

# National Journal

## Trump Turns the Presidency Into a Modern Monarchy

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America under President Trump isn't becoming an autocracy, as some recently feared. Our country's democratic institutions have demonstrated their resilience, the media have rediscovered the importance of checking those in power, and the bureaucracy has demonstrated that simple inertia can overwhelm even the most committed demagogues.

I've struggled how to precisely describe this moment in American history, in which the leader of the free world is an erratic, demagogic celebrity who dominates every nook and cranny of public life like no president before him—yet is so weak institutionally that he can't pass any legislation with his party fully in charge. In February, I anticipated that the Trump administration was “more likely to look like a tragi-comedy, not a horror story.” Still, that doesn't fully capture the uniqueness of this moment in American politics.

The Trump administration resembles an American version of a monarchy, in which the head of state consumes outsize attention but has ceded significant power to trusted advisers, his party's leadership in Congress, and well-placed bureaucrats across the government. The triumvirate of Defense Secretary James Mattis, National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has remarkable autonomy to steer the nation's foreign policy. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is shouldering all the blame for the president's inability to rally support for health care reform. Trump may have humiliated Attorney General Jeff Sessions, but the Department of Justice is actively revamping policy on drug sentencing, cracking down on sanctuary cities, and fighting censorious administrators on college campuses.

Clearly, Trump has actual powers—as opposed to the symbolic roles of a Queen Elizabeth—but it's remarkable to see how much the traditional powers of the presidency have been shrunk. Mattis, his Defense secretary, didn't carry out Trump's tweeted order to ban transgender people from the military. Many foreign governments have learned to ignore the presidential tweets and listen to his advisers to get a better sense of administration policy. Even the despotic North Korean government reportedly was reaching out to conservative think tanks to understand whether to believe Trump's threatening bluster.

This is especially unusual for us because the executive branch has become all-powerful in recent generations. Presidents are expected to set the agenda in Washington, sell their preferred policies, comfort those affected by tragedies, and single-handedly protect America from its enemies. Both Presidents Obama and Trump have relied on executive orders to accomplish much of their agendas. As the Cato Institute's Gene Healy put it: “The modern president is America's shrink, a social worker, our very own national talk show host. He's also the Supreme Warlord of

the Earth. ... He is no longer a mere constitutional officer charged with faithful execution of the laws.”

Yet much of the power Trump exerts ends up grinding the gears of government and causes chaos for its own sake—just as a reality-show producer wants to create surprises and conflict to juice up ratings. His impulsive nature combined with a lack of ideological convictions invariably lead to gridlock. He campaigned as an immigration hard-liner, but then cut a deal with Democratic leadership on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. His knowledge of health care policy is so limited that he undermines the legislation he champions. As one GOP strategist put it, “A lot of things are not moving because they don’t know what the ‘king’ wants.”

Then there’s the celebrity aspect of Trump’s presidency. The endless gossip over his family resembles the tabloid sensations surrounding the British royal family. White House staffers, like former Trump press secretary Sean Spicer, become celebrities in their own right, in the same way that exiled aides of Prince Charles and Princess Diana command headlines in London newspapers. The remarkable daily conflicts emanating out of the White House—paging Anthony Scaramucci!—couldn’t be scripted any more dramatically on a soap opera or reality show, and in some ways resemble the highly publicized breakup of Charles and Diana.

Indeed, the American cult of celebrity was a necessary precondition for Trump’s rise. He was ubiquitous on television, seen as a hard-nosed tycoon, eager to speak his mind, while slamming hated elites in the process. Politics used to flow downstream from culture, as the late right-wing provocateur Andrew Breitbart once said. Now, it is part of culture itself. I did a double-take this week flipping to Stephen Colbert’s *Late Show* and seeing an earnest analysis of the Alabama Senate runoff. You can’t make this stuff up.

Now our political landscape is littered with rock stars, talk-show hosts, and football players rumored for higher office. Kid Rock is teasing his fans that he’ll pursue a Senate bid in Michigan, and GOP operatives are excited at the prospect. Retired quarterback Peyton Manning is floated as a candidate for retiring Sen. Bob Corker’s Senate seat in Tennessee. Oprah leads a focus group of voters on television, and she immediately hints that she might be interested in a presidential run in 2020.

None of this is healthy for American democracy. But in the public’s obsession with Trump, we’re overlooking the root cause of our country’s challenges. Trump is a reflection of who we are: obsessed with celebrity, addicted to conflict, and tribalistic in our worldviews. The mediating forces that separated governing from campaigning have been obliterated, thanks to both the proliferation of social media and mainstream media’s preference for ratings/clicks over substance.

Simply replacing the president won’t make much of a difference to our toxic political culture. It will take a groundswell of voters to demand that our public servants care about governing, understand policy, and appreciate the art of compromise. Until then, we’ll be in the grip of the mythically omnipotent commander in chief, the drama of endless campaigns, and what Adam Gopnik, writing in *The New Yorker*, called “the Higher Gossip of History.”

There’s no need to worry about the threat of a tyrannical president coming to power in the United States. If Trump can’t pull off the trick, no one will. But Americans should be alarmed that we’re close to electing a bunch of political Kardashians to higher office—and empowering an unaccountable, undemocratic bureaucracy as a result