



© Press Association

# Donald Trump – CEO-in-Chief

As the US gears up for the 2020 presidential election, [James D. Boys](#) looks back at 1000 of Donald Trump's administration and finds few significant achievements but plenty of headline-grabbing controversies.

Every American presidency faces moments of introspection and reflection, occasions to consider what has been achieved and what remains to be done. Thanks to FDR there is the routine assessment after the first 100 days in office. Less observed, but perhaps more telling, is the benchmark of the first 1000 days as established by John F. Kennedy in his inaugural address. This, of course, became all the more apt due to JFK's abridged tenure in office.

One thousand days is an apt time to consider the status of a presidential

administration. One hundred days is unfair, since most presidents in the modern era will not have secured congressional confirmation for many of its personnel by that stage. It is also a benchmark established during a time of national emergency as FDR engaged in an era of unprecedented legislative action. Kennedy's benchmark is an altogether more appropriate moment to reflect upon what has been achieved and what remains to be addressed as a chief executive prepares to embark upon a campaign for re-election. It is at such a moment that we currently find ourselves in

regard to Donald J. Trump.

Looking back over the past three years it seems that every week brought about new outrages, new revelations, and new outbursts that would have dominated and potentially doomed any previous administration. The President's unprecedented use of Twitter as a tool of policymaking, as well as a form of communication, has provided a remarkable insight into the unique workings of this administration, for good and for bad. The turnover in personnel at the highest level of government and ensuing publication of damning memoirs has revealed the inner turmoil at the heart of this White House. The rollercoaster presidency of Donald Trump has given whiplash to all who seek to discern meaning from what has transpired to date, and perhaps most painfully, to those who

seek to forecast what is yet to come. As he heads into his constitutionally mandated final election campaign, what can be acknowledged in regard to President Trump's achievements to date and to what extent can they be viewed as a legacy, regardless of the outcome in November 2020?

### The CEO presidency

During his inaugural address, Donald Trump promised an end to what he referred to as 'this American carnage'. Vowing to 'drain the swamp', his administration set forth an aggressive domestic agenda that even former President George W. Bush described as 'weird'. Seemingly blessed with Republican control of both the House and the Senate, many speculated that what Donald Trump wanted, Donald Trump would receive. It appears that the President himself believed this was how politics worked, as he sought to apply the bombastic approach that he had adopted in business to the new environment he found himself in. Seeking to be a Chief Executive Officer of the United States, however, immediately presented challenges as he sought to implement his three domestic policy priorities; to repeal and replace Obamacare; implement tax reform; and instigate a massive infrastructure plan. Addressing these priorities in this specific order, it was believed, ensured that key election promises would be addressed, while also enabling a reappraisal of the US tax code following the abolition of Obama's signature healthcare initiative. This, in turn, would enable government investment in a rebuilding of American infrastructure on a scale not seen since Eisenhower's interstate highway initiative of the 1950s. That was the plan. What transpired was rather different.

Despite Republican control of congress, the White House was unable to secure the repeal of Obamacare, much less its replacement. Every move to appease hardliners alienated moderate Republicans. Efforts to appease moderates alienated hardliners, ensuring that the issue failed to secure the necessary support even within the Republican majority. The failure to secure congressional support to repeal and replace Obamacare, however, was offset by a clear victory in regard to tax reform and a series of judicial appointments. In both areas, the Trump White House can feel justifiably delighted with their efforts, which will continue to influence public policy and

public finances for years to come.

Despite these important achievements, the manner in which Trump and his aides approached policy implementation and the priorities they afforded various initiatives, revealed their lack of political experience. Rather than seeking to govern with a solid core of the Republican base and an appeal to more conservative Democrats from states that voted for Trump in 2016, the White House sought to govern from the right, ensuring it was held hostage by the more extreme members of its own party. This contributed not only to the collapse of healthcare reform, but also to an inability to implement immigration reform and much needed infrastructure development. Both policy initiatives required urgent national attention and bipartisan support, yet rather than combine policy aspirations, the White House sought to score political points, leaving both sides with little to cheer. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the President's infrastructure initiative garnered little support from Republicans. With its obvious need to invest heavily in key areas of the country with large government investment in both plant and people, this was an initiative that Democrats should have been capable of supporting. Despite the all too obvious ways in which such a plan could quite literally be used to 'Make America Great Again', it appears destined to be unaddressed as the 2020 election season gets underway.

If plans to rebuild America's ailing infrastructure have been shelved, it appears that Trump's most profound physical legacy may be the construction of a wall on the southern border of the United States. Having campaigned promising to build a wall (that already existed on large stretches of the border), financed by Mexican money, Trump now appears set on reinforcing the border with new, higher and improved walling, and implementing an immigration policy that separates families upon their arrival in the United States. As engineered by controversial aide Stephen Miller, the political and social outrage that has accompanied this approach is both understandable and totally unnecessary, as the White House appears more eager to provoke than to lead. The leadership from both parties have spoken of the need for immigration reform but disagree upon the method to enforce existing laws. The President's plan for a wall, now being paid

for not by Mexicans, but by the American taxpayer, appears to be a 13th century solution to a 21st century dilemma, and a solution only as viable as the highest ladder or deepest tunnel. A pragmatic solution would have been to link funding for the wall with a massive infrastructure initiative, governing from the centre and creating a core base of bipartisan support that would have given Trump two major legislative successes early in his term.

Prioritising repeal and replace, however, along with other efforts to overturn the legislative legacy of Barack Obama, has merely reinforced existing Democratic Party resolve to obstruct the White House and block its policy initiatives. This was all the more certain after the 2018 midterm elections, which, despite the best efforts of the White House to suggest otherwise, were a devastating blow to Trump's political agenda. Losing control of the House of Representatives not only ensured that his policy initiatives were dead on arrival, but also handed the power of political investigation to his political enemies, determined to address what they saw as over-reach by Republicans on the Benghazi hearings during the 2016 election.

### A dark path ahead

Calls for Trump's impeachment have been sounded from early in his presidency. As long as the Republicans controlled both houses of Congress, impeachment was not an option. As soon as they lost the House of Representatives in the 2018 midterms, it became ever more likely. Facing a revolt from the left of her own party, a previously hesitant Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, has ensured that Donald Trump's presidential legacy is ensured, but for the wrong reasons, as he faces being only the third president to be impeached. Trump now faces the kind of Congressional volley that Republicans visited upon Hillary Clinton during the 2016 campaign. This constant barrage of allegations and revelations will distract the candidate from the 2020 campaign, and focus the voting public on scandal, not policy. What the Benghazi hearings did for Hillary, so the impeachment hearings could well do for Donald Trump in a wholly unvirtuous circle of political shenanigans.

Trump's latest predicament has arisen due to the revelations from a civil servant whistleblower, and the accompanying testimony of high placed sources within the





federal government. Their concerns regarding an apparent deal between Trump and the President of Ukraine, trading bilateral aid for political dirt on Joe Biden and his son, has inflicted more damage on the White House than Robert Mueller achieved during his entire investigation. Unlike Bill Clinton, who adopted a business as usual approach during his impeachment to demonstrate that the process would not impede the work of his administration, Donald Trump appears set on a scorched-earth strategy. As the first impeachment of the Twitter era, this will be played out in real time, with the President's every thought available for one and all, and unlike during Watergate, presidential expletives will not be deleted.

The President's political survival depends not on the findings of his opponents in the House, but on the strength of his support among his political allies in the Senate. Impeachment is the beginning of a process, not its conclusion, despite the ease with which the term is used and the assumptions associated with it. As devised by the founding fathers, the process of removing a sitting president relies upon bipartisanship, since to do otherwise risks the clear appearance of a coup d'état. Yet it is partisanship that has ultimately been responsible for the inability of the impeachment process to remove a president to date. A simple majority in the House can trigger impeachment hearings, but a super majority in the Senate is required to remove a president from office. Impeachment, therefore, is a political act, not a legal consideration and whatever actions

result in impeachment hearings, the jury that will decide the case are the 100 members of the Senate. In 1867/68 and 1998/99 a sitting president was impeached by the House and subsequently acquitted by the Senate. With Republicans in control of the Senate there appears little to suggest at the time of writing that a different outcome will prevail in 2019/2020. That could change in a heartbeat, as Nixon discovered in 1974, when attempts to obstruct justice proved far more detrimental than the initial break in at the Watergate.

### Commander-in-chaos

Exacerbating Trump's domestic crises are the many challenges he has created for himself overseas. From the earliest days of his presidency, Donald Trump has adopted a frankly inexplicable approach to foreign leaders; alienating allies and cosying up to adversaries. Key strategic partners in France, Canada and the UK have all been rebuffed or rebuked in one manner or another, while hardline rulers in Russia, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have all been feted and fawned upon. The murder of a US citizen, journalist Jamal Khashoggi, in a Saudi embassy in Istanbul has gone unchallenged, the findings of the US intelligence service in regard to Russian interference in the 2016 election have been ignored, the continued development of missile technology by North Korea is dismissed and, perhaps most egregiously, Turkish incursions into Syria and the betrayal of the Kurds were initiated only after receiving an apparent green light from President Trump.

Such incidents currently form Donald Trump's international legacy. To date, this self-described master negotiator has failed to implement any new international agreements and has merely withdrawn from existing frameworks. While his aspiration to withdraw the US from what he views as 'endless wars' has its merits, the reckless manner in which he is doing so risks creating precisely the kind of power vacuum that Trump routinely accused Obama and Hillary Clinton of creating by withdrawing from Iraq, leading to the rise of ISIS. The precipitous decision to withdraw US forces from Syria and the abandonment of the Kurds looks set to ensure that ISIS prisoners are released and that far from destroying the terrorist movement, Trump will have unwittingly ensured its continued viability. This is hardly a legacy to be proud of.

Future historians will doubtless attempt to make sense of Trump's administration and his time in office, however long it lasts. In this regard, Trump will have achieved what it was he perhaps craved most of all: He will have become a man of history, whose words, deeds and actions will be studied long after he has gone. At this juncture, however, it appears likely that his presidency will be studied as a warning of what not to do in office.

*Dr James D. Boys is author of **Clinton's War on Terror: Redefining US Security Strategy, 1993-2001** (Lynne Rienner, 2018). He currently resides in Boston, Massachusetts, where he is working on his fourth book.*