

Opinion **US politics & policy**

While Democrats sleep

As Donald Trump tears up America's rule book, the minority party can't work out how to respond

EDWARD LUCE



Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer and other Democrats hold a press conference in Washington. The veteran politician is following the rules of a vanished age © J. Scott Applewhite/AP

Edward Luce YESTERDAY

Donald Trump is making good on his threats. Giving Elon Musk plenipotentiary powers, driving a cyber truck through the US constitution, threatening allies with economic war, blaming DEI for the country's worst air crash in years and obliterating America's aid agency are just a sample of moves in his opening fortnight. Trump is burning America's rule book. If he carries on like this, Democrats will have no choice but to send him a strongly worded letter.

To claim that America's minority party is too punch drunk to get its act together would be charitable. None of Trump's moves should come as a surprise. He is "flooding the zone" like he did in 2017. For years, he has been insisting that America's system is rotten. Now he is putting a torch to it. Aside from the markets, which still have trouble processing that Trump means what he says, Democrats stand exposed as complacent.

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Not being parliamentary, the US lacks an opposition leader to spearhead the fightback. The system's closest approximation, Chuck Schumer, the Senate minority leader, is following the rules of a vanished age. Democrats could have blocked confirmation

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DEMOCRATS COULD HAVE BLOCKED COMMUTATION

hearings for Trump nominees — many of whom would have been laughed out of the chamber in that bygone era. A single

Republican, Alabama's Tommy Tuberville, froze all of Joe Biden's military appointments for almost all of 2023. But Democrats are following regular order.

They are also invisible to the American public. Hours after being sworn in, Trump issued a blanket pardon for around 1,500 people convicted of storming Capitol Hill four years ago and commutation for the 14 hardcore felons. Eight days later Democratic leaders held a press conference to condemn Trump's move. The pardons were a green light to future assaults on US democracy — including the one that Schumer could have argued was happening now. Democrats should have said as much that very day.

It is not as if Schumer is being outshone by colleagues. A few days after Trump's inauguration, Hakeem Jeffries, the Democratic leader in the House of Representatives, posted: "Presidents come and Presidents go. Through it all. God is still on the throne." That is as may be. But fatalism has no track record of stopping revolutions.

Do not look to the Democratic National Committee either. Last weekend the DNC elected a new chair, Ken Martin, a Minnesota party official. But the hustings were noticed because of the outgoing chair Jaime Harrison's plea that they reserve a place for a non-binary Democrat on its seven-member committee. Delegates also acknowledged that America is built on indigenous land. Words like "string quartet" and "Titanic" come to mind.

Were all things still equal, Schumer's approach would seem reasonable. His view is that Democrats should separate the signal from the noise. An example of this would be fighting tooth and nail to stop Trump from occupying the Panama Canal Zone but ignoring his renaming of the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America. Schumer recently predicted that "Trump will screw up". Republicans would then lose the 2026 midterm elections and Trump then become a lame duck.

Schumer's playbook is the 2006 Democratic midterm sweep just two years after George W Bush was re-elected. Barack Obama's presidential launch came three months later. The hope is that Democrats can pull off a similar rebound now. But Trump is not Bush Junior. He is not even Trump 1.0. They say always pick your battles. Yet Democrats seem to overlook that they are in a full-blown war. Assuming that they will fight the next election on a level playing field is an act of faith. Trump

has been in office for two weeks. There are 21 months until the midterms.

What, therefore, should Democrats be doing? Many argue their best course is to sound the alarm when merited and hope that, on top of Trump's own incompetence, he will be constrained by court rulings and market corrections. Here is another view. Congress is sidelined. The one person whose powers the Senate ought to adjudicate is Musk. The giga-tycoon has seized control of the federal payments system and the country's personal data. He has no legal basis to do so.

Where in the constitution does it say that the unelected richest man in America gets to decide which programmes live or die, who to hire and fire, and what contracts to revoke? An alert opposition would ask: "Who elected Elon Musk?" It seems an act of will not to make that a rallying cry. When life gives you a Bond villain, make Bond-villain lemonade.

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