

Opinion **Donald Trump**

Trump and his mandate for retribution

The president-elect has promised vengeance against perceived enemies

EDWARD LUCE



Unlike him, anyone Donald Trump targets with tax audits or probes will be unable to tap a campaign to pay their lawyers © Evan Vucci/AP

Edward Luce 4 HOURS AGO

JD Vance, now America's vice-president elect, last month said that the second-most important figure in Donald Trump's administration would be his attorney-general. Nobody, least of all the incoming number two, ever said that about a US presidency. Typically, the shortlists for secretary of state, defence secretary, Treasury secretary or CIA director dominate the speculation. Yet Vance was straight talking. Trump's bitterest first term gripe was that the Department of Justice did not bend to his will. We can assume that whoever Trump picks as attorney-general will owe him personal loyalty.

There are few theoretical limits on what Trump can do to carry out his vows of revenge. The Supreme Court made sure of that in the summer when it gave the US president near blanket immunity. The question is whether Trump faces practical or inner limits to his pursuit of enemies. It is possible that he feels so vindicated by last week's victory, and so liberated by having escaped prison time, that he is basking in a new spirit of magnanimity. That would be out of character. Yet it takes a morbid pessimism to believe that he will turn the US into a police state. His likelier course will be somewhere in between.

Even if he wanted to forgive and forget, Trump's campaign was launched on the promise that "I will be your retribution" It was an extraordinary gamble that voters

PROMISE THAT I WILL BE YOUR REIBUTION . IT WAS AN EXTRAORDINARILY GAMBLIE THAT VOTERS would either identify with Trump's vengeance or not consider it a deal-breaker. It paid off. Evidence of that was clear long before last Tuesday. Trump's most lucrative 24 hours of fundraising came after he was convicted in New York in late May of disguising hush money payments to a porn star. His next biggest hauls came when he was arraigned a few weeks earlier and in August 2023 after his mugshot was released in a separate criminal case in Georgia.

It is not just Trump who wants his pound of flesh — the list of individuals and entities that he has threatened with some form of vengeance stretches to more than a hundred, according to National Public Radio. His supporters want it too. First in line would be those who have investigated and prosecuted Trump. His base believes Washington is run by a corrupt Democratic machine that deployed “lawfare” to hound him into oblivion. The reality is that Joe Biden's attorney-general, Merrick Garland, took almost two years to appoint a special counsel to investigate Trump. He was given every chance to run out the clock. That he has now done.

Richard Nixon also had a long enemies list, which included celebrities like Barbra Streisand and Democratic senators, such as Walter Mondale. Senior officials at the FBI and the Internal Revenue Service refused to carry out his wishes. Nixon was undone by a Supreme Court that forced him to release his incriminating tape-recorded conversations. Other than the courage of stray civil servants, those checks will not apply to Trump. This Supreme Court is in his corner and Capitol Hill looks set to be controlled by loyal Republicans. The question is not whether Trump will replace the heads of investigative agencies but with whom.

That does not mean he can simply throw his enemies in jail. Trump's legal bills ran up to [\\$171,000 a day](#), according to Open Secrets, a group that investigates money in US politics. Unlike him, anyone Trump targets with tax audits or probes will be unable to tap a campaign to pay their lawyers. Even nuisance investigations with little chance of success can bankrupt their targets. Financial terror is how other strongmen, such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán and India's Narendra Modi, have inflicted pain on opponents and punished nonconforming civil society and the free media.

Fleeing abroad is no remedy. Unlike in Hungary or India, the US Treasury's reach is global. Plan B is not solid. There is no safe hiding place for your money. The hope is that Trump's threats are empty. “I have no doubt Trump plans revenge on many people,” says George Conway, a never-Trump Republican who Trump considered as his solicitor-general in 2017. “But we also know that he is impulsive, easily distracted and incompetent.”

The same does not necessarily apply to the legions of incoming Trumpians — in contrast to 2017, when an unprepared Trump picked from a more conventional roster of Republicans. The Plantagenet echo of “Who will rid me of this turbulent priest” — casual kingly words that led to an archbishop’s murder — should be borne in mind. In the super-enabled climate of today’s Washington, Trump will not be sole keeper of the score-settling account. Others will be keen to anticipate his wishes.

edward.luce@ft.com

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2024. All rights reserved.
