars agree that the basis of international politics is interests rather than ethics. They acknowledge that the "international community" is a hollow metaphor, for no such community governed by universally recognized values or at least norms truly exists.⁽²²⁾ International law is not binding absent an authority to enforce it, and every state defends its existence and interests with the means at its disposal. But this does not mean that people around the world accept the principle that might makes right. Nations have

established treaties to regulate war-time conduct, and there are charters and agreements – international laws – based on respect for state sovereignty that nevertheless recognize universal human rights that transcend national borders. Despite widespread hypocrisy and states that place themselves above international law and norms, nations are still expected to resort to force only after exhausting other options and to justify such actions as necessary for preserving their own security and that of their citizens. Force should not be used with the goal of expanding territory, seizing the wealth of others, or interfering in the affairs of other states, except to prevent genocide or counter a military intervention by another state. Justifications for the use of force based on objectives like expansion, control of others' wealth, or the pursuit of political agendas is a subversion of the norms established since the Second World War.

It is current US policy to use force for imperialist objectives, among them reclaiming hegemony over South America, extending American influence, or projecting power to assert dominance in a given region. Trump is willing to recognize the prerogatives of the strong to impose "order" within their own spheres of influence, provided they acknowledge American supremacy and its global reach. Even Israel, which, with US and Western backing, sets itself above the law, once cited the protection of its security and citizens to justify its military aggression and occupations, though under the Trump administration, it no longer bothers to conceal its drive for regional hegemony and expansion.

III. Loud and Proud Racism

Although racism is not new, the open expression of it is extremely significant for two reasons. First, it suggests that there is nothing wrong with it. The hypocrite implicitly acknowledges the authority of the moral standard even as they violate it whereas the open racist rejects the standard itself. This is worse than hypocrisy because a hypocrite who conceals their racism is at least conforming with social norms that

20 Rebecca F. Elliot et al., "Trump Urges Oil Companies to Speed Work in Venezuela", *The New York Times*, 9 January 2026, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGIL>.

21 Daniel Estrin et al., "Trump Warns Iran not to Retaliate after Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is killed", NPR, 1 March 2026, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybH9u>; The New York Times, "Transcript: Trump's Speech on Iran War", 1 April 2026, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGw9>. For more on the launch of the operation on 28 February 2026, the killing of Khamenei, and the goals of ending Iran's nuclear program and regime change, see: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "Epic Fury: Washington's Contradictory War Aims in Iran". Situation Assessment, 4 March 2026, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy1D1e>; Daniel Brumberg, "Will Trump 'Finish the Job' in Iran?" Arab Center Washington DC, 12 June 2026, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHnB>.

22 Mohammed Hemchi, "On the Concept of the International Community and Its Bitter Failure in Gaza", Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 26 November 2023, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy1D0D>.

consider it a vice. Second, undisguised racism is a way of rebelling against the culture of political correctness, of striking at and undermining its hegemony. Resentment towards political correctness – which itself is not free of hegemonic dictating tendencies – is a key common feature among the four allied factions supporting the current US administration. The aim of this blatant racism is to propagate prejudices and demeaning stereotypes about other cultures, prime targets being immigrants, especially Muslims.⁽²³⁾ A notable exception is wealthy individuals from these purportedly inferior cultures, for this is ultimately a class-inflected racism. The president and those in his cultural sphere have no issue with the wealthy members of despised peoples, particularly those in their same line of work.⁽²⁴⁾

In an official campaign statement issued on 7 December 2015, Trump called for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States". A few months later, in a television interview on 9 March 2016, he responded to a question about whether Islam was at war with the West with his characteristic blend of crude stereotyping: "I think Islam hates us...there's a tremendous hatred there". A week after his first inauguration, he issued Executive Order 13769 banning citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States.⁽²⁵⁾ In contrast, during a speech at the Saudi-US Investment Forum in Riyadh on 13 May 2025, he

praised Gulf leaders and the "gleaming marvels of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi", saying that this transformation did not come from "flying people in beautiful planes, giving you lectures on how to live and how to govern your own affairs".⁽²⁶⁾ Trump appears comfortable with leaders of non-democratic countries because he has no interest in human rights or the destinies of peoples for whom democracy is ostensibly ill-suited. It soon became evident, however, that even these leaders would not be spared his barbs unless they paid the price of friendship in a language he understands.

Trump allows himself to make vulgar statements about Africans, Muslims, Somalis and their culture, and others. Such crude generalizations align with the language and prejudices of many of his voters. The racism is neither complex nor veiled. It is expressed directly, banking on ignorance and aversion to the unfamiliar. Describing Somali immigrants as "garbage" who "have nothing going", he said, "They're not smart, they have no aptitude". Speaking of Congresswoman Ilhan Omar just days after his administration revoked the temporary protected status that Somalis had enjoyed since 1991, he said, "Ilhan Omar is garbage. She's garbage. Her friends are garbage", claiming she married her own brother to obtain American citizenship and insisting they be sent "back to where they came from". During an Oval Office meeting on 11 January 2018, he asked, "Why is it we only take people from shithole countries, right?" – a reference to Haiti and African nations – while suggesting that the United States admit immigrants from countries like Norway or Sweden. He publicly boasted about using offensive terms to disparage Haiti and African nations during a campaign rally in Pennsylvania in late 2025,

23 Justine McDaniel et al., "Trump's False Claim about Haitian Immigrants Eating Pets Invokes Racist Trope", *The Washington Post*, 14 September 2024, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGKq>; Josh Dawsey, "Trump Derides Protections for Immigrants from 'Shithole' Countries", *The Washington Post*, 12 January 2018, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGxZ>.

24 Krishnadev Calamur, "Nine Notorious Dictators, Nine Shout-Outs from Donald Trump", *The Atlantic*, 4 March 2018, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGxL>.

25 Jenna Johnson, "Trump Calls for 'Total and Complete Shutdown of Muslims Entering the United States'", 7 December 2015, *The Washington Post*, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGYn>; John Santucci and Candace Smith, "Trump Says 'I Think Islam Hates Us'", ABC News, 10 March 2016, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHp6>; The American Democracy Project, "Executive Order 13769—Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States", 27 January 2017, accessed on 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGxL>.

26 Charles W. Dunne et al., "President Trump's Gulf Trip: Post-Visit Observations", Arab Center Washington DC, 20 May 2025, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHcu>; Rami G. Khouri, "Will Trump's Gulf Trip Exacerbate or Mitigate the Arab World's Three Plagues?" Arab Center Washington DC, 22 May 2025, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGz9>; The American Presidency Project, "Remarks at the Saudi-United States Investment Forum in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia", 13 May 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGZS>; Dress, "Trump Says Putin 'Smart'"; Landen, "Trump Repeats Praise of 'Smart' Putin".

despite having previously claimed on social media that "this was not the language used". He also bragged about announcing a halt to Third World immigration, including from "hellholes like Afghanistan, Haiti, Somalia", describing Somalia as "filthy, dirty, disgusting, ridden with crime", where the only thing the people are good at is "going after ships". When *The New York Times* asked if he was bothered about painting the entire Somali community with such a broad brush, he replied, "I don't care".⁽²⁷⁾

I need not expound at length on the seriousness of a US president using such language as if it were ordinary, natural behaviour, or of treating his contemptible descriptions as self-evident truths. The impact on public ethics is clear. Ideas expressed in these terms should not be regarded as legitimate viewpoints when espoused by ordinary citizens, let alone the president.

IV. Influence of Money on Politics. Contempt for the Rule of Law

Trump's disregard for the rule of law is apparent first of all in the United States itself. Among its manifestations is his deliberate undermining of the judiciary, whose standing is respected in democracies and non-democracies alike. Judges who displease Trump are denounced as part of the corrupt institutions and arrogant elites of whom populists claim to be victims.

On 18 March 2025, Trump described Federal Judge James Boasberg, who had halted the deportation of Venezuelan migrants under the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, a "troublemaker and agitator", calling for his

removal, which prompted Chief Justice John Roberts to issue a rare statement reminding the public that impeachment is "not an appropriate response to a disagreement concerning a judicial decision". The administration proceeded with the deportations despite the judicial order.⁽²⁸⁾ On 20 January 2025, his first day in office, Trump issued a blanket pardon for some 1,500 individuals convicted in connection with the Capitol attack, including those found guilty of assaulting police officers. He also commuted the sentences of leaders of the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys who had been convicted of seditious conspiracy, calling all of them as "hostages". He then ordered the dismissal of all pending cases, abruptly suspending the largest federal criminal investigation in US history.⁽²⁹⁾

Trump's indifference to the law may be chalked up to the milieu of businessmen used to evading taxes and paying bribes to win contracts. Or perhaps it stems from his long-standing association with real estate developer and lawyer Roy Cohn,⁽³⁰⁾ who taught him to treat the law as a system of loopholes, where success is won by circumventing legal constraints, and to be aggressive with adversaries, attacking them to tarnish their reputations or wear them down, never apologizing, and declaring victory regardless of the actual outcome. Whatever the origin, Trump has carried his contempt for the rule of law into the realm of international relations.

It is a fact that international law lacks an enforcement authority and so states often disregard it when it does not align with their interests. Yet, while they may disagree on

27 Zolan Kanno-Youngs, "Trump Stokes Islamophobia by Calling Democratic Candidates 'Jihadists'", *The New York Times*, 10 August 2026, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHqB>; David Smith, "Trump Rails on Affordability 'Hoax' and Flings Racist Attacks in Rally-style Speech", *The Guardian*, 10 December 2025, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGNG>; Amy B Wang, "Trump Finally Confirms Using Vulgar Slur about Several Countries in 2018", *The Washington Post*, 10 December 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHDz>; McDaniel et al., "Trump's False Claim about Haitian Immigrants"; Dawsey, "Trump Derides Protections for Immigrants".

28 Chris Megerian, Lindsay Whitehurst, and Mark Sherman, "Roberts Rejects Trump's Call for Impeaching Judge Who Ruled against his Deportation Plans", Associated Press, 19 March 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGAE>.

29 Ella Lee, "Trump Pardons Nearly all Jan. 6 Rioters on First Day of Presidency", The Hill, 20 January 2025, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybH1n>.

30 Marie Brenner, "How Donald Trump and Roy Cohn's Ruthless Symbiosis Changed America", *Vanity Fair*, 28 June 2017, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHs6>. Cohn (1927–1986) was counsel for Senator Joseph McCarthy and, starting in 1973, became Trump's lawyer and mentor in New York. Trump, by his own admission, would call him 15–20 times a day.

its interpretation, they rarely flaunt their disregard for it like the current president does. Historically, only leaders of totalitarian or rogue regimes, like the Nazis or fascist regimes, have done so. Even communist totalitarian regimes typically challenged American imperialism with rhetoric that championed international law, legitimacy, and state sovereignty.

The Trump administration, without legal justification, reneged on agreements signed by previous US administrations. In his first term, he withdrew from the nuclear deal with Iran (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) on 8 May 2018 and the Paris Climate Agreement in 2017. In executive order issued on the first day of his second term, 20 January 2025,⁽³¹⁾ he pulled out of successful negotiations with Iran in Oman, launching a war with Israel on 28 February 2026.⁽³²⁾

On 2 September 2025, US forces, acting on Trump's orders and without Congressional authorization, commenced strikes on boats in the Caribbean Sea, alleging they were transporting narcotics. The initial strike killed 11 individuals whom Trump called "terrorists". *The Washington Post* later reported that a second strike targeted two survivors clinging to the wreckage of the boat, carried out based on the earlier order of Secretary of Defence – later, Secretary of War – Pete Hegseth to "kill them all";⁽³³⁾ Trump only stated he would "look into the issue".⁽³⁴⁾ Many of the boats

since struck in the Caribbean were clearly fishing vessels, as detailed by reports discussing the campaign's impact on Caribbean fishing communities.⁽³⁵⁾

Showing an outright preference for criminals over judges, the Trump administration has exhibited unprecedented hostility towards the International Criminal Court (ICC) for carrying out its professional legal duty to prosecute perpetrators of international crimes. It imposed sanctions on the court and its judges via executive order because the court dared to prosecute war criminals allied with the US. Executive Order 14203, issued on 6 February 2025, declared a national emergency, deeming any attempt by the ICC to investigate "protected persons" – whether Americans or US allies – an "unusual and extraordinary threat" to national security, and authorized the freezing of assets and the denial of entry into the United States.⁽³⁶⁾ The move came months after the ICC issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant in connection with the genocidal war on Gaza. The sanctions were subsequently expanded to include Prosecutor Karim Khan and several ICC judges.

On 9 July 2025, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, a far-right ideological Zionist, used the same executive order to impose sanctions on Francesca Albanese, the UN special rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories. Saying she had "directly engaged with the International Criminal Court (ICC) in efforts to investigate, arrest, detain, or prosecute nationals of the United States or Israel, without the consent of those two countries", he called this a "gross infringement" of national sovereignty. This marked the first

31 The American Presidency Project, "National Security Presidential Memorandum on Ceasing United States Participation in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and Taking Additional Action To Counter Iran's Malign Influence and Deny Iran All Paths to a Nuclear Weapon", 8 May 2018, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGOL>; United States, The White House, Putting America First in International Environmental Agreements, Executive Order 14162, 20/1/2025.

32 For a comparison of the airstrikes of June 2025 and February 2026, both rounds of which were launched during negotiations, see: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "'Trump's Negotiations with Iran: Exit Strategy or Bluff?'" 26 March 2026, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy1CF4>.

33 Alex Horton and Ellen Nakashima, "Hegseth order on first Caribbean boat strike, officials say: Kill them all", *The Washington Post*, 28 November 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy1D81>

34 Mariana Alfaro, Alex Horton and Noah Robertson, "Trump says Hegseth denied issuing order to kill boat crew", *The Washington Post*, 30 November 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy1C7E>.

35 Dánica Coto, "Fishermen in the Eastern Caribbean Fear for their Lives Following a Deadly US Strike", Associated Press, 18 February 2026, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybH2S>. The campaign continues, with the latest strike on 9 September 2026 killing three people. According to data published by *Just Security*, part of the Reiss Center on Law and Security at the New York University School of Law, there have been 69 strikes since the campaign began, which have killed 230 people, among them 23 lost or presumed dead. Jeremy Chin et al., "Timeline of Boat Strikes and Related Actions", *Just Security*, 9 September 2026, accessed 18 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHtB>.

36 Federal Register, "Imposing Sanctions on the International Criminal Court", 12 February 2025, pp. 9369-9373, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGQg>.

time a UN special rapporteur had ever been sanctioned. Stéphane Dujarric, spokesperson for the UN secretary-general, described the move as a "dangerous precedent", while the UN high commissioner for human rights called for the immediately reversal of the sanctions.⁽³⁷⁾

Not since the Second World War has the modern world witnessed such a subversion of norms. Despite unwavering American support for Israel, the US has never provided services of this kind. Israel could only dream that the United States would sanction ICC judges or punish criticism of Israel by imposing restrictions on freedom of speech unseen since the McCarthy era or by denying critics entry to the US. It is simply unprecedented for a US administration to demonstrate such direct hostility to international law and its upholders.

Nor is there any parallel for the United States withdrawing from international organizations or cutting off funding simply because the administration dislikes their policies or believes it has no obligation to support culture, the environment, or public health without a clear return on investment. Executive Order 14155 was issued on 20 January 2025 withdrawing from the World Health Organization. It was followed by Executive Order 14199 on 4 February 2025, which withdrew the United States from the UN Human Rights Council, and suspended all funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and revoked US recognition of the agency on the grounds that it had been "infiltrated" by terrorist organizations. The aim of the move, made in clear collusion with Israel's relentless campaign against UNRWA, was to strike the Palestinian refugee issue off the international agenda, without resolving it within the broader framework of a solution to the Palestinian question. UNESCO, too, was formally notified on 22 July 2025 of the US decision to withdraw from the organization due to its admission of the State of Palestine as a member. On 7 January 2026,

Trump issued a memorandum withdrawing from dozens of international organizations and treaties.⁽³⁸⁾

These actions were neither capricious nor unpredictable. They reflect a consistent pattern of conduct dating back to his first term, when he recognized the annexation of Jerusalem and the Golan Heights in violation of the principle prohibiting the acquisition of territory by force, making the United States the only state to acknowledge the Golan's annexation. On 6 December 2017, he recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and relocated the US embassy to the city. On 25 March 2019, in the presence of Netanyahu, he signed a presidential proclamation stating that "the United States recognizes that the Golan Heights are part of the State of Israel" in contravention of UN Security Council Resolution 497 of 1981, which declared Israel's decision to impose its laws and administration on the Golan "null and void".⁽³⁹⁾ In his "Deal of the Century" proposal to resolve the Palestinian issue, Trump adopted the lexicon of the Israeli religious right and its stances on Jerusalem, settlements, and other issues.⁽⁴⁰⁾

V. Influence of Money on Politics

Trump has diligently supported Israel's most extreme policies since his first term, justifying its actions in the West Bank, Gaza, and southern Lebanon while ignoring its aggression in southern Syria. In a speech before the Knesset on 13 October 2025, he boasted about supplying Israel with any weapon it asked for: "Bibi would call me so many times. 'Can you get me this weapon? That

37 UN News, "UN Calls for Reversal of US Sanctions on Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese", 10 July 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHgZ>.

38 NPR, "U.S. to Exit 66 International Organizations in Further Retreat from Global Cooperation", 7 January 2026, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGDE>.

39 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "Trump's Decision to Announce Jerusalem as the Capital of Israel: Motives", Situation Assessment, 11 December 2017, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBylCTf>; Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "Behind Trump's Decision on the Golan Heights", Situation Assessment, 27 March 2019, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBylCWW>.

40 Azmi Bishara, *Palestine: Matters of Truth and Justice* (London: Hurst and Company, 2022), especially Chapter 7, "Zionist Religious-Nationalist Discourse in an Official American Text", pp. 167–205.

weapon?'...Some of them, I never heard of".⁽⁴¹⁾ In a joint press conference with Netanyahu at the White House on 4 February 2025, Trump announced that the United States would seize the Gaza Strip, saying that the two million Palestinians who live there would be relocated to other countries and that Gaza would become the "Riviera of the Middle East". Speaking of "long-term ownership", he did not rule out deploying US troops.⁽⁴²⁾ This vision, predicated on the forced displacement of the population, reflects the influence of his socio-cultural milieu, made up of real estate developers and high-tech entrepreneurs who are overwhelmingly staunch Zionists. His own views on Palestine and Israel are not necessarily ideological. They spring from the same convictions that determine his views of South Africa and the Third World in general: solidarity with the strong and contempt for Arabs, Muslims, and Africans. In other words, he identifies with white colonizers against indigenous peoples whom he views as backwards or dirty.⁽⁴³⁾

We are dealing here with a vulgar, unsophisticated form of racism. Unlike former President Biden or Secretary of State Marco Rubio, he may not be an ideological Zionist, but his cultural outlook is rooted in casual racism, and he is influenced by the Zionist businessmen

in his orbit. In his case, money plays a pivotal role. He has openly acknowledged that Miriam Adelson, the far-right widow and heir of businessman Sheldon Adelson, gave \$200 million to his election campaign and promised him another \$250 million if he ran for a third term (in violation of the constitution).⁽⁴⁴⁾ It was Adelson, he said, who persuaded him to recognize Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Never before has a US president – or any US politician – so openly disclosed the link between his political actions and political money.

Elon Musk, the eccentric business titan who opposed the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, spent over \$290 million on the 2024 elections, according to Federal Election Commission filings, a quarter of a billion dollars of which went to America PAC to support Trump. Musk was subsequently tapped to lead the Department of Government Efficiency, where he wielded broad authority over state agencies.⁽⁴⁶⁾ On 22 May 2025, Trump hosted a dinner with the largest holders of the Trump family's cryptocurrency. Investing in the family's cryptocurrency venture, or granting it permits to operate in other countries, has become a primary means of currying favour with president. Senators Elizabeth Warren and Adam Schiff have

41 The American Presidency Project, "Remarks to the Knesset in Jerusalem, Israel", 13 October 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGRL>.

42 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "Trump's Plan to 'Cleanse' Gaza: Origins and Implications", Situation Assessment, 10 February 2025, accessed 16 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBylCPy>.

43 On 7 February 2025, Trump issued an executive order cutting off aid to South Africa and offering to resettle white South African refugees in the US who were purportedly facing racial discrimination. On 21 May 2025, President Cyril Ramaphosa was visiting the Oval Office in the White House when the lights were turned down, and he was shown a video that claimed a genocide was being perpetrated against white farmers in South Africa. In early May 2025, the US received 59 white South African refugees, even while the refugee program for all other refugees was suspended. Murders of farmers in South Africa, both white and black, make up less than 1% of more than 27,000 murders documented every year in the country, according to official data. Trump misrepresented memorial cross as "burial sites" and one image he showed to Ramaphosa depicted Congo, not South Africa. Amy Sherman and Louis Jacobson, "Fact-Checking Trump's Video, Images about South Africa during Oval Office Meeting with Ramaphosa", PolitiFact, 22 May 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGF9>.

44 Toby Meyjes, "Donald Trump Offered \$250M to Run for a Third Term", *Newsweek*, 17 December 2025, accessed on 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybH5S>. In a Hanukkah candle-lighting ceremony at the White House on 16 December 2025, Trump said that Miriam Adelson had given his campaign \$250 million in direct and indirect funding. He then called her to the stage, where she said that she and lawyer Alan Dershowitz had discussed the legality of a third run, prompting chants from the audience of "four more years". When Trump returned to the stage, she whispered in his ear, and he said, "She said, 'Think about it, I'll give you another \$250 million'", to which Adelson added, "I will give".

45 When speaking to the Knesset on 13 October 2025, Trump boasted about recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital and moving the US embassy to the city, mentioning in particular Miriam Adelson and her late husband Sheldon. "They were very responsible for so much, including getting me thinking about Golan Heights", he said, adding, "I think they had more trips to the White House than anybody else I can think of". Muhammad Badawi, "Trumb Yuqirr bi-Musahamat Miryam Adilsun fi Qararatihu bi-Sha'n al-Mintaqa: Ta'arraf ilayha", *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, 13 October 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHan>; The American Presidency Project, "Remarks to the Knesset".

46 David Wright and Alex Leeds-Matthews, "Elon Musk Spent More than \$290 Million on the 2024 Election, Year-End FEC Filings Show", CNN, 1 February 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGTg>.

called for an investigation into what they called "pay to play" and "a scheme of 'corruption and foreign influence'".⁽⁴⁷⁾

Normalizing – and even flaunting – disgraceful behaviour, coupled with the tactic of attacking critics to put them onto the defensive, effectively intimidating them, has a profound impact on the values, ethics, and norms underpinning liberal democracies. Even if such moral norms are often only honoured in the breach, the assumption that they constitute a public standard has value in itself.

Broad segments of the population, particularly the younger generation, are exposed every day to practices, expressions, actions, and policies that contradict the values with which they were raised, and it is treated as normal, or even as grounds for boasting. At the same time, they see how opponents of these policies are forced to defend themselves against counterattacks, and how defamation, incitement, and accusations of antisemitism levelled against dissenters drain their financial resources and their ability to retain legal counsel.

VI. Lack of Differentiation between Democracy and Authoritarianism

No statement or action from the Trump administration, and specifically the president himself, suggests that it differentiates between democratic and authoritarian states. The crucial distinction between state leaders is whether they are "with me or against me", meaning with or against Trump personally. Being "for Trump" might mean simply flattering him. It need not signal a genuine political alliance, but could simply entail acknowledging his leadership, if only through a show of deference. While Machiavellian logic holds that a ruler should choose to be feared over being loved, we might add that that by the same logic, a ruler should choose a performative display of affection over genuine affection that is not performed.

47 Olga Kharif, "Trump Memecoin Speculator Says Presidential Dinner Is Costing Him Just \$1,200", Bloomberg, 14 May 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHjZ>.

In an address in Riyadh on 13 May 2025, Trump uncharacteristically spoke the truth, though of course in the service of falsehood. Announcing a break with the idea that foreign ties to a country should be linked to its political system, he attacked "so-called nation-builders, neocons, or liberal non-profits like those who spent trillions and trillions of dollars failing to develop" Kabul and Baghdad, while extolling rulers "developing your own sovereign countries...and charting your own destinies in your own way".⁽⁴⁸⁾ Trump was not articulating a principled opposition to military intervention in hostile states on the pretext of exporting democracy – after all, this is a man who openly advocated regime change by force in Venezuela and Iran. His aim was rather to justify his admiration for authoritarian regimes and his cordial personal relationships with their rulers by attacking foreign interventions intended to impose democracy on other states. In any case, the Gulf states were never on the West's democracy to-do list, even in the full bloom of that imperialist doctrine.

Trump has often declared his support for far-right leaders. On 9 July 2025, he imposed a 50% tariff on Brazil, explicitly citing the trial of his ally, former President Jair Bolsonaro, who was charged with plotting a coup, as the reason and describing the proceedings as "a witch hunt". On 30 July, the Treasury Department levelled sanctions under the Magnitsky Act on the Brazilian Supreme Court justice overseeing the trial.⁽⁴⁹⁾ In other words, Brazil's democracy was punished for prosecuting putschists. In contrast, Trump welcomed Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to the White House on 7 November 2025, where he gave Hungary a one-year exemption from sanctions imposed on Russian oil and gas.⁽⁵⁰⁾

48 The American Presidency Project, "Remarks at the Saudi-United States Investment Forum".

49 Mauricio Savarese, "Trump Accuses Brazilian Authorities of 'Witch Hunt' against ex-President Jair Bolsonaro", Associated Press, 7 July 2025, accessed 24 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy1CLR>. [

50 James Politi and Marton Dunai, "Donald Trump Exempts Hungary from Russia Oil Sanctions after Meeting Viktor Orbán", *Financial Times*, 8 November 2025, accessed 17 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybH7n>.

Certainly, American leaders and others have historically shown considerable hypocrisy when distinguished democratic nations from non-democratic ones. They had no qualms about allying with dictatorships that served US strategic interests or power, whether to combat communism or "Islamic extremism" or any other reason. Democratic states nonetheless enjoyed a different status. The concept and practice of exporting democracy were imperialist at root, in terms of both intentions and outcomes, or at times in terms of outcomes alone. But Trump criticized the export of democracy while retaining the imperialist mindset, even in his dealings with democracies like Canada, Mexico, and Denmark. His disregard for the distinction between liberal democracy and authoritarianism on the global stage is intended not merely to justify his admiration for authoritarian rulers. He has also sought to infuse aspects of authoritarianism into democratic states themselves by allying with conservative right-wing forces, exploiting populist resentment towards the "establishment" and "elites", showing contempt for the rule of law, and supporting far-right forces in Europe.

In his address to the Munich Security Conference on 14 February 2025, Vice President J. D. Vance said that he was not worried about Russia or China threats to Europe, but "the threat from within". Attacking German parties for freezing out the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), he declared that there was "no room for firewalls" and met with AfD leader Alice Weidel the same day, just days before the German elections. He also condemned Romania's decision to annul the results of its presidential election on the grounds of Russian interference.⁽⁵¹⁾ Meanwhile, Elon Musk, a previous member of the Trump administration, said on 20 December 2024 that the AfD is Germany's "last spark of hope". He wrote an opinion piece for *Welt am Sonntag* on 28 December defending the party, triggering the resignation of the newspaper's opinion editor. In a video address to the party's election

rally in the city of Halle on 25 January 2025, he declared that the AfD was "the best hope for Germany", and he urged Germans to move beyond their excessive focus on past guilt⁽⁵²⁾ – a precise echo of the AfD's stance.

The Trump administration has treated liberal democracies as a burden on the US. Even in his first term, he constantly demanded that Western NATO states increase their military or general security spending,⁽⁵³⁾ and he repeatedly claimed that the US was on the losing end of trade with these states to justify his imposition of high tariffs. Speaking at a cabinet meeting on 26 February 2025, in his characteristic superficial style, Trump remarked: "The European Union was formed in order to screw the United States. That's the purpose of it, and they've done a good job of it", after which he declared his intention to impose a 25% tariff on the EU.⁽⁵⁴⁾ Conversely, he has actively courted leaders in Russia and China, boasting of his supposed personal friendships with them. He has similarly showed sympathy for Russia's justifications for the war in Ukraine, holding Biden administration responsible for the conflict and, at times, blaming Ukraine itself for failing to offer sufficient concessions to appease Putin. On 18 February 2025, following American-Russian talks in Riyadh from which Kyiv was excluded, he said that Ukraine should never have started the war and could have struck a deal. The

52 Emma De Ruiter, "Elon Musk Backs Far-Right AfD Party in an Op-Ed for German Newspaper 'Die Welt'", Euronews, 28 December 2024, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGUL>; Rachel Treisman, "Elon Musk Faces Criticism for Encouraging Germans to Move beyond 'Past Guilt'", NPR, 27 January 2025, accessed 17 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHlu>.

53 At the NATO summit in Brussels on 11 July 2018, Trump called on treaty members to increase their defence spending to 4% of GDP, or double the agreed-upon commitment, threatening to "do his own thing" if they did not meet the 2% target immediately. In his second term, NATO members agreed at The Hague summit on 25 June 2025 on a target of 5% spending by 2035. Michael Birnbaum and Philip Rucker, "At NATO, Trump Claims Allies Make New Defense Spending Commitments after He Upends Summit", *The Washington Post*, 12 July 2018, accessed 17 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGi9>; NATO, "The Hague Summit Declaration", 25 June 2025, accessed 17 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybH8S>.

54 Raf Casert, "EU Pushes back Hard against Trump Tariff Threats and his Caustic Comments That Bloc Is out to Get US", Associated Press, 27 February 2025, accessed 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGvx>.

51 CBC News, "J.D. Vance Meets Leader of Far-right German Party after Claiming Free Speech in Europe 'in Retreat'", 14 February 2025, accessed 17 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGu2>.

next day, he described Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a "dictator without elections".⁽⁵⁵⁾ On 15 August 2025, on Putin's first visit to a Western nation since the invasion of Ukraine, Trump rolled out the red carpet for the Russian leader at a military base in Alaska and welcomed him with applause and flyovers by B-2 bombers and F-35 fighter jets; the two men then rode together in the same car, without their aides. The summit concluded without the ceasefire Trump had demanded. Having levelled no criticism at Putin for the killing of Ukrainian civilians, Trump later remarked that was now "up to President Zelenskyy to get it done".⁽⁵⁶⁾ Pundits continue to struggle to understand Trump's weakness towards Putin, but it cannot be overlooked that it may stem from personal reasons. Just because the US administration is underpinned by a four-part alliance does not diminish the significance of the personal as a contributing factor.

True, the United States and Western Europe did not do enough to avert the war in Ukraine. They failed to deter Russia against launching the war, to take pains to avoid provoking it by expanding NATO eastward, and to ensure the rights of the Russian minority in Ukraine. But the war was launched by Putin and justified using Russian nationalist rhetoric. It must be recognized that Biden leveraged the conflict to strengthen NATO after it had been weakened by Trump. These are not the reasons, however, that the Trump administration criticizes the war. He is driven instead by a fondness for the strong and an acknowledgement of their privileges and spheres of influence. The administration demands that Ukraine yield to the dictates of the personal relationship between Trump and Putin. This is the message conveyed by official US conduct, as made evident during that bizarre White House meeting with the Ukrainian president on

28 February 2025, where Trump and his retinue heaped insult upon insult on Zelenskyy, humiliating an official guest in an unprecedented, televised spectacle.⁽⁵⁷⁾

To sum up, the amorality of politics in Trump's tenure has crossed over into unethical or immoral conduct in both rhetoric and practice. This is apparent in multiple areas that were not discussed here. The Trump administration has freed itself from all constraints on power politics and profit-seeking, abandoning environmental restrictions on industry and energy consumption, for example, and refusing to regulate AI, despite the risks of the technology spiralling out of control or infringing on property rights and personal privacy. The amoral tendency in politics – manifested in power politics, greed, habitual or compulsive lying, male posturing, performative narcissism, and the like – has gradually become pervasive, permeating every sphere, with inarguable implications for ethics in both public and private life.

People may change their voting patterns in the midterm congressional elections on 3 November 2026 and the presidential election in November 2028. A sweeping backlash against far-right governance in the United States is possible. Nevertheless, the extent to which this era has influenced values and morals remains an open question. International relations certainly will need time to recover from the erosion of norms and the lawlessness of the Trump administration.

55 Doina Chiacu and Olena Harmash, "Trump tells 'Dictator' Zelenskiy to Move Fast or Lose Ukraine", Reuters, 20 February 2025, accessed 17 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGWg>.

56 Dave Lawler, "Trump-Putin Summit Starts on Red Carpet, Ends in Confusion", Axios, 16 August 2025, accessed 17 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHmZ>.

57 Rhianna Schmunk, "Trump, Vance Shout at Zelenskyy in Heated Oval Office Meeting", CBC News, 28 February 2025, accessed on 14 September 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGJE>. In front of press photographers, Trump told Zelenskyy, "You're not in a good position. You don't have the cards right now... You're gambling with the lives of millions of people. You're gambling with World War III", and asked him to show more gratitude. Meanwhile Vance asked him, "Have you said thank you once?" When Zelenskyy mentioned that Putin did not respect prior agreements, Trump responded that Putin "didn't break them with me". The meeting ended without the signing of the minerals agreement; the joint press conference was cancelled, and Zelenskyy left the White House with nothing.

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