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Trump First, America Last



Image by Elijah Flores.

Yes, “shock and awe” is back in the second age of Donald Trump. His border czar, Tom Homan, used that very phrase to describe border policy from day one of the new administration and, whether the president has actually said it or not, it’s now regularly in headlines, op-eds, and so much else. If you remember, it was the phrase used, in all its glory, to describe America’s massive bombing and invasion of Iraq in 2003. (You remember! The country that supposedly threatened us with nuclear weapons but, in fact, didn’t have any!)

We Americans were, of course, going to shock and awe *them*. But from that moment on (if not from the moment, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, when, rather than simply going after Osama bin Laden and crew, President George W. Bush launched a full-scale invasion of Afghanistan), you could say that it was we who were truly shocked and awed. After all, in their own disastrous fashion, our post-9/11 wars prepared the way for... yes!... Donald Trump to take the White House the first time around (shock and awe!) — and then blame the

final disastrous retreat of the American military from Afghanistan in 2021 on the Biden administration. (“Kamala Harris, Joe Biden — the humiliation in Afghanistan set off the collapse of American credibility and respect all around the world.”) And of course, four years later, his reelection on a functional platform of Trump First, Americans Last, was distinctly a double shock and awe!

And if you’ll excuse my being thoroughly repetitious, that was — or at least should have been seen as — the true definition of shock and awe. Donald Trump! Twice! Even now, can you truly take it in? In fact, more or less every moment since his reelection victory in November 2024 has been — pardon me for the turn of phrase — a first-class S&A experience.

And — shock, if not awe — I haven’t even mentioned Elon Musk yet, have I? I mean, who can take him in either? The richest man on Planet Earth (S&A!) and, at least until President Trump levied those massive tariffs on our three major trading partners (only to partially back off soon after), still making money hand over fist (wrist, pissed?) — about \$224 billion extra dollars (S&A!) just between the November 2024 election victory of Donald Trump and the moment he actually took power again in January 2025 — at the expense of the rest of us. Meanwhile, he’s been more or less running this country (into the ground) hand in glove with Donald Trump, who, by the way, is already talking about a possible third term in office! (“They say I can’t run again; that’s the expression... Then somebody said, I don’t *think* you can. Oh.”) Now, wouldn’t that be an all-American S&A first (or do I mean last?)!

An MMMW World

Phew, I’m already out of breath *and* exclamation points! No surprise there, of course, given the awesomely shocking and shockingly Trumpified (or do I mean Muskratted?) world we’re now living in and dealing with.

After all, we once again have a president who himself is (or may be — since you never know with him) a multi-billionaire and has at his side the DOGE-y man with a totally made-up position and an organization that nonetheless seems to have the power to dismantle whole parts of our government. (Science, Medicine? Who needs them? Veterans, who cares?) He could evidently even purchase Mars (and donate his sperm to help colonize that planet). And imagine this: despite all the dough they and their billionaire pals possess — there are at least 13 of them in his administration, worth something like \$460 billion — Elon and he seem intent on shoving through Congress a plan that would make his tax cuts for billionaires a permanent feature of American life (whatever it may cost the rest of us).

Don't try to tell me that we're not in a mad, mad, mad world (MMMW, if you prefer). And hey, the man who only recently set a record by spending more than an hour and 40 minutes giving the longest State of the (Dis)Union speech or speech of any sort ever to a joint session of Congress has done a remarkable job of foisting his version of an America First (Foist? Last?) policy on the rest of us and this world — a world that distinctly isn't ours, but his. Think of us as now living in a Trump First World, or TFW. Of course, his version of America First includes those recent tariffs (some but not all of which have been delayed again) that, though officially levied against Canada, China, and Mexico, were actually being foisted on the rest of us. Count on one thing: in the end, we will undoubtedly pay through the nose for them. So, no question about it, we have certainly entered a distinctly S&A era.

The Double D of Donald

In truth, the 45th and 47th (and 48th and 49th?) president of the United States is a genuinely remarkable figure. Truly historic — or do I mean hysteric? After all, who can't bring some image of him to mind at any moment? That face, that stare, that glare, that red tie, that wave in his hair. Need I say more?

In his own remarkable fashion, he should be given full credit and a double capital D — for both Donald and Decline. Or just think of him as PD (for President Decline). And it is remarkable that a single figure, one man who once oversaw the bankruptcy of six different companies he had launched, could become responsible for potentially the greatest bankruptcy of all — the ending of the American Century (as we once knew it) and even, after a fashion, humanity's centuries on Planet Earth.

I mean, who can even remember anymore the time in a distant century — the year was 1991, to be exact, the very moment when Donald Trump filed for bankruptcy for the Trump Taj Mahal and the year before he did the same for the Trump Plaza Hotel — when the Soviet Union went into the garbage pail, China had not yet truly risen, and this country was left alone as not just a great power but *The Great Power* or TGP, the only one left on Planet Earth? That, in retrospect, was a truly shock-and-awe moment. And isn't it no less shock-and-awing to think that a mere 34 years later, that same country is now led by a raging maniac on an America First platform that could, in effect, prove to be an America Last one? In a mere two terms in office, he will have taken what was once known as the planet's "sole superpower" into a world of chaos and, ultimately, disaster of a sort we still can't really grasp. He will have been the monarch — and yes, that's the appropriate word, not president — from hell. (In fact, the White House digital strategy team all too appropriately produced a portrait of President Trump with a golden crown and the phrase "LONG LIVE THE KING"!)

And if that (and he) isn't the definition of shock and awe, what is?

Burn, Baby, Burn

Worse yet, tariff by tariff, tax by tax, act by act, Donald Trump stands a reasonable chance of taking this planet down with him. Think of it as little short of remarkable that, in a world in which every month, every year (and every decade) is hotter than the previous one in a record fashion, in a world in which the weather and its devastating effects — from fires to storms to floods — is only growing more extreme and more horrific, Americans freely voted in (a second time around!) someone whose election phrase of choice was “drill, baby, drill,” but might as well have been “heat, baby, heat” or “storm, baby, storm,” or simply “burn, baby, burn.”

And if his platform was America First (but truly Donald First), it distinctly should have been Planet Earth Last. (Of course — don't be shocked — he also appointed as secretary of health a man who thinks that the way to fight measles outbreaks is with anything but a vaccine.) Yes, above all else, Donald Trump, who has called climate change both a “scam” and a “Chinese hoax,” continues to be focused on making sure that ever more oil, natural gas, and coal comes out of the ground and is indeed burned, baby, burned forever and a day.

Of course, no one should be surprised, given the way the fossil-fuel companies funded his campaign. He's already gone out of his way to cancel anything the Biden administration did to fight climate change and announced the country's departure from the Paris climate accords (again). As the *New York Times* put it recently, “In a few short weeks [of his second term in office], President Trump has already severely damaged the government's ability to fight climate change, upending American environmental policy with moves that could have lasting implications for the country, and the planet.” What he's doing is now considered a “deep freeze” on climate programs of all sorts (though it might better be thought of as a hot melt).

At one point, he was even talking about eliminating 65% of the employees at the Environmental Protection Agency (S&A!). Lasting implications indeed.

In any other era, President Trump would still undoubtedly have been considered a nightmare and a half, but not a potentially world-ending one (at least the world as humanity has known it all these endless centuries). The truth is that, once upon a time, if you had told anybody that this would be our S&A version of the future, you would have been laughed out of the room.

The Second Time Around with No End in Sight

And yet, there can be no question that, all these years later, despite bankruptcy after bankruptcy, and failure after failure, he remains the man of the second, minute, hour, day, week, month, and year. Give him credit. It's a remarkable record not just when it comes to

the success of failure but of putting Himself (and yes, under the circumstances, I do think that should be capitalized!), not America First.

Oh, and while all of this has been going on, the Democratic Party has not completely but largely been missing in action. Imagine that! And as for Congress, remind me what it is (other than an audience for You Know Who).

Consider it a remarkable historical irony that America First has remained Donald Trump's slogan all these years when, in reality (or what passes for it in his universe), it should certainly have been Trump First and, when it came to anything that truly mattered to him, America (not to speak of the rest of the world) Last!

Worse yet, if all of us hadn't actually lived through the Trumpian epoch (epic? toothpick?), I don't think anyone could have made this up or, in a previous version of America, even imagined it happening. And if they could, there can be little question that they would simply have been laughed out of the room, if not institutionalized, not once but twice.

And yet here we are, the second time around with no end in sight, and a third time a history-breaking possibility, leaving us fully and thoroughly in another America on another planet. Phew! Talk about shock and awe!

I must admit, with at least three years and 10 months to go in the era of You Know Who, I find it hard to imagine our future, even if (as is certainly possible) the American and global economies go down the tubes and the Democrats are swept back into Congress — I'm sorry, where? — in 2026.

Nonetheless, for the (un)foreseeable future, we're all living with Donald Trump in a genuinely shock-and-awe world of almost unpredictable strangeness. In some fashion, all of us are now Afghans or Iraqis.

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This piece first appeared on [TomDispatch](#).

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