

Opinion **Donald Trump**

The Trump 50 per cent doctrine

With ruthless purges of the US government, the president is tipping the scales towards autocracy

EDWARD LUCE



US President Donald Trump, who took office for the second time last month, has already purged the state's repressive organs and installed loyalists in key positions © Tasos Katopodis/Getty Images

Edward Luce

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If you could condense the Democratic party's plan into one line, it would be: "Just wait until the midterm elections." Faith that the economy under President Donald Trump will curdle is already backed by data. Inflation expectations are rising, consumer confidence is falling and voters are starting to chafe at public job cuts. Throw in the cumulating toll of Trump's trade wars and a midterm defeat seems plausible.

But betting on Trump's failure misses what got him there. The worse things go for him in politics as it is meant to be played, the likelier he is to rip up the rule book. Former vice-president Dick Cheney had a rule that if there was a 1 per cent risk of something happening, we must act as if it will. Cheney was referring to terrorists after 9/11 using weapons of mass destruction. The risk that Trump will take America across the line into autocracy looks more like 50:50.

The more precarious his situation, the more boats he will burn. Just over six years ago, I deemed Trump not a fascist because he was missing a key trait — a plan to seize control of the so-called power ministries. With apologies for self-quoting (which I promise not to repeat), [this](#) was my verdict: "The first thing aspiring

totalitarians do is conduct a purge of the military. Loyalists must be installed. Then they methodically do the same for the police, intelligence agencies and beyond . . . Trump is not even trying to do this.”

This time, Trump began with exactly that plan. Within a month, he decapitated each of the state’s repressive organs and put loyalists in their place. Last Friday, he [purged the top levels](#) of the Pentagon. His firing on social media of CQ Brown, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, and Lisa Franchetti, chief of naval operations, got rid of the pre-eminent African American and woman in America’s senior brass. This fits with the new defence secretary Pete Hegseth’s war on DEI. Hegseth even implied that Brown had been given the job because of affirmative action.

More serious is what Trump believes his pick for the new US military chief, Dan Caine, is prepared to do for him. “I love you sir. I think you’re great sir. I’ll kill for you sir,” Trump claims that Caine told him when they first met. Trump tried last time to deploy US troops on the streets to shoot protesters and immigrants crossing the border. But he failed to prepare the ground by putting henchmen in control. “I wouldn’t take [him] literally every time he did it,” Bill Barr, Trump’s one-time attorney-general, told CNN. “At the end of the day it wouldn’t be carried out and you could talk sense into him.”

This time, Trump has enablers in those jobs. Last Friday he also fired the judge advocate-generals for the navy, army and air force. These are the senior legal officers who tell military leaders what is legal and what is not. Kash Patel and [Dan Bongino](#), his new head and deputy head of the FBI, are in place because they have promised Trump unquestioning obedience. “The only thing that matters is power,” said Bongino, who, like Hegseth, is a former Fox News anchor. “We have a system of checks and balances? Haha! That’s a good one.”

A mistake of Trump’s opponents in his first term was to believe he would be undone by [former special counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation](#) into his alleged Russia collusion. The Mueller report, which was nevertheless damning, has been corroborated by Trump’s pro-Russia moves in the past two weeks. But Mueller’s findings were a damp squib partly because Barr pre-released his recommendation not to prosecute. There will be no Trump probes this time. Those in danger include [Mark Milley](#), the former chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, who earned Trump’s enmity by refusing to obey unconstitutional orders.

The invective is also stronger this time. Anyone who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities, goes the saying. Elon Musk, Trump’s

alter ego, has called for impeaching judges and jailing journalists. The pardoned ringleaders of the January 6 Capitol Hill storming have licence to act as Trump's shock troops. As the political scientist Larry Diamond put it: "Fear now stalks the land."

Not many are prepared to risk their jobs or regulatory scrutiny. Wavering Republican senators are brought into line by Musk's apparent threats to spend millions ejecting them. Those who know Trump's worst instincts, such as Barr, still support him. But new people are also in position. When things go wrong, Trump will be tempted to cross the point of no return.

edward.luce@ft.com

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