

OPINION DECLARATIONS

The Art of the Self-Deal

Thoughts on how Trump-era corruption is affecting Americans as a people.



By **Peggy Noonan**

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President Trump speaks in Palm Beach, Fla., Jan. 16. ANNA MONEYMAKER/GETTY IMAGES

I'm thinking about the deeper effects of governmental corruption in the Trump era, and why it leaves many not only indignant but uneasy. I suspect it's doing something to us as a people. The thoughts were prompted by a poll this week from Reuters/Ipsos, which Reuters headlined "Most Americans Believe Trump Has Inappropriately Profited Since Returning to Power." It reported that 69% of respondents see his personal business interests as influencing presidential decisions. Two-thirds of independents, half of Republicans and 9 in 10 Democrats shared that view.

Republicans, God bless them, were split on whether graft under Mr. Trump has gotten worse or better or stayed the same, which makes that polling question a case study in how bright people are capable of not seeing what they don't want to see.

We'll quickly posit what we mean by Trump-era corruption. I see two general areas, personal enrichment and the use of government to satisfy private goals.

The personal-enrichment part is suggested by recent and frequent reports showing that Mr. Trump's net worth, and that of his family, has surged dramatically in his second term. This isn't just wealthy folks seeing their stocks go up: Trump businesses have developed positions in industries over which the administration exercises power.

Some were in cryptocurrency, and there is the \$Trump meme coin, some of the largest buyers of which have been given access to the president, some at a dinner at one of his golf clubs. A Washington Post analysis suggests roughly half may be foreign-based. The Journal has reported that representatives of Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi agreed to purchase 49% of a Trump crypto entity for \$500 million. Sheikh Tahnoun is not only a businessman but a senior member of the United Arab Emirates' ruling family and its national-security adviser. This newspaper also reports that Mr. Trump made many millions licensing his name to overseas property developers, including developers in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E. and Oman.

These are items in a longer possible list, but are representative of the administration's general approach. The size and means of this enrichment would seem . . . dubious? Careless of appearances? Appalling?

As to the use of governmental power to achieve not public but personal goals, including revenge and punishing enemies, there have been numerous reports—it feels like a new one every day—of bending, testing or getting around the law to make the administration's friends happy and enemies sad. This has included paying people in Mr. Trump's orbit to lobby for presidential pardons—this newspaper has done great work there—launching strange investigations, and muscling law firms and media companies.

Republicans seem generally not to have found the last alarming, which is alarming. You don't like Jimmy Kimmel? I don't like Jimmy Kimmel; he's boorish, crude, tinnily self-valorizing. But defending speech when it's muscled by government? Yes, of course. Governments are worse than

networks because the former have the power to crush you, and you only get one at a time, and you can't change the channel except every four years. Be on the side of the information flow, even when it's full of sludge. Be on the side of the voice, not the big crushing thing. Conservatives used to know to fear government, and beat it back.

An odd thing about all this is the absence of furor. There is no broad public outcry. Why? Because corruption is a constant and "the other side is dirty too." Because the scandal threshold has skyrocketed. President Trump walked into history dragging a long tail of litigation, accusation and lawsuits behind him. He never sold himself as a man of moral rectitude, and most supporters didn't think that's what they were buying. Jimmy Carter's shaking down the system to see what coins fall out would have been news, Donald Trump's doing the same is Tuesday.

And there's the sheer scale: The extraordinary becomes ordinary through repetition; scandals add up and become a blur, not a call to action. But the country pays a cost for all this. Institutionally, everything happening today sets a precedent. Every abuse we accept widens the range of possible misbehavior for the next administration.

Corruption is more dangerous, has a more deteriorating effect, than bad policy. Bad policy can be reversed. Corruption works its way into a system and changes its nature.

Suppose a Republican president leaves office having established that a president can use regulatory powers against antagonistic institutions, exert pressures on companies needing government approval, and demand personal loyalty throughout the executive branch, all with no lasting repercussions. The next administration, disposed in other ideological directions, inherits the precedents. It says turnabout is fair play.

An Ocasio-Cortez administration wouldn't have meme coins and golf resorts, it would look much cleaner! Progressives usually aren't set on personal cash, they're set on institutional power. They would privately thank Mr. Trump for proving restraints on executive power are weaker than previously thought, and publicly claim that finally we have a president who advances the *public* interest.

But I suppose the larger threat of governmental corruption is that it hurts the public's morale, its sense of seeing itself as a moral actor to whom politicians have to answer. Our entire system of government assumes a citizenry that polices its politicians, that says "You can't do that, this office isn't yours, your powers were lent to you for public purposes." If the public shrugs and looks away, Americans will lose the habit of thinking of themselves as entitled to a clean government. And they'll have to admit they surrendered their own views to the views of the tribe.

It is the public's role to uphold republican standards. In the past, a politician caught selling an office, taking money from interested parties, using governmental machinery for personal revenge was supposed to fear not only legal action but disgrace.

Citizens derive a certain dignity from believing that we enforce the rules. It reminds them who's in charge: them. You're giving up a lot when you give that up.

In times of corruption, good people who might run for office, don't. They think they can't survive in that world. Bad people, those with limited internal ethical and moral structures, are encouraged: Politics is a way to get rich and famous, to push people around. They are elected, govern badly, corruptly, and the cycle continues.

Unchecked corruption tells cynics not that they have an uninteresting flaw but that they are realists. Never tell cynics that. It gives them license.

As always, the whole world is watching. What it has seen lowers the esteem in which it formally (if grudgingly) held Americans. It embarrasses us before the world. It hurts our heart a little. We were the morally rectitudinous Doughboy GI Marshall Planning JFK and Ronnie People who made the wall come down. We did our best each generation to be equal to our reputation, or at least to have some class. There are foreign-policy implications to all this. Some day we'll need friends and see only the satisfied spite of the previously jealous.

Nothing good comes from this. When corruption is allowed, it governs not today but tomorrow too.

Peggy Noonan is an opinion columnist at the Wall Street Journal where her column, "Declarations," has run since 2000.

She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary in 2017. A political analyst for NBC News, she is...



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