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# All Change in the White House? Trump's Legacy and Biden's Challenges

After a chaotic transfer of power and an insurrection on Capitol Hill, [James D. Boys](#) examines the legacy of Donald Trump's presidency and asks what is in store for Joe Biden.

**W**ednesday, January 20, 2021, was a day that many feared they would not live to see; indeed, 400,000 Americans who died during the COVID pandemic did not live to watch the departure of President Trump from the White House and the inauguration of his successor, Joe Biden. Following four years in which political norms were abandoned, international relations were upended, social discourse became strained, and national tensions were tested to breaking

point, the United States successfully achieved what Trump did his best to prevent; the transfer of executive power and authority. Now that the Trump presidency is over, what is its legacy, and what awaits the incoming Biden administration?

## **Trump's tainted legacy**

Despite being reviled in vast numbers both at home and overseas, it must be recognised that there were successes associated with the Trump presidency. It got off to

a fast start, with the President personally unveiling a wide-ranging National Security Strategy within his first year in office. The understandable misgivings about placing real-estate developer and presidential son-in-law, Jarred Kushner, in charge of the quest for peace in the Middle East were quelled somewhat, by the signing of the Abraham Accords that normalised relations between Israel and three Arab states (United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Sudan). The more expansive Middle East peace plan failed to gain support and efforts to secure a Saudi-Israeli deal also proved unobtainable, but such efforts should not go unrecognised. The state of the American economy must also rate among the Trump administration's

successes. Efforts to deregulate, as well as moves to lower taxes, certainly contributed to a record-setting economy over the past four years, as the stock market soared to historic heights.

So what caused Trump's defeat? In one word: chaos. The very thing that Jeb Bush accused candidate Trump of in 2015, came to define his presidency and campaign for re-election. Tensions and contradictions dominated his time in office, leading to confusion, political conflict and policy clashes, all of which could have been avoided. At no point in his term did Trump, the former Democrat supporter, reach out to develop a bipartisan approach to governing; he failed to appoint any Democrats to his administration, and singularly refused to appeal to Democrats or Independent voters, apparently content to speak solely to his core base of supporters.

Despite his self-appointed status as a successful business man, Trump proved remarkably inept at running his administration. He alienated powerful figures within the Republican Party on issue after issue, hired too many unqualified individuals to staff his White House and serve in the Cabinet, and used Twitter as a tool of government rather than an occasional method of communication. Lacking any experience in foreign policy, Trump refused to hire an experienced national security staff, resulting in a revolving door of officials moving in and out of the administration (four national security advisors, four chiefs of staff, four secretaries of defense, three attorneys general); he appeared subservient to staunch foes such as Vladimir Putin, granted North Korea's leadership unprecedented time and attention, and failed to support long standing allies and alliances. For a man who promoted his own apparent self-confidence, Trump appeared remarkably insecure, imagining conspiracies and plots against his leadership, thereby nurturing the rise of the QAnon phenomenon that believed, amongst other things, that Trump was engaged in a one-man crusade against a high-powered global child abuse ring. For a man who was a clear supporter of the state of Israel, and whose favourite daughter had converted to Judaism, Trump claimed to see a moral equivalence between racist, antisemitic mobs and civil rights protesters.

Despite these clear and apparent failings, however, Trump could have easily won re-election and served for two terms, considering the overwhelming power of the incumbency. He announced his intention to run for re-election on his first full day in office, amassed a huge campaign fund, and ran unopposed within the Republican Party. The United States was at peace, the economy was improving following the COVID collapse, and the President remained remarkably popular within the Republican Party. In the modern era, such a scenario had previously guaranteed a successful bid for re-election, for as 2016 demonstrated, Trump had no need to win a plurality of the electorate, just enough to secure an Electoral College victory.

### The unsuccessful incumbent

The electoral calculus, however, failed to factor in Trump's character. Just as many assessments of Lyndon Johnson's presidency invariably contain the phrase 'if it weren't for Vietnam...', supporters of President Trump will daresay point to COVID in much the same way to argue that it derailed a President cruising to a second term. Maybe. But it was also the Trump administration's handling of the outbreak that exacerbated the situation in the United States, making it a far greater crisis than it perhaps needed to be. What doomed Trump's presidency was his singular inability to get out of his own way. He made his presidency all about him, rather than the country. Having promised to end what he termed, 'American Carnage,' Trump instead ensured its success. This was most apparent when, having lost the 2020 election, he refused to accept the result and, instead, incited a riot that led to the storming of the United States Capitol on January 6, leading to his second impeachment. His final day in office, and refusal to attend his successor's inauguration, confirmed his petulant reputation.

Although Trump's presidency can now be consigned to history, his impact will continue to be felt in Washington, much like a black hole; unseen, yet inescapable. Part of this will be due to his success in appointing more than 200 judges to the federal bench, and three Supreme Court justices, where they will continue to wield influence for decades to come. Trump and his policies have driven moderate voices from the Republican Party,

as temperate politicians retired from politics altogether, to be replaced by Trump devotees such as Josh Hawley and QAnon devotee Marjorie Taylor Greene. Even former Trump adversaries, including Senators Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz, supported his claims that the 2020 election was rigged. They joined 147 members of the House of Representatives in an effort to overturn an election result that had been certified in all 50 states, and whose veracity had been confirmed in courtrooms across that land, as Trump's claims of fraud were dismissed out of hand. Trump not only poisoned politics at home, but also overseas, as his rise and approach to politics emboldened those who fell under his spell, empowering autocrats and bolstering boorish acolytes the world over.

Trump's presence will be felt in the continuing disagreement over his second impeachment trial, and the anticipated role of his three adult children and various appointees in elected politics. Trump will doubtless protest the result of the 2020 election until his dying day and continue to rage against his successors in the Oval Office from a plethora of media outlets, including the *One American News Network* and *NewsMax*. He has also threatened to establish a new political party, although the most likely result of this would be to split the vote on the right and ensure Democratic victories in the most unlikely of places. In a real sense, this has already happened. As much as Trump may rightly claim to have received more votes than any incumbent president in US history, he proved even more successful at driving voters to support his political opponents. As a result, Trump can lay claim to being both the most popular, but simultaneously the most unsuccessful incumbent in US history, winning 74 million votes, but being rejected by over 81 million Americans. His subsequent actions ensured that he became the first President to ever be impeached twice, plunging his approval ratings still further, providing succour only to James Buchanan, who has long been regarded as the worst American President.

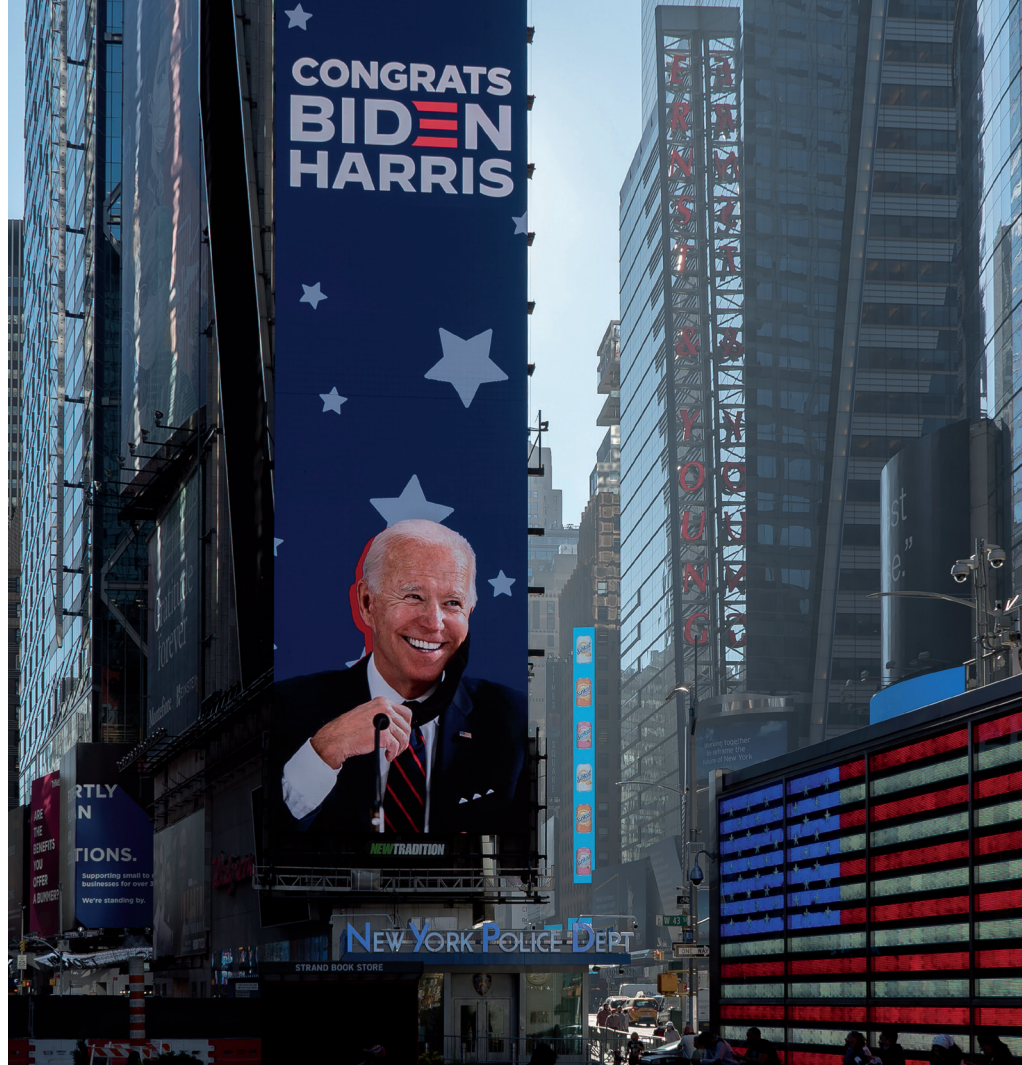
### Biden's triumph and challenges

Donald Trump's defeat ensured that Joe Biden's 34-year quest for the presidency was finally achieved. Having launched his first bid for the presidency in 1987, at

78 years old he became America's oldest President, older even than Ronald Reagan was when he left office in January 1989. Based on his career to date, and the policies espoused on the campaign, it would be remiss to expect the remarkable from this administration. This will, instead, be a restorative rather than a transitional presidency. Indeed, the extent to which Biden's victory marked an embrace of his policies, or a repudiation of Trump, remains to be seen. There was an undeniable lack of enthusiasm for his candidacy among many Democratic activists, although few could doubt their success in driving voters to the polls in record numbers. This proved vital not only in the General Election, but also in the ensuing Senate elections in Georgia, that proved decisive in ensuring Democratic Party control of the House, the Senate and the Presidency for the first time in a decade. With the Senate split 50-50, however, the Democrats' razor-thin majority ensures that every senator has an effective veto over legislation, and that every vote will need to be courted with a persistence and appreciation of legislative affairs, that Biden may well excel at as a former member of the chamber.

Biden's inaugural address sought to set a new tone for the incoming administration: It removed the heat from presidential rhetoric, and made overtures to mainstream members of the Republican Party, while repudiating those who sought to sow political discord. 'We must end this uncivil war,' President Biden declared in the most memorable line from the address. His ability to unite the country, however, will be severely tested by those on both extremes of American political life. Violent protests have already erupted on American streets by those on the far left, determined to correct the inadequacies in American society, and angry at Biden's moderate policies. Meanwhile, those on the far right, angry at Trump's defeat, remain a political and physical threat to the Biden presidency, ensuring that the inauguration occurred behind a ring of steel, with the nation's capital defended by more than 25,000 military personnel.

As President, Biden faces numerous challenges, both at home and abroad. At home, his administration must address the COVID pandemic, unemployment, business



failures, racial injustice, income inequality, climate change and political division. To do so, he has moved quickly to issue a series of executive orders that reverse Trump-era policies and deliver upon vital campaign pledges. The extent to which this will be a restorative rather than a revolutionary administration, can be seen in the team Biden has recruited to help him govern. He has assembled a group of experienced diplomats, bureaucrats and politicians with previous experience in government, many of whom were drawn from the Obama administration, and most of whom would have served in a Hillary Clinton White House. President Biden has chosen to back scientists in the quest to end the COVID pandemic, drawing once again on the insight of Dr. Anthony Fauci, and instigating a national mask-wearing policy where mandated to do so. To formulate a US Grand Strategy, the Biden administration has appointed a series of experienced personnel, all drawn from the moderate centre of the Democratic Party. It would be wise to expect a Grand Strategy of Restoration and Restraint from Antony Blinken at State and Jake Sullivan at the National Security Council,

both of whom will do much to restore faith in the approach that the United States has traditionally adopted on the world stage, as will the decision to re-join the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Agreement.

Joe Biden overcame tremendous odds to unseat an incumbent president during a turbulent time in national and international history, in the midst of a crippling pandemic, economic uncertainty, and racial upheaval. Those challenges are now his to address as the new administration takes charge. As America's second Catholic President, he may well reflect on the words of his illustrious predecessor, John F. Kennedy, who noted in his inaugural address, that while presidents may ask for 'His blessing and His help,' they do so 'knowing that here on earth, God's work must truly be our own.'

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