

**FT Swamp Notes** **US politics & policy**

## TDS is a real condition

What does such sycophancy tell us about the state of US democracy?



A Cabinet meeting at the White House on April 30 © Getty Images

## Edward Luce

Published MAY 2 2025

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Some time during 2016, people on social media started to accuse me of suffering from Trump Derangement Syndrome. The diagnosis was indeed slapped on anyone writing or talking critically about then candidate Donald Trump. This kept going incessantly for eight years. About 104 days ago it mysteriously stopped. The breach is particularly odd because I've never been as witheringly critical of Trump — and indeed as alarmed by his impact — as I have since his inauguration. Shouldn't my TDS have degenerated from an illness to a chronic disease? Apparently not. It seems I'm exonerated from overstating Trump's effect on the world.

Credit for this belongs solely to Trump. Conservative and independent friends who once strove to put the best gloss on Trump have noticed the ground is missing beneath their feet. I give credit to these Wile E. Coyotes for acknowledging gravity.

And to be fair to Trump's sane-washers they were in multitudinous company. Among these were the captains of Wall Street, the hedge fund kings and private equity barons. Massive wealth was present at Trump's inauguration, which took place in the Capitol rotunda that was vandalised four years ago when his supporters tried to overturn an election. Among his guests were Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg and Shou Zi Chew, TikTok's chief executive.

Then Trump started talking. He promised to usher in a new "golden age" of peace by expanding US sovereignty to Panama and Mars and declaring economic war on the world. Trump's warlike pacifism and value-destroying transactionalism have been at full throttle ever since. His fair-weather supporters have been hit by climate change. Most of them are keeping their scepticism to themselves. It takes genuine courage to be a Liz Cheney. The Alaska senator, Lisa Murkowski, [explained it best to a town hall](#) last week: "We are all afraid, OK? I'm oftentimes very anxious myself about using my voice because retaliation is real." Remember, Murkowski has been a Republican senator since 2002.

I divide US politics into three types of people; those who identify Trump as a unique threat; opportunists, Panglossians and others whose instinct is to apply lipstick to this pig; and genuine devotees to the Trump cult. The latter are the ones suffering from TDS. Take Florida's Anna Paulina Luna who wants Congress to pass a law adding Trump's likeness to Mount Rushmore to reflect his "towering legacy". Or New York's Claudia Tenney, who proposes to make Trump's June 14 birthday a federal holiday alongside George Washington's. Then there's Tennessee's Andy Ogles whose bill would amend the US Constitution to allow Trump to run for a third term so he has time to restore "America to greatness". North Carolina's Addison McDowell would rename Washington's Dulles Airport the Donald J. Trump International Airport to thank him for the new "golden age of America". And so on.

Or watch Tuesday's two-hour open press Trump cabinet meeting in which principals fell over one another North Korea-style to praise their sovereign. This included Mike Waltz, Trump's national security adviser, who said, "Mr President, over the last four years the world experienced a total lack of zero [sic] leadership under Biden and then we've had 100 days of your leadership with respect, with strength, starting with 'there'll be all hell to pay'." Waltz's self-abasement was not enough to stop him from [being fired two days later](#). Elon Musk (remember him?) said: "I think this could be the greatest administration since the founding of the country." The attorney-general Pam Bondi said Trump's first 100-day achievements had exceeded any other presidency in full — predecessors that JD Vance, the vice-president, summarised as mostly "placeholders"

mostly placemolders .

But my favourite bit was when Bondi announced that Trump had seized 3,400kg of fentanyl at the border, “which saved — are you ready for this media? — two hundred and fifty eight million lives.” There we have it. Three-quarters of America would have died since January had Trump not nobly returned to power. I give you the definition of lunacy. Trump’s cabinet and half his party are suffering from a readily diagnosable disorder called TDS. I assume there is no need for a second opinion.

That said, I willingly submit myself to a sanity test by my eminently sane colleague, James Politi, our DC bureau chief. James, I know you’re a reporter and don’t fancy a holiday in El Salvador right now but am I barking up the wrong tree? What does such sycophancy tell us about the state of US democracy?

## Recommended reading

My [column this week](#) explains the portents behind Mark Carney’s dramatic election victory in Canada. Again, it was all down to Trump. But Carney exploited his Trumpian windfall with great skill. Those with appetite for more Carney might read [my Lunch with the FT with him](#)

- from two years ago, in which he said he was short on America and long on India.

I also wrote a [one-off column in the New York Times](#) in advance of the launch next week of my biography of Zbigniew Brzezinski. I evaluate his remarkable relationship with Pope John Paul II and how it helped prevent a catastrophe in Europe. Thank you to the FT for giving me

- permission. And thank you to any Swampians who want to [pre-order my book](#).

There was a deluge of 100-day evaluations this week. Unsurprisingly, the one by Francis Fukuyama on “100 Days of Ressentiment” stood out. Do read his [short essay in Persuasion](#).

- Finally, read Martin Wolf on [why the US will lose a trade war against China](#). Too many of America’s partners trade far more with China than they do with the US. And the latter’s qualitative appeal is now under

assault.

## James Politi responds

Ed, I'll leave it to you to describe it as TDS, but it's very clear that Republican loyalty to Trump and everything he does remains fierce, even amid dropping poll numbers, a contracting economy and a scandal-driven [shake-up](#) on the White House national security team.

A case in point was on Wednesday afternoon on Capitol Hill, when the vast majority of Senate Republicans opposed a resolution that would have terminated the national emergency Trump used to impose sweeping “liberation day” tariffs on most of America's trading partners, and nullified the levies. Many Republicans who are traditional free-market conservatives have heard howls of protest from businesses and voters about the tariffs, and would privately love to see them gone. But they cannot muster the will to try to overturn them, and trigger the wrath of the White House.

That dynamic is happening in other areas, too. Republicans could have mobilised for the sacking of Pete Hegseth as defence secretary over Mike Waltz, the more hawkish national security adviser, over the “Signalgate” scandal. Instead, they allowed the former congressman from Florida to take the fall over the more MAGA-friendly former Fox News host. (Waltz is landing on his feet though, nominated to be US ambassador to the UN.) And Republicans of another era, who were very close to the US pharmaceutical and biotech sectors, would also not be allowing Robert F Kennedy Jr, a vaccine sceptic as health secretary, to push through the cuts to medical research he is.

## Your feedback

**And now a word from our Swampians . . .**

**In response to [“Trump, tech and the transatlantic trade fight”](#):**

“Many see Trump as accelerating the trend to a multi polar world. What are the implications for the EU? If it accepts this role, it most certainly cannot be unduly reliant on others for its defence. It must also be a major player in tech. It cannot remain viable dependent on tourism and niche sectors alone. That does not mean — as in the past — supporting “me-too” projects. Tech moves too fast. “Search” is now AI. It does require fostering an entrepreneurial friendly environment. This has

been known for some time. It is difficult, especially in a “dirigiste” and risk-averse culture with very unwieldy governance. But Europe must find its own way.” —

*Christian van Schayk*

## 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 James on [james.politi@ft.com](mailto:james.politi@ft.com), and follow them on X at [@JamesPoliti](https://twitter.com/JamesPoliti) and [@EdwardGLuce](https://twitter.com/EdwardGLuce). We may feature an excerpt of your response in the next newsletter

## Recommended newsletters for you

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**Trade Secrets** — A must-read on the changing face of international trade and globalisation. Sign up [here](#)

**Unhedged** — Robert Armstrong dissects the most important market trends and discusses how Wall Street's best minds respond to them. Sign up [here](#)

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