

The Imperial Presidency: How Donald Trump's second term is changing the White House forever

-Sarah Ferguson

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US President Donald Trump in the Oval Office, where his taste is reflected. *(Samuel Corum/Sipa/Bloomberg via Getty Images)*

Donald Trump is less than halfway through his second term, an Imperial Presidency that may change the role forever.

That change is being seen both inside and outside the United States, according to New York Times reporters Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan.

"It became clear to us within the first few months of the presidency that we were witnessing a form of regime change in our own country," Haberman told 7.30.

"This is just a fundamental remaking of the presidency, and not just in terms of how Americans view it and how a president behaves, but how the rest of the world views an American president."

This administration has become very good at keeping secrets, but Haberman and Swan have managed to penetrate the centre of Trump's Imperium for their new book, *Regime Change*.



Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan have written a book about the first year of President Donald Trump's second term. (*ABC News*)

In his first term, from 2017 to 2021, Mr Trump did not know how Washington worked and brought in traditional establishment figures to run the administration, including [former secretary of defence James Mattis](#) and [former secretary of state Rex Tillerson](#).

According to Swan, this time Mr Trump was careful not to involve people who "despised his worldview".

"By the end of his term, he really resented the effect that they had on his presidency," Swan said.

"Talking him out of things that he wanted to do, like starting a massive trade war, pulling American troops out of areas around the world, pursuing more ambitious foreign policies, going after his enemies."

Exploding the norms of the office

Swan and Haberman call that first term, "diluted Trump", a different phenomenon from what they say has unfolded since January 2025, when Trump returned to the Capitol to swear his second oath of office.



The assassination attempt on Donald Trump saw him raise his fist defiantly. (*AP Photo: Evan Vucci*)

"This term, this White House, is really unrecognisable to the last one," Haberman said.

"We are looking at a president who is operating so uninhibited based on the fact that he has presidential immunity from the Supreme Court, based on the fact that the Republican Congress members are totally cowed by him, based on the fact that he has a very loyal team around him and he is really operating on such a pure gut level in a way we just did not see before."

As Swan explains it, Mr Trump has exploded the norms of the US presidency.

"He took America to war in the Middle East again in Iran without even talking to Congress, he authorised Delta Force to go into Caracas and [snatch a foreign leader](#) out of his bedroom in his pyjamas in the middle of the night to do regime change in Venezuela, he didn't talk to Congress," Swan said.

"He started a trade war with the whole world on Liberation Day in April; he didn't talk to Congress.

"He's operating with raw unilateral power to reshape the world in the ways that he wants to, again, unencumbered by the usual checks and balances."



Former Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro was captured by US operatives in a daring raid.
(Reuters: Eduardo Munoz)

As an example of this new power, Swan and Haberman offered 7.30 an account of Mr Trump's decision to go to war with Iran, including classified briefings in the Situation Room.

"That decision that Trump made was a really good example of second-term Trump," Swan said.

"Of Trump saying, 'You know what? You might all be telling me about this risk and this risk and this risk, but at a really deep gut level, I believe that this Iranian regime is a paper tiger and they're going to fold really quickly and the US military is going to be indomitable and I'm going to authorise this operation with Netanyahu'.

"That's really how that went down."

That operation has now resulted in an uneasy peace deal with the Islamic Republic, and Swan says it, too, was an example of staving off scrutiny.

"This peace deal, whatever it is we're living through right now with Iran, the memorandum of understanding, the number of people in the US government that had seen that document before it was released to the public was minuscule," he said.

"You had very senior people at the State Department and the Pentagon and the intelligence community who had no earthly idea what was in that document until it was public."

Bunker mentality

The authors may be the most formidable subject matter experts in the US.



Jonathan Swan's 2020 interview with Donald Trump went viral. (*Axios*)

Haberman began reporting on then real estate tycoon Donald Trump for New York tabloids more than 25 years ago.

Swan picked up the Trump beat as a political reporter for US congressional publication *The Hill* in 2015, when Trump was the least likely candidate to triumph in the Republican presidential primary.

When Trump won, Swan found himself well-positioned to cover the first Trump presidency for the new media title *Axios*, including a viral interview with Mr Trump in 2020.

The reporters united at the New York Times, where their relentless skills have enabled them to reach deep into Trump world.

After the chaotic revolving door of the first administration, this time they say Mr Trump has a very small group of advisors.

"The most powerful country in the world is really being run by about five or six people, given the day, maybe seven or eight," Swan told 7.30.

The loyalty of the current group surrounding Mr Trump was forged in the years after he lost to Joe Biden in 2020, as special prosecutor Jack Smith pursued the former president, investigating Mr Trump's role in the [January 6 riots](#), and his mishandling of classified documents, as well as numerous state investigations stretching from Georgia to New York.

"Many of them were with him in the '21 through '24 period and were actually quite radicalised by the experience of being under investigation," Swan recounted.

"So when they come back, it's very much a bunker mentality, and it's us versus them.

"When Trump talks about an enemy within, which is a quote he has said many times, he's talking about his domestic enemy.

"Trump sees the biggest enemies to him as not Russia and China or foreign terrorists. He sees it as Americans who oppose him."



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping wield a lot of power but neither may be seen as Trump's greatest rival. *(Reuters: Maxim Shemetov/Pool)*

The desire for this group to take back the White House in 2024 included the cold calculation that returning to power meant an end to all investigations of their activity in term one.

Hundreds of interviews about events across the first year of this term form the narrative of the book, from secret meetings in the Situation Room to Trump, super glue in hand, affixing gold appliqué to his walls.

Haberman and Swan seem to have ears and eyes on it all, including the rank humiliation of supplicants, eager for Trump's approval or largesse, none more excruciating than the fawning tech titans, one of whom, Mark Zuckerberg, urged his child to write to Trump, saying he is looking forward to the golden age of America.

World's 'most powerful man' ever

Mr Trump told Swan and Haberman it would have been better for the Democrats if he had served his two terms concurrently.



Donald Trump has the United States's many intelligence and military resources at his command. *(Reuters)*

The conversation took place during a meeting between the president and the pair in the Oval Office.

"Instead of having two consecutive terms at the height of a global pandemic, which was still raging in 2021, inflation was rising around the globe. There was anti-incumbent sentiment around the globe. He would've had to deal with the thorny issue of withdrawal from Afghanistan ... and he very likely would've left on the same trajectory that several lame duck presidents leave, which is unpopular," Haberman said.

Asked why he would invite the reporters in to meet him, since both were celebrated for scoops exposing the president, Haberman said: "I try not to peer too deeply into his mind on why he does certain things.

"But he almost never fully closes a door on anyone in media."

Sitting across the resolute desk, the president had an advisor bring a document for the pair to look at.



Natalie Harp is the Trump advisor who showed the list to Swan and Haberman. *(Reuters: Evan Vucci)*

"It begins with a sentence saying, Donald Trump is the most powerful man who's ever existed on the planet by far. And then it goes on to compare him to what Trump tells us are the top 10," Swan told 7.30.

"And it's Mao, Stalin, Hitler, Napoleon, Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Attila the Hun, the Caesars, Tamerlan, William the Conqueror.



Former Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and former Chinese leader Chairman Mao Zedong made Mr Trump's list. (*Wikimedia Commons*)

"What it was saying was that Donald Trump is the most powerful man who's ever lived because he's in charge of the US military. He's in charge of the most powerful economy in the world, but he's willing to use that power in ways that previous presidents haven't."

A historian did not write the paper, as the president claimed, but by a golf caddy.

After this term, the gilding and gold trim affixed to the walls and mantels in the Oval Office may be chiselled off, Donald Trump's name will not return to emblazon the Kennedy Center but the message from Swan and Haberman's powerful coverage is that the deep changes he has wrought to the nature of the presidency itself, with its ability to wield power unchecked, will remain.