

**FT Swamp Notes** [US politics & policy](#)

## The loneliness of Mike Pence

When a former vice-president spurns his former president, we ought to sit up and notice



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**Edward Luce** YESTERDAY

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If we inhabited another planet — call it the 20th century — Mike Pence’s refusal to endorse Donald Trump this week would have merited headlines. When a former vice-president spurns his former president, we ought to sit up and notice. The fact that we did not is yet another sign of the political weirdness we are living through.

To be fair to the headline writers, Pence could have delivered his message with more pizzaz. Instead of saying that Trump was a threat to the US Constitution, Pence cited Trump’s lack of a plan to reduce the national debt and his U-turn on TikTok. These were eccentrically unrelated to the real reason for Pence’s decision, which he has cited on many previous occasions. Top of these is that Trump put Pence and his family in physical danger on January 6 2021. Having unsuccessfully put inordinate pressure on him to overturn the results of the 2020 election, Trump then exhorted his followers to hold Pence to account. “Mike Pence didn’t have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution,” Trump tweeted. When he was told that the mob were chanting “Hang Mike Pence”. Trump said “he deserves it”

was told that the mob were planning to hang Mike Pence, Trump said he doesn't know it according to an aide who testified to the House's January 6 committee. Trump had already been informed about the noose and scaffolding that had been erected in front of the Capitol building with Pence specifically in mind.

It is not hyperbole to point out that such a plotline would have been rejected by the writers of *House of Cards*. When that show was first streaming I found it to be exorbitantly far-fetched. Now it feels understated, like the British original. The Capitol Hill rioters got within 40 feet of Pence. Had they managed to string him up for being a traitor to the Maga cause, Trump would have surely been charged as an accessory to murder. No outrage that Kevin Spacey's Frank Underwood committed in that Netflix drama came near to what Trump tried to do that day.

Pence has still not received his full due for his display of principle. Since then, it has come to light that Pence's secret service detail tried to bundle him into a waiting car so that they could take him to a safe place. Pence refused. He figured, probably correctly, that if he left the scene all manner of constitutional shenanigans could take place. In other words, Pence did more than anyone else to save the US republic from overthrowal. He is a profile in courage and integrity.

I say this in spite of disagreeing with most of his policies. Pence has long campaigned for a federal abortion ban, clearly detests gay marriage, and would not be out of place in another far-fetched drama, *The Handmaid's Tale*. As vice-president he was fawning to Trump. Standing expressionless next to the president, he looked at times more like a marble statue than a human. We used to joke that he resembled a United Airlines pilot, or perhaps chief purser on British Airways. The fact that he pledged to his wife, Karen, that he would never be alone in a room with another woman only added to the hilarity. But when it mattered, Pence did more than everyone else combined to uphold the US Constitution.

I doubt very much that Pence's non-endorsement of Trump will sway too many evangelical voters. That bloc has long since abandoned any care about a candidate's personal morals in exchange for a Leninist measure of whether he can deliver the goods. Trump gave them the Supreme Court justices they wanted. That is all that counts. Pence thus joins a small and lonely group of Republicans who have shown character and principle in an age where these qualities are in short supply. Others include Liz Cheney, Mitt Romney, and Adam Kinzinger.

It is a remarkable testament to Trump's immunity from any kind of accountability that almost every single "adult" that served in his administration has repudiated him. Starting with his vice-president, we can add his chief of staff, John Kelly, both his

defence secretaries, Jim Mattis and Mark Esper, his national security adviser, John Bolton, his first secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, his two attorneys-general, Jeff Sessions and Bill Barr, his chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, Mark Milley and — if I had to hazard a guess — his wife, the former first lady, Melania Trump. None of this seems to have the slightest effect on his base. The worse Trump's character, the more damning his references from those who know him best, the more his voters love him.

Swampians should ready themselves for an unusual guest responder, my former boss, and the FT's last editor, Lionel Barber, who is as addicted to US politics as I am.

Lionel, I have two questions: 1. Can you explain the above? I still find it excruciatingly hard. 2. When will we get to read your forthcoming biography of Masayoshi Son?

## Recommended reading

My column this week looks at [Trump's inability to find a creditor](#). No one will lend to him. "It doesn't take great insight to see that Trump's financial quandary poses a national security risk," I write. "If big insurance companies and friendly billionaires think he's too big a credit risk, who might bail him out instead? What sort of collateral could Trump offer in return?"

On a related and highly topical theme, Tom Nichols — author of the deservedly best-selling *The death of expertise* — has a great piece in The Atlantic on [why Trump should not be given the customary intelligence briefings](#) that candidates receive. As a former US government official, and a Reaganite, Nichols knows whereof he speaks.

My colleague Pilita Clark has an interesting and original piece about [the US financial sector's stampede away from ESG](#), specifically on green financing: "Wall Street is letting Orwellian doublethink kill climate action." This is prompted entirely by the political backlash from the red states and threats of legal action.

Do also read the always thoughtful Raghuram Rajan in the FT on [why protectionism hits the poorest hardest](#) — "governments are not good at picking winners". There is a lot to admire about Biden's administration

but its ever more random lurches towards fortress America are a deepening self-inflicted wound.

## Lionel Barber responds

Ed, my prediction that Trump was toast after his role in the January 6 insurrection makes me a somewhat busted pundit. That said, I have just returned from a two-week road trip to Arizona, California and Texas, where I was cycling in LBJ hill country and *No Country for Old Men* desert expanse near Marfa. The table talk was all about Trump 2.0 and what it means for America and the rest of the world.

You refer to a period of “political weirdness”. I agree, up to a point. The best way to understand Trump’s appeal is to re-read Robert Penn Warren’s novel *All The King’s Men*, based on Huey Long, the Louisiana rabble rouser governor. The explanation for Trump’s comeback is threefold: a flawed primary election system for selecting presidential nominees; moral equivalence in the Republican party, notably Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell’s failure to back the second impeachment process; and the “lawfare” strategy pursued by zealous Democratic party prosecutors who have turned Trump into a political martyr.

Let’s start with the primary system which is (generally) heavily tilted towards activists and bears little relation to voter turnout in the general election. It’s complicated but this [Atlantic article](#) is a good primer. To this, add the stunning ineptness of Trump’s main challenger, Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida. Like all the Republican candidates, bar Chris Christie and Nikki Haley at the end, DeSantis refused to take on Trump because he feared losing “the base”. He ended up as Trump-lite and Maga voters stuck with the real deal.

I suspect you and I agree that Trump’s conduct, especially in the run-up to January 6, warrants the attention of the criminal justice system. But multiple prosecutions in multiple jurisdictions complicate the case for prosecution. Besides, say New York friends, everyone inflates the value of their real estate in Manhattan. They are equally scathing about Fani Willis, the attorney-general in Fulton County, Georgia, who hired her boyfriend to help on the Trump racketeering case. Special counsel Jack Smith received plaudits but the overwhelming view among people I spoke to on my trip was that voters, not the courts, should decide the outcome of the November election.

My sense is that Big Business is mentally adjusting to the prospect of a Trump victory. The FT had a [good piece](#) on hedge funder John Paulson hosting a big money dinner including people previously against Trump. I could read a lot more about why

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business is lukewarm to sceptical about Biden, despite the mega subsidies in his new industrial strategy. Never mind the age factor. They are fearful of a wealth tax, they have no time for antitrust tsar Lina Khan, and they are appalled by the woke takeover of higher education in the US. I could go on, but will keep my powder dry for a future guest appearance nearer November.

You kindly asked about my biography of SoftBank CEO and founder Masayoshi Son. It's coming out in early October in the UK (Allen Lane) and in January 2025 in the US (One Signal, Simon & Schuster).

Your signed copy is (almost) in the post.

## Your feedback

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*We'd love to hear from you. You can email the team on [swampnotes@ft.com](mailto:swampnotes@ft.com), contact Ed on [edward.luce@ft.com](mailto:edward.luce@ft.com) and Rana on [rana.foroohar@ft.com](mailto:rana.foroohar@ft.com), and follow them on X at [@RanaForoohar](https://twitter.com/RanaForoohar) and [@EdwardGLuce](https://twitter.com/EdwardGLuce). We may feature an excerpt of your response in the next newsletter*

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