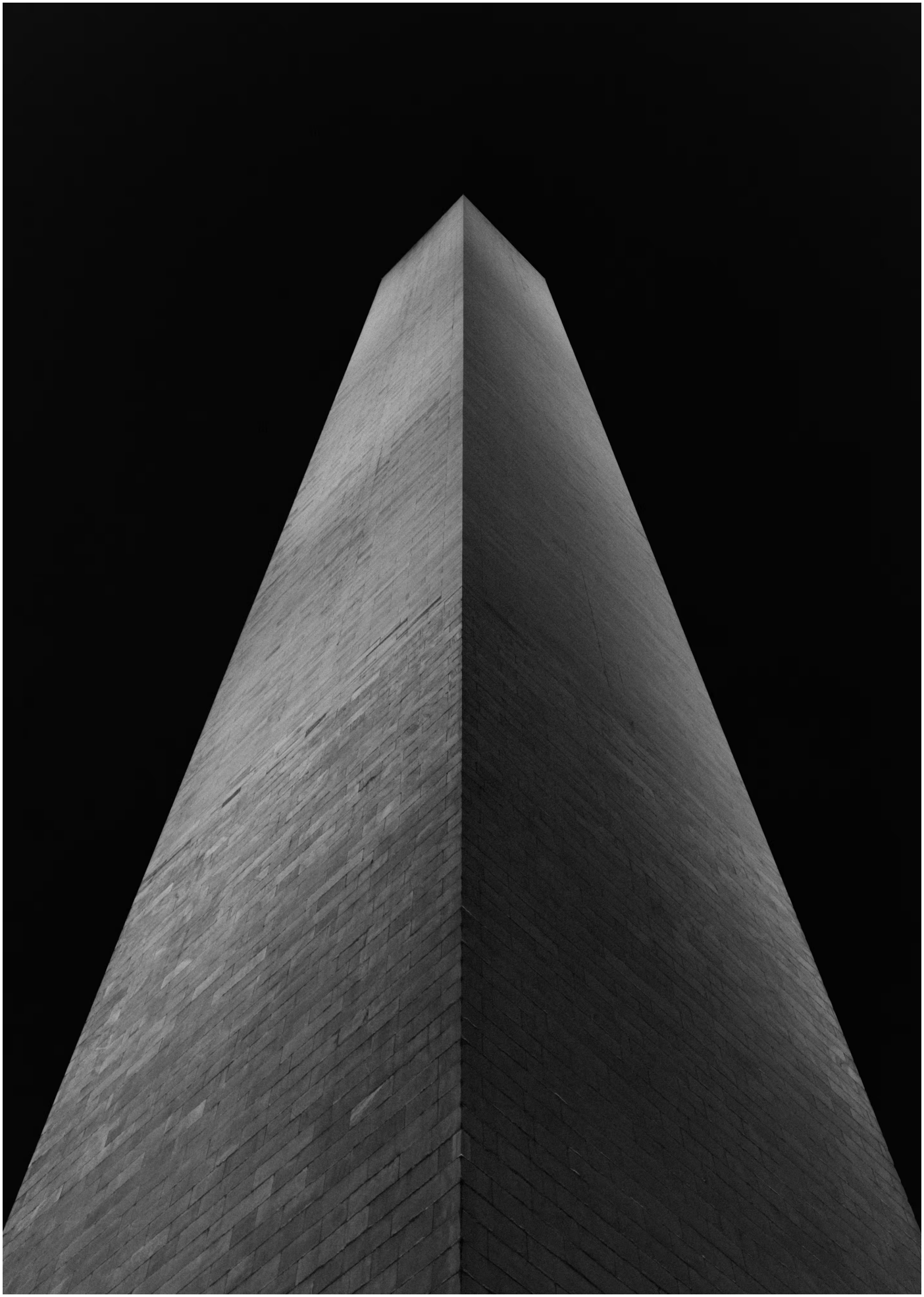
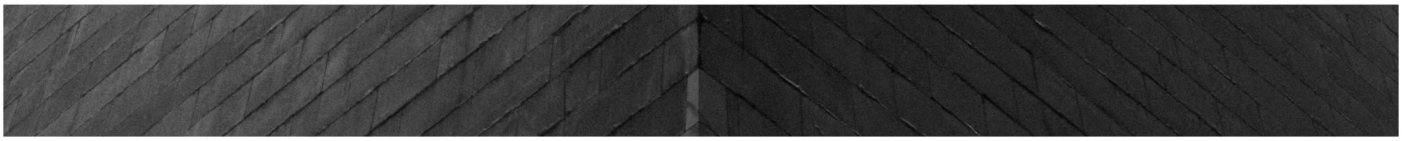




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FT Magazine **Donald Trump**

Donald Trump's endgame

What will the US president's last two years in Washington look like?

Edward Luce

Published 7 HOURS AGO

At some point in late summer, Donald Trump stopped taking my calls. It was nothing personal. He stopped answering most journalists. "The president is in a foul mood," said a senior figure in his orbit. "You wouldn't want to speak to him."

Earlier in the year, Trump had been only too keen to talk. Operation Epic Fury was a huge success, he said; America was beating Iran like never before. Since Jimmy Carter was humiliated almost 50 years ago by the Iran hostage crisis, no president had the guts to take on the ayatollahs and win, was Trump's consistent refrain.

Then his mood altered. His problem was that ever fewer Americans seemed to believe him. Drones and missiles kept flying. Iran's 1,000lb or so of "nuclear dust", as Trump calls enriched uranium, was still in Iran. Diesel prices kept rising. Trump's approval ratings continued to fall and Republican prospects for the US midterm elections on November 3 kept getting worse. Renaming the Strait of Hormuz the Trump Strait — one of his suggestions — would not fool anybody. Nor would telling people to vote "as if my name is on the ballot" be of much help. Trump's approval rating is running well below his party's.

Republicans are likely to lose control next week of the House of Representatives. There is a reasonable chance that the Senate will also go. Under the old rules of US politics, that would turn Trump into a lame duck. That would mean Democrats tying his administration up in investigations and subpoenas. His remaining agenda, such as it is, would also be dead on arrival. But almost

nobody I interviewed for this essay — people in and close to the administration, on Capitol Hill, among Republicans and Democrats, lobbyists and constitutional scholars — thought the lame duck status would fit him. Reaching across the aisle, and all the other bipartisan tacks that constrained presidents normally try, are not how Trump does things. "He is more likely to turn into an angry duck," says Chris Christie, former Republican governor of New Jersey and Trump's two-time rival for the presidential nomination. "My fear is not of specific things he will do — we could compile a list — but of the great Trumpian unknown."

What we can reasonably surmise is that Trump, who refers often to Democrats as "the enemy within", will instinctively tend towards a showdown with Capitol Hill than a late-life conversion to "Kumbaya".

Compared with the two previous elections when Trump was the incumbent — his first midterm in 2018 and the 2020 presidential election — panic about Trump's election interference is checked by hints of optimism. This is partly because the courts have blocked most of his attempts to affect vote counting. Thirty US states refused to hand over their voter rolls to Trump's Department of Justice. So far they have won 27-0 in the courts. The Supreme Court struck down Trump's attempts to take control of the US postal service for mail-in ballots. And the Republican-controlled Congress refused to pass the Save America Act, which would have imposed stringent new ID requirements on voters. Skulduggery thrives when margins are thin. Should the scale of the Democrats' victory be "too big to rig", as the saying goes, Trump's task would be a lot harder.

Nothing should be ruled out. "For Trump there are only two kinds of election; ones that he wins and ones that are stolen," says Larry Tribe, a Harvard constitutional scholar. "If people think they are going to wake up with clarity about a new world on November 4, they are deluding themselves."

Trump has three stages of election interference, says Ian Bassin, head of Protect Democracy, an advocacy group, and former White House counsel to Barack Obama — "deceive, disrupt and deny". The first, deception, involves persuading enough Republican voters that Democrats are cheating, or conversely, convincing Democrats, especially minorities, that it is too dangerous to vote. It is illegal under federal law to send armed men to polling places. That includes Trump's much feared Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency. "Do I think Trump will deploy ICE to a handful of states, then immediately withdraw them?" says Chris Coons, a

Democratic senator from Delaware. "Yes, because the airwaves will be blanketed with [images of] masked men brandishing guns and that will intimidate people."



The Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool © Nate Langston Palmer



Roses in the Washington Monument grounds © Nate Langston Palmer

About the photography

Nate Langston Palmer is a photographer born and raised in Washington, DC. Throughout this decade, he has been photographing life and community inside DC, a practice that has reshaped his relationship with the city.

This month the FT invited Palmer to revisit and make new work both in the public spaces of America's capital and in the neighbourhoods he calls home.

It would nevertheless take a big event to override what political analyst Charlie Cook has dubbed the "red undertow" — Republican voters likely to stay at home because they are disenchanted with Trump. Should deception fail to move the needle, disruption is always possible. But Trump keeps meeting obstacles. "There was a reason why the constitution's founding framers gave the US president no role in overseeing elections," Bassin says.

That leaves denial. Trump's best bet would be to get Mike Johnson, the speaker of the House, to refuse to certify the new Congress on January 3. If there were more Democratic wins being contested than the party's majority of seats, Johnson might block the swearing-in of new members. That would trigger a constitutional crisis. Johnson has made it clear that he is willing to improvise. "Some efforts [at vote rigging] are so diabolical and deeply embedded that they're impossible to prove," Johnson said recently. "But everyone instinctively knows something is wrong."

Reversing a federal election, however, requires systemic connivance. Should they lose big next week, many more Republicans could discover their post-Trump self-preservation instinct by January. Thom Tillis, the outgoing Republican North Carolina senator who increasingly fell out with Trump over the past 18 months, says there is a lot of Republican anger about Trump's architectural passions in particular. "My God, we're trying to talk about affordability and you're building luxury ballrooms and monuments to yourself?" says Tillis. "I was a Republican long before Trump and will be long after Trump. If the assholes on my side can't recognise that they made a mistake and address it, maybe they deserve to lose."

Trump lacks the support to make it easy to hijack a partial transfer of power. At between 27 and 38 per cent, depending on the pollster, he has even lower ratings than during the worst points of Covid-19. Many, thus, believe that his window to seize control is narrowing. "Trump must have

missed the day in autocracy school where you are taught to consolidate power while you are still popular," says Bassin. Many around Trump are showing their frustration. Steve Bannon, a co-architect of America First, points out that Trump's universe of small donors — a key measure of grassroots enthusiasm — has "evaporated". Republicans are thus relying on infusions from the tech titans. "Maga hates the White House ballroom and jets from the Gulf," says Bannon, of the Boeing 747 Qatar gave the US last year. "If we win, we will win ugly."

Toxicity is not in short supply. In one of the most closely watched races of the election, James Talarico, the Democratic Senate candidate in Texas, looks capable of flipping the seat after decades of attempts by his party. Fake videos have circulated alleging that a former student of Talarico was sexually abused by him. Another debunked story that Talarico had suffered a nervous breakdown this year was aired nightly on Fox and other outlets. No correction was issued. Talarico once described God as "non-binary". This led JD Vance, the vice-president, to imply he was a pervert. "You got to wonder what the [internet] search history of a man like that looks like," said Vance. Musk, who has pumped almost $200mn of his money into defeating Talarico, which breaks several election spending records, has called him a "creep" whose ideas are "pure evil". "There is something deeply wrong with Talarico," Musk posted.





The Kennedy Center © Nate Langston Palmer

Abdul El-Sayed, the Democratic Senate candidate in Michigan, has also been singled out for abuse. The word "terrorist" has regularly been bandied about. Trump called him a "jihadist" and "100 per cent Muslim Brotherhood". El-Sayed's opponent, Mike Rogers, called him "anti-Jew". Even by America's post-9/11 standards, the intensity of rhetoric against Muslims is high. Musk, in particular, has promoted the idea that western culture is on the ballot next week. He and others blame the recent French riots on Muslim immigrants and say France gives a foretaste of America's coming nightmare under the Democrats.

By contrast, Republican warnings about the Democratic impact on the US economy have been muted. Trump has taken a public stake in 30 US companies and has promised each adult American a $5,000 "dividend" if Republicans win. Such federal largesse has made it harder to motivate libertarians and fiscal conservatives. Though there are about two dozen Democratic Socialists on the ballot, Trump's economic meddling has blunted his ability to paint the left in statist colours. When asked to define what he meant by socialism, Vance tellingly did not mention rising deficits or public ownership. Socialism, he said, was wanting "to replace American workers with foreign workers and you want boys to play in girls' sports".

Could Trump nevertheless surprise the world by trying to work with a Democratic Congress, as figures such as Tillis advise? Or will he, in Bannon's words, "burn it all down"? Clarity on how he will handle divided government could come swiftly. After Republicans took a "thumping" in the 2006 midterm elections, George W Bush fired his unpopular defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, the next day. He also put his weight behind a bipartisan immigration bill. History might have turned out differently had it passed. Few believe that Trump would want to compromise with Democrats over the border. Democrats, likewise, would be in no mood to meet him halfway. Vows to abolish ICE are rife on the campaign trail.

It is not out of the question, however, that Trump could fire Pete Hegseth, his testosterone-loving "secretary of war". Trump's request for a near-50 per cent increase in the US defence budget to

$1.5tn — one of the few items on his threadbare legislative agenda — is unlikely to pass while Hegseth is running the Pentagon. Nor will Democrats approve open-ended funding for the Iran war. "Hopefully Trump will find a coherent strategy to get us out of Iran," says Tillis, who has publicly regretted his vote to confirm Hegseth. "I lay most of that debacle at the feet of Hegseth."

Other post-midterm pivots, such as Obama's effort at a fiscal grand bargain with Republicans following his Tea Party "shellacking" in 2010, seem even further removed from Trump's way of doing business. Likewise for Bill Clinton's embrace of third-way triangulation following his 1994 setback to Newt Gingrich's "new model" Republicans. Trump does not do triangulation. Besides, both Obama and Clinton were focused on re-election.



National Guard outside the Washington Monument © Nate Langston Palmer

Almost everyone anticipates that Trump's obsession with monuments will only grow. In the past few months, more and more of Trump's time, and that of his staff, has been diverted by the White House ballroom, his planned victory arch near Arlington cemetery (the "Arc de Trump"), failed

plans to rename the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts after himself, a botched project to beautify the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool, which instantly turned green, and an even odder project to remodel the East Potomac Golf Links, a picturesque public course on the capital's riverbank. After felling 430 trees, Trump's arboreal massacre was stayed by the courts. He plans a grand reopening of the golf course in early 2028. Trump disclosed last week that he had failed to persuade Sundar Pichai, Alphabet's chief executive, to rename the Atlantic Ocean on Google Maps as the "Trump Ocean". Pichai had apparently demurred. "Oceans are different, sir," Trump related Pichai as having said. Renaming the Potomac golf course might be an easier lift.

Compared with other potential distractions, however, Trump's architectural upheaval is low stakes. "If Trump checks out of everything else and just focuses on his buildings that would be the best outcome," says Christie. It is also not a likely one, Christie adds. Hakeem Jeffries, the Democratic House leader, who would become speaker if Democrats regain control, has promised that Trump corruption investigations will be his top priority. This would antagonise Trump even if Democrats refrain from embarking on a third impeachment. "He is going to lash out in ways that are going to get worse, not better," says Rahm Emanuel, former chief of staff to Obama and a 2028 Democratic presidential aspirant. "Trump's approach is that 'if I can't get something, then nobody else will get it', whether that's the Kennedy Center [now shuttered] or the Nobel Peace Prize."

Whether he is angry or lame, or both, Democrats are sharply divided on the best way of handling Trump. Some want a take-no-prisoners approach. Others believe a new season of "lawfare", which would come to naught, since they would need an unattainable 67 Senate votes to convict Trump, could single-handedly revive his popularity.

James Carville, who was Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign manager, recently enraged the left by saying that he would prefer Republicans to retain control of the House than Democrats getting a five-seat majority. The latter would make Jeffries a "hostage" to the Democratic Socialists of America, he said. Coons put it more delicately. "The two impeachment trials in Trump's first term made him a martyr," he says. "I would encourage a new Democrat House majority to focus on oversight and accountability."





Samman Mack, DC native, in NW Washington, DC © Nate Langston Palmer



China in NW Washington, DC © Nate Langston Palmer

That will be easier said than done. Capitol Hill’s last serious effort at reining in an out-of-control executive came in the wake of the 1970s Watergate crisis that ended Richard Nixon’s presidency. But his offences were comparatively few and did not extend to personal enrichment. Unlike Nixon, moreover, Trump will still be in office. The menu of his and his family’s alleged acts of corruption

is dizzyingly long. Even if Democrats widened their investigative scope to the private sector — for example, correlating corporate donations to Trump's ballroom with companies that have got rebates on his disallowed tariff revenues — Congress cannot prosecute. It can only refer investigations to Trump's loyalist attorney-general, Todd Blanche. "Blanche would laugh and throw them in the trash," says a White House official.

Most Democrats would still prefer to be caught trying than die wondering, even if Trump pardons everyone around him. Many are also mindful that previous decisions to let sleeping dogs lie did not turn out well. Chief among these was Obama's decision not to prosecute Wall Street executives for their excesses in the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis, or to investigate alleged CIA torture in Bush's global war on terror. Even Joe Biden's dwindling band of apologists have a hard time explaining why his Department of Justice was so slow to move against Trump for his failed January 6 2021 effort to overthrow the election. Bassin's Protect Democracy group studied how other countries have tried to hold wayward regimes to account, from South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission to presidential convictions in South Korea and Brazil. "The overwhelming conclusion is that you need some form of accountability — otherwise you are more likely to see it happen again," Bassin says.





Ahmad Nurriddine, who has lived in DC for over 50 years, in SW Washington, DC © Nate Langston Palmer





Inside the home of 97-year-old DC native Shukkiyah Nisar in SE Washington, DC © Nate Langston Palmer

One way of getting around Trump's pardon of acolytes from criminal liability and his own presidential immunity would be for Congress to compile a record of ill-gotten gains. Such a process would cover all Trump's alleged grift, from the Qatari jet to the proceeds from his sons' crypto vehicle. It would also encompass Musk's alleged seizure of personal data during his chainsaw-wielding time at the "Department of Government Efficiency" and the startling roster of foreign and domestic gifts to Trump in cash and in kind. The House would provide a detailed ledger of taxpayer money that could be clawed back through civil asset forfeiture cases. The term "lustration" — the act of purifying a political or religious system — has been doing the rounds among constitutional lawyers. This would chiefly be a drive to educate the public. "We have to build realistic expectations," said a Democratic lobbyist close to the party's leadership. "It is better to talk about a 'Democratic firewall' than a 'Democratic majority', because almost anything that we pass, Trump would veto."

Effective oversight requires discipline. That "government corruption" has recently soared to the top of US voter concerns, ahead of inflation and healthcare, is striking. Sixty per cent of Americans told the pro-Trump Fox News that they were "extremely concerned" by corruption. The question is not whether Democrats investigate Trump but with what end in mind. "The priority must be for a Democrat to take the White House in 2028," says Harvard's Tribe. "The next two years should be

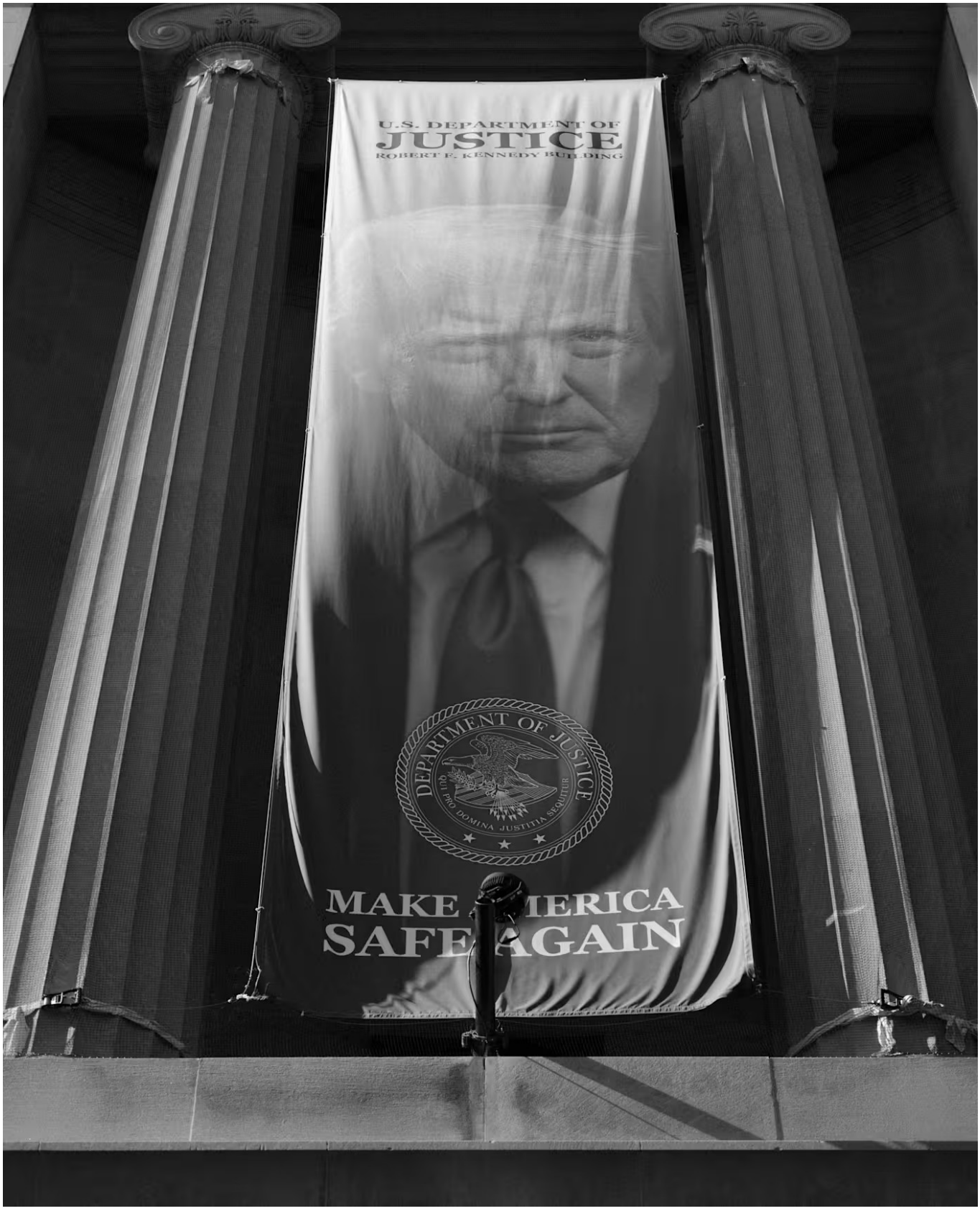
about setting that up." That would mean taking visible steps to address public anger about the rising cost of living, Democratic insiders say. Each time Trump vetoes a bill they would link it to his self-enrichment. As the Republican Tillis puts it: "If I were a Democratic Speaker, I would say, 'Mr President, you want to increase the debt ceiling, then why don't we get through some of these bullshit things like saving a billion on that ballroom? Maybe you could put up an obelisk instead?'"

On the global front, there is little Congress can do to check Trump's leeway. Trump's hunt for peace deals, and his volatility when he fails to secure them, implies a radical gamut of scenarios. "My fear is that foreign policy will become even more of an outlet for Trump's adventurism if he loses Congress," says Coons, who would be chair of the foreign relations committee if Democrats regain the Senate. Trump's foreign policy unpredictability can cut both ways.

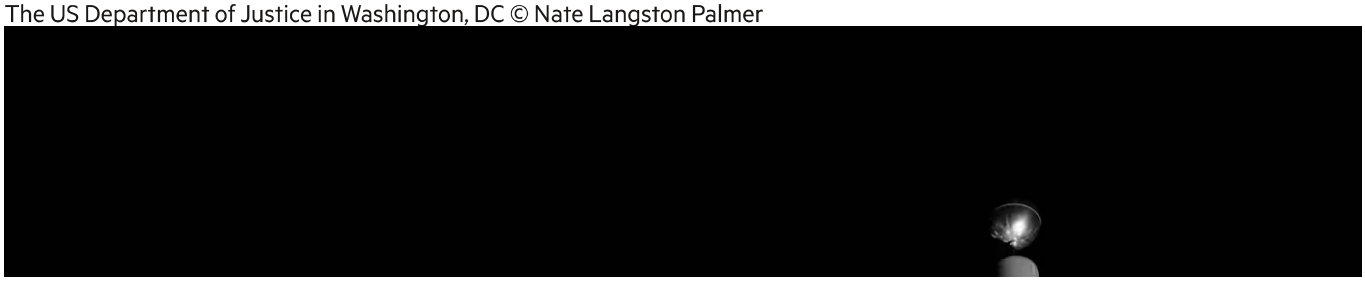
Unreported at the time was Trump's 2025 invitation to hold talks with his Iranian counterpart, Masoud Pezeshkian. Trump cut short his attendance at the June 2025 summit of G7 leaders in Alberta because he was expecting a response from Iran, says a former senior Trump official. Tehran's return call never came. "People forget how much Trump invests in personal diplomacy," says the official. "He talked to Kim Jong Un of North Korea. He really wanted to talk to the Iranians." Trump's first attack on Iran, Operation Midnight Hammer, took place a few days later.

The one relationship where Trump is likely to stay the course is on China. Trump has already met Xi Jinping twice this year, at a summit in Beijing in May and a glitzier return one in Washington in early September. Two more Trump-Xi meetings are scheduled this year. These will take place at the Apec summit in Shenzhen in mid-November, and at the Florida G20 summit in December that Trump will host at one of his golf courses. Trump will be the first US president to meet his Chinese counterpart four times in one year. "Trump puts high value on his meetings with Xi," says the ex-official. But Trump's evident taste for US-China stability can worsen problems elsewhere. The most pressing example of this is Vladimir Putin's proposed three-way talks on Ukraine in Shenzhen with Trump and Xi. Ukraine's increasingly embattled president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, would not be present. As the saying goes, if you are not at the table, you are on the menu.





The US Department of Justice in Washington, DC © Nate Langston Palmer





The American flag at the Washington Monument © Nate Langston Palmer

Trump's recent tilt to Putin, including his call for Zelenskyy to leave office and buying Russian diesel in a forlorn bid to reduce prices before the midterms, has triggered rare Republican pushback. There was special anger when Trump's envoy, Steve Witkoff, thanked Putin for being a "humanitarian". Republicans were already seething over Trump's refusal to implement a Russia sanctions bill that was passed in the wake of the unexpected death in July of Lindsey Graham, the

Republican South Carolina senator. Graham was the closest among Trump's confidants to being a champion of Ukraine. "Graham's Russia sanctions bill [which passed 86-11] was a good proxy for the will of Americans," says Tillis. "We can't get 86 senators to agree on motherhood. Then Witkoff describes Putin as a fucking humanitarian? It's hard to pivot from that."

Should there be, as some forecasters anticipate, a Democratic "blue wave" next Tuesday, the Trump 2028 succession race will heat up sooner than expected. The Democratic field already promises to be crowded. But a stinging rebuke for Republicans would place both Vance and Marco Rubio, Trump's secretary of state and losing 2016 presidential candidate, in a quandary. The two men lead most prediction markets to succeed Trump. Both would be penalised by being perceived as too close to him.

Kamala Harris's most costly moment in the 2024 election was her inability to think of anything that she would have done differently from Biden. Trump has not expressed much interest in whom he might anoint as his heir. Bannon has recently gone quiet after having said he had a plan to enable Trump to bypass the two-term limit and run for a third. But he points out that Trump is not on the hunt for his successor. No leader has ever dominated America's attention quite like Trump. The word "loser" is the dirtiest in Trump's vocabulary. It is near unimaginable that he would become less angry following a big loss than he is now.

Whatever mood he is in, and however badly he has squandered his political capital, a post-Trump world still seems a long way off. "Put it this way," Bannon says. "Trump is not looking to turn over his ballroom to Vance."

Edward Luce is the FT's US national editor.

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