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16.06.2024



Trump's Obsession With Revenge: A Big Post-Verdict Danger

The convicted felon has long hailed retaliation as a key to his success.



Julia Nihkinson/AP

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Three days after a New York City jury turned Donald Trump into the first former president branded a felon, the onetime reality television host to Fox News, “My revenge will be success.” This above-the-fray rhetoric was not to be believed, for Trump, through much of his life, has exhibited an intense obsession with vengeance and seeking retribution against those he considers his foes and detractors.

In subsequent interviews, Trump adopting contradictory stances on the matter of retaliation. Appearing on Newsmax, he said that if he is elected his political opponents *might* face prosecution. Then, on Wednesday night, Trump remarked that he would not seek retribution against President Joe Biden and others.

Despite all this back-and forth, the historical record is clear: Trump has long had a love affair with revenge—to such an extent that this fixation should be added to the list of concerns reasonable people ought to have about a Trump restoration. If Trump, with his authoritarian impulses, returns to the White House, it is rather likely he will use his power to extract payback—for this conviction, the other civil and criminal cases filed against him, and all perceived slights and assaults. There will be a revenge-a-thon.

Immediately after the verdict, Trump’s MAGA minions were not as restrained as their Dear Leader, and many explicitly called for retribution. Rep. Mike Collins (R-Ga.) tweeted, “Time for Red State AGs and DAs to get busy”—a clear demand for state and local prosecutors to target Democrats. Stephen Miller and Steve Bannon each called on Republican prosecutors to launch probes against Democrats. Mike Davis, a right-wing legal activist who’s been mentioned as a possible attorney general if Trump wins, told *Axios* that Republican prosecutors in Florida and Georgia should initiate criminal investigations of Democrats for engaging in election interference by indicting Trump. House Speaker Mike Johnson informed his Republican colleagues that he was plotting ways to punish the Justice Department and local jurisdictions that prosecute Trump. After Republican Larry Hogan, the former Maryland governor now running for US Senate, issued a pre-verdict tweet urging “all Americans to respect the verdict and the legal process” and “not pour fuel on the fire with more toxic partisanship,” Trump campaign co-manager Chris LaCivita spitefully responded: “Your campaign is over.”

Commenters on pro-Trump websites called for violence against the judge in Trump’s hush-money/election-interference case and against liberals in general. Trump supporters also tried to dox the jurors—setting them up as targets—and posted violent threats against the prosecutors. John Eastman, the indicted lawyer who helped Trump’s efforts to overturn the 2020 election (and whose law license has been suspended in California and Washington, DC), came close to justifying violence when he warned that if Trump is sentenced to prison, Trump supporters will be “taking matters into their own hands” and “seeking remedies on their own.”

All these responses—and other similar reactions—were extremely Trumpian. Throughout his presidency, Trump condoned and encouraged violence. And for decades, Trump has cited revenge as one of his key motivators. He has even touted it as crucial to his success.

During the 2016 campaign, I tried to bring attention to this worrisome facet of Trump’s psychological make-up. I reported many examples of his long-held passion for revenge—

including the time he tweeted in 2014 a quote from legendary filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock: “Revenge is sweet and not fattening.”

Before running for president, Trump gave many speeches and public talks in which he expressed his fondness for retribution. In 2011, he addressed the National Achievers Congress in Sydney, Australia and explained how he had achieved his wealth and fame. He noted there were a couple of lessons not taught in business school that people aiming to be successful must know. At the top of the list was this piece of advice: “Get even with people. If they screw you, screw them back 10 times as hard. I really believe it.”

In a 2012 speech, he offered a longer version of this riff:

One of the things you should do in terms of success: If somebody hits you, you’ve got to hit ’em back five times harder than they ever thought possible. You’ve got to get even. Get even. And the reason, the reason you do, is so important...The reason you do, you have to do it, because if they do that to you, you have to leave a telltale sign that they just can’t take advantage of you. It’s not so much for the person, which does make you feel good, to be honest with you, I’ve done it many times. But other people watch and you know they say, “Well, let’s leave Trump alone,” or “Let’s leave this one,” or “Doris, let’s leave her alone. They fight too hard.” I say it, and it’s so important. You have to, you have to hit back. You have to hit back.

At a speech in 2007 in Toronto, Trump railed against actor Rosie O’Donnell with whom he had a celebrity feud. He then pivoted to his deeper message: “The point is, one of the things I say later is...get even. When somebody screws you, you screw them back in spades. And I really mean it. I really mean it. You’ve gotta hit people hard. And it’s not so much for that person. It’s other people watch.”

For Trump, acts of revenge are essential for demonstrating he’s a tough guy. It’s evidently an important component of his own self-image.

During another speech that year, he shared his first rule of business:

It’s called “Get Even.” Get even. This isn’t your typical business speech. Get even. What this is a real business speech. You know in all fairness to Wharton, I love ’em, but they teach you some stuff that’s a lot of bullshit. When you’re in business, you get even with people that screw you. And you screw them 15 times harder. And the reason is, the reason is, the reason is, not only, not only, because of the person that you’re after, but other people watch what’s happening. Other people see you or see you or see and they see how you react.

In a 2010, interview with journalist Erin Burnett, Trump thumped his chest on this point:

There are a lot of bad people out there. And you really have to go...If you have a problem, if you have a problem with someone, you have to go after them. And it's not necessarily to teach that person a lesson. It's to teach all of the people that are watching a lesson. That you don't take crap. And if you take crap, you're just not going to do well...But you can't take a lot of nonsense from people, you have to go after them.”

Again and again, Trump hailed the power and necessity of retribution. As he tweeted in 2013, “Always get even. When you are in business, you need to get even with people who screw you.” – Think Big.”

Even if Trump has yet to respond to the guilty verdict with a bombastic public vow of vengeance, his record of celebrating revenge remains. (Perhaps he is refraining while awaiting sentencing.) Yet he hasn't been shy on other fronts. Trump recently endorsed the GOP primary opponent to Rep. Bob Good (R-Va.), the chair of the far-right House Freedom Caucus, even though Good was one of the Republican officeholders who made the pilgrimage to Trump's trial to show fealty to the accused. Trump did so because Good earlier supported Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis over Trump in the Republican presidential contest. Trump characterized this endorsement as payback for Good's sacrilege.

And it was only a few months ago that the *Washington Post* reported that Trump and his allies “have begun mapping out specific plans for using the federal government to punish critics and opponents should he win a second term, with the former president naming individuals he wants to investigate or prosecute.” That list included people who had worked for Trump and became critics, including former chief of staff John Kelly, former Attorney General Bill Barr, and retired Gen. Mark Milley, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as well as Biden and his family. The article—headlined “Trump and allies plot revenge, Justice Department control in a second term”—generated much reaction, with pundits pointing to it as more evidence of Trump's extremism and authoritarian yearnings.

The *Post* report was an important story but also an old one. Anyone who has paid the least bit attention knows that Trump has always been a revenge addict. This is a dangerous and fundamental character trait. Naturally, as he has turned the Republican Party and conservative movement into a personality cult, a craving for retribution has become a core value in these circles.

During a public rant the day after his trial concluded, Trump inveighed against the “bad people” and “sick people” responsible for the cases against him, slammed the judge in the New York City case, and excoriated the Biden administration as a “group of fascists...destroying our country.” This is the sort of terminology Trump has deployed in the

past to identify those who warrant his vengeful wrath. He fervently believes in retaliation, and he keeps a list.

For years, political observers have speculated that Trump entered the 2016 presidential content in part to avenge the humiliation he suffered when President Barack Obama skewered him at the White House Correspondents Dinner in 2011. Maybe. But certainly one factor driving him this time around is his desire to even the score with those who opposed him during his first term and thwarted the reaffirmation he yearned for in 2020. This guilty verdict adds more names to his hit list and will, without doubt, intensify the already excessive and alarming lust for revenge that Trump, if elected, will bring with him back to the White House.

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