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Trump: the Final Daze



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

I don't put much stock in all the articles and news reports that envision President Donald Trump, once smoked out of his Oval Office hole, suddenly becoming a perpetual motion machine—launching a new conservative talk channel, running for president in 2024, writing his memoirs, or cashing in on peace deals in the Middle East with a string of Trump hotels and golf courses in Jared-friendly places such as the Golan Heights or Raqqa. (*"In our luxury ISIS Suite, guests can indulge in seaweed-eucalyptus salt scrubs and drone massage..."*)

Under these happy Fox News scenarios, this Trump colossus will bestride the earth—president without portfolio—as popular out of office as he was in it with his MAGA-base, a political Force 5 of verve, energy, and pithy primetime denunciations of the Biden-Obama resurgimiento.

History, however, suggests otherwise. Most ex-presidents—at least those lucky enough to survive the withdrawal symptoms of high-office stimulation—fade into obscurity, once the battery on their bullhorn runs out of juice.

Many ex-presidents, following George Washington's precedent (he died in 1799, two years out of office), have headed for an early grave, as much from broken hearts as natural causes.

Out of office, Harry Truman took his wife Bess on a cross-country driving tour (they stayed in motels to which Harry schlepped the luggage), while Dwight Eisenhower played golf at Gettysburg and Woodrow Wilson was driven around Washington, D.C. in an open touring car that was done up with Princeton hood ornaments.

A few presidents (Thomas Jefferson and Jimmy Carter among them) made a success of their post-presidency years, but I have a hard time imagining Trump retiring to Monticello to write letters to John Adams or heading off to Haiti to fix up old houses.

My guess is that Trump will retire to madness, the mental illness that all the president's men have been obscuring from the public (not very successfully) for the last four years.

Example: Trump recently had a world-class hissy fit at Mar-a-Lago after he discovered that Melania had done over the presidential suite with white marble (even thought she should have known his taste in Habitat-for-Inhumanity runs more toward gilded mirrors of Versailles dimensions). Terrified footmen were summoned to rip out what he took to be vertical tombstones on his walls.

Various fates await Trump out of office, and they are worth exploring:

The Flying Trumpman?

I love the notion, floated in conversations at various Washington taprooms, that post-president Trump will be forced to flee the country and live in a wandering exile in such bolt holes as Cuba or Panama. Call this the Robert Vesco model for an ex-president.

Vesco was a 1960s-era con man (securities fraud was his speciality) who kept trying to buy a Caribbean island and set up himself up as a sovereign state to avoid extradition to the United States. (Compared to Trump's scams, however, Vesco was a numbers runner.)

Vesco had yachts, planes, and mansions in places like the Bahamas, and he was forever on the run, which could well be Trump's fate, once his creditors (Deutsche Bank, various conned Saudi princes, etc.) begin foreclosing on his inflated assets. (*"It says here on his bank guarantee form that this golf course in the Bronx under the Throgs Neck Bridge is worth \$1.2 billion...."*)

I have heard mention that Trump might flee to Dubai, as the United Arab Emirates is one of a number of countries that has no extradition treaty with the United States. By the same token he could also choose Brunei, the Central African Republic, East Timor, Guinea-Bissau, Moldova, South Sudan, or the Solomon Islands.

In trying to figure out where Trump might escape his creditors or the long arm of the law, I think we can eliminate the bloc of Shithole nations (he might not get the warm MAGA

welcome he would be expecting), most of Latin America (“*drug dealers, criminals, rapists...*”), and that part of the Islamic world covered by his travel bans (“*I think Islam hates us...*”).

In cross referencing the list of places in the world where 1) Trump is building a hotel and 2) the host country has no extradition treaty with the United States, I only came up with Baku and Moscow.

It’s hard for me to imagine Trump hiding out in Azerbaijan (too hot in summer, too cold in winter, although it does have a few golf courses, including one called “Dreamland” that might appeal to Trump should he want to channel Michael Jackson’s short game).

Which leaves Trump on the lam in Russia, in the grand tradition of Cambridge Five turncoats Kim Philby and Guy Burgess, not to mention all those writers in the 1930s who saw the future “working” in the Soviet Union.

On many levels Moscow is perfect for Trump’s exile: he’s already a well-known there as a film star (*Rain Man II*) and pageant impresario; the Russian president Vladimir Putin is “his daddy”; and upon establishing residence Trump could boast that he’s one of the few persons on earth who has never uttered a critical word about Russia or the Soviet Union.

Cable Network Executive?

I can’t really see the concept of a Trump Network going anywhere in his post-presidency, as there’s a big difference between boasting to Howard Stern that STDs were your “Vietnam” and setting up a 24-hour news channel/app.

Presumably, the Trump Network would be a blend of QVC and QAnon (Ivanka would flog the cheap handbags from China while Trump himself would peddle the theories about the Clintons’ pizza pedophilia). And the intended cable subscribers would be those 74,222,957 Americans who voted for Trump in the recent presidential election.

Leaving aside the evening two-hour Trump rant, what else would the network cover? I guess during the day there could be Trump-themed exercise courses (“*Now reach behind your back, stretching out those pecs, and imagine you are grabbing a cheeseburger from a bedside a tray that the butler has left....*”); Trump game shows (“*Who Wants to Be An Ex-Millionaire?*”) in which contestants blow imaginary fortunes investing in golf courses and steaks; an edgy serial called *Dating Your Daughter*; and mock trials (a bit like *Judge Judy*, but with Trump as the only defendant) featuring angry unpaid plumbers in Atlantic City, owners of leaky condos in Miami Beach, and the IRS.

I can’t imagine, however, that a Trump Network could ever work itself up to broadcast anything remotely newsworthy. For sure, it would run daily features on Hunter Biden, menacing Mexican caravans approaching the southern wall, and voter fraud updates from the parking lots of adult bookstores in Pennsylvania, but would that be enough to compete with nightly professional football?

Throughout American history newspapers and later television stations have identified closely with various political parties. (Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson had the highly partisan *American Aurora*, which drove John Adams to distraction, prompting him to pass the Alien and Sedition Acts.) But I cannot think of any successful publication that was devoted entirely to the ego of an ex-president.

Perp Walker?

This is not as hard as most people imagine—not as difficult as steering a cart around a Florida golf course while your caddies kick balls out of the rough.

All you need to do is to fold a raincoat over the handcuffs and shuffle from a limousine into a packed courthouse, fending off reporters and television cameras with the words “no comment.”

The question of whether Trump’s post-presidency will be papered with indictments depends, in part, on whether he tries to pardon himself before leaving office.

Let’s assume he will—for the simple reason that his lawyers would rather defend the legality of a selfie pardon before the pliant Supreme Court than argue before a jury (of unpaid Atlantic City plumbers?) that Trump did not obstruct justice or violate campaign contribution laws as “Individual 1” in the Southern District of New York case that sent Trump fixer Michael Cohen up the river for three years in prison.

The self pardon, however, comes with some strings attached, in that anyone who accepts a pardon is acknowledging that he or she has committed a federal crime—not the greatest blurb on the back of your next campaign biography.

Nor should a presidential pardon (even one self-administered) be confused with the kind of blanket immunity that presidents in Africa and Asia routinely confer upon themselves. It’s a particular reprieve for a specific crime. Nor has any court ever ruled on whether you can pardon yourself before you are charged.

In theory, a federal grand jury in New York could indict Trump on the afternoon of January 20, 2021 (when he is officially out of office), and in his defense Trump would flash his get-out-of-jail card that he, himself, has signed, setting up a court case on the validity of the pardon.

My guess is that the packed Supreme Court would uphold Trump’s auto-pardon, but at the cost of appearing as just another Trump in-house law firm (something Chief Justice Roberts would prefer to avoid). And a pardon will do Trump no good in the many New York state and city investigations.

Biden-Trump-Clinton Game Theory?

In the matter of assessing his risk for federal prosecution (which could decide whether or not Trump should pardon himself), the president has to weigh how seriously to believe Joe Biden’s recent statement that he has “no interest” in pursuing criminal charges against ex-president Trump.

Question: Biden himself might not be interested in charging Trump, but would his justice department block a prosecution brought against Trump in the Southern District?

And what would happen if a Hillary Clinton confidante is appointed as Biden's attorney general? Might he or she recall Trump's lavish use of the phrase "Crooked Hillary" in weighing whether to allow the federal prosecutors in New York to complete their appointed rounds?

I am sure that, on balance, Trump would rather not pardon himself or his extended family. (If Ivanka and Don Jr. both want to be president, running under the banner of a presidential pardon isn't much of an endorsement.) At the same time, does Trump want to gamble his freedom on a Joe Biden aside at a press conference?

New York, New York?

Regardless of Trump's federal criminal liability, nothing can save Donald (or members of his immediate family and corporate circle) from the clutches of the Manhattan District Attorney, Cyrus Vance Jr., should that office wish to pursue charges against Trump for such crimes as bank fraud, relating to Trump's falsifications in regard to loans secured against Trump family assets.

Perhaps if Trump had a more stable business behind him, he could pay civil penalties to avoid more serious criminal charges in New York City. But what happens if Trump's businesses collapse (under their mountains of debt, some of which he has personally guaranteed) at the same time that Vance is weighing criminal charges against Trump and his organization? At that point Trump would look like former President Bernie Madoff.

Keep in mind that D.A. Vance only has one boss—the voters in New York City—and that he's beyond the reach of political influence, should he wish to be. I am sure he would listen to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and New York Senator Chuck Schumer, but will either of them go to bat for Trump?

Trump has often referred to Cuomo's brother as "Fredo," implying the Cuomo family is mafia, in the tradition of *The Godfather*, and he's repeatedly referred to Schumer as "Cryin' Chuck"—words I suspect both men recall.

Presidential Candidate in 2024?

What are Trump's chances of standing for the Republican presidential nomination in 2024?

By some accounts, while Biden is being sworn into office at noon on January 20, 2021, Trump will be off at MAGA rally, raising money for his slush fund and announcing his presidential candidacy for 2024. (That's easier to imagine than seeing Trump up on the platform in front of the capitol, squeezed into a folding chair between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama.)

With the \$200 million that he raised to fight voter fraud, Trump would start out as the presumptive Republican nominee for 2024, as other candidates (among them Governor Nikki

Haley, Senator Tim Scott, and South Dakota's Superspreader Governor Kristi Noem) would not have much room to maneuver with the 800-pound gorilla in the race.

Just by announcing his candidacy for 2024, Trump would, in the language of Wall Street, be buying himself an option on the nomination. But will he get it?

A few presidents have lost re-election and then run again for the presidency—Grover Cleveland, in 1892, comes to mind—but most ex-presidents don't get anywhere near a return engagement at the White House.

Teddy Roosevelt had a run in 1912 as a "Bull Moose" (officially it was the Progressive Party), but all he ended up doing was throwing the presidency to Woodrow Wilson. After leaving office in 1877, Ulysses Grant tried to get the Republican nomination again in 1880, but the party machine turned against him, and nominated James Garfield.

By 2024, if not sooner, my guess is that the Republican party will be done with Trump, especially if the Senate races go poorly in Georgia. "Trumpism without Trump" will become a slogan, and it will postulate a bright political future based on conservative judges, a border wall, Citizens United, and the right to a mask-less eternity—without having to listen to Trump call in to *Hannity*.

The Madness of King Donald?

Leaving aside Trump's legal and financial problems (I know, a big aside), I feel the biggest obstacle to his renomination will be his mental illness, which in several years, and without the protective veil of the presidency, will be that much more pronounced.

Early in Trump's presidential term, there were many books and speakers on YouTube, describing his increasing detachment from reality.

During the last election, not much was said about his mental incapacitates, other than by his niece Mary, a doctor in clinical psychology who wrote her thesis on some of the dysfunctional families in the novels of William Faulkner (good training if you are going to evaluate crazy Uncle Donald).

Mary has written at length in her books and articles about her uncle's "disordered, impulsive, self-defeating and destructive behavior." She makes it clear that Trump swindled her out her father's inheritance, routinely cheats in business and financial transactions and on his wives, habitually lies, and suffers from pathological narcissism of Mt. Rushmore proportions. Still, 74 million Americans voted for him in 2020. So why will being out of office shine more light into these dark Trump corners?

For all that the presidency, in the age of social media and the 24/7 news cycle, has become a social media fish bowl, the office is still one of the greatest cloaks of invisibility this side of the Deathly Hallows.

The romance of the presidency and all the trappings of the office—Air Force One, the White House, the opening bars of "Hail to the Chief", etc—turned Jack Kennedy from a raging

womanizer into a world statesman, just as it made Ronald Regan look vaguely competent and turned George W. Bush into something more than a sodden frat boy.

Donald Trump's written and spoken words—at least those he composes himself—make no more sense than did those of *Being There's* Chauncey Gardiner (Chauncey: “Yes! *There will be growth in the spring...*” Trump: “*You know, a lot of people think that goes away in April with the heat — as the heat comes in. Typically, that will go away in April...*”). But, filtered through the lens of the imperial presidency, Trump appeared almost normal, at least to millions.

Out of office, deprived of his entourage of some 700 minders (who clean up everything from his rape lawsuits to his obstructions of justice), Trump will increasingly sound like a delirious old man losing his grip on reality.

Imagine what the world would think of Trump if he wore old clothes and said the things he says while feeding pigeons in Central Park.

The Third Wives Club?

The finger in the dyke of Trump's coming collapse may well belong to his wife Melania. Her choice is this: she can renew her personal services contract with the chairman of the Trump Organization and continue to appear at his side on state occasions or she can lump her prenuptial agreement into the basket of Trump's other financial deceits and sue him for half of \$7 billion (what he boasts he's worth).

Although I have no way of knowing, something tells me Melania agreed to a prenup that on paper is worth about \$25 million to her. At the time of the Trumps' marriage in 2005, that promise probably sounded better than heading back to Ljubljana to pose in more lingerie ads. Now she faces this dilemma: Trump may be broke and on his way to jail, in which case her fate, if she sticks around, will be that of Mrs. Bernie Madoff, consigned to the netherworld of a Connecticut condo. Maybe even the \$25 million severance payoff is in question?

Or Melania can get a jump on the line of her husband's creditors, and she can sue him for divorce and fraud, on the basis that their prenuptial agreement was no more honest than the financial statements he submitted to the lending banks or his real estate investors.

More than she realizes, Melania's interests are those of Deutsche Bank, the Russians, Saudis princes, and various other private equity LLCs that believed the hype of Trump's inflated wealth, and who are now trying to work out what will be left of the boardwalk empire once Cy Vance or the New York state attorney general forecloses on the Trump dream and the rest of the pyramid organization unravels. In any liquidation, it pays to stake an early claim.

High Seas Grifter?

As a spiritual descendant of Charles Ponzi, Trump's strategy has always been to repay his most demanding creditors with fresh money raised from newer, more gullible investors.

In the latest round, Trump raised some \$200 million from the aggrieved MAGA crowd, based on his allegations of electoral fraud, although no proof of that was ever forthcoming and the small print of the slush fund allows Trump to bank much of the \$200 million.

So is Trump solvent or against the wall? We know that he personally owes about \$400 million in the coming years, and that the combined debts of the Trump Organization are in the billions, at a time when golf courses and office space aren't exactly in high demand.

My guess is that the new \$200 million will only cover the lawyers needed for Trump's coming legal entanglements.

Trump's other hope of a pay day will come from various licensing arrangements on a continuation of his White House reality show—perhaps a presidential memoir (*Me and I: Donald Trump Keeps Score...*) or a Netflix serial (a bit like *The Crown*, only with more sex and gold).

Whether those royalties will bail out Deutsche Bank or duped Russian investors in various high-rise projects is difficult to say, although I cannot imagine that Trump will use new money to payoff his old creditors.

How Does It All End?

Rather than sweeping back into office in 2024—on the back of new billions from a conservative cable network and a Netflix serial—I see Trump hounded by the law and creditors (including his wife) ending up in some Mar-a-Lago panic room, seen only by a handful retainers who leave Happy Meals by the steel security door.

Maybe he will follow the Robert Vesco model and fake his own death in a Havana hospital, so that he could be free to search for sunken Spanish treasure fleet off the Cuban coast?

Trump might well need to fake his own death just to dodge Deutsche Bank, back taxes, angry women he abused, his wife, the Manhattan D.A., the indifference of the Republican party in 2024, and deceived Russian paymasters, all of whom have seen their claims put on hold while for four years he held the United States hostage to his diminishing fortune.

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This essay is part of a periodic series on the 2020 presidential election. Some earlier pieces can be found [here](#).

Matthew Stevenson is the author of many books, including [Reading the Rails](#) and [Appalachia Spring](#). His most recent book, published this summer, is [The Revolution as a Dinner Party](#), about China throughout its turbulent twentieth century.