

# Trump's Golden Age could usher in Gilded Age corruption

by Ken Brill, opinion contributor - 02/27/25

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Trump Tower in New York on Friday, March 22, 2024. (AP Photo/Ted Shaffrey)

The so-called “Gilded Age” in America was noted for the flourishing of [corruption](#). At his inauguration, [President Trump](#) declared America was entering a “[Golden Age](#)” under his leadership.

Judging from his first month back in office, Trump’s Golden Age seems to be opening the door to the Gilded Age’s affinity for corruption.

Trump often accuses people and institutions he does not like of being corrupt. For example, he said the New York judge who presided over his so-called hush money trial was [corrupt](#). Similarly, [New York state](#), the [U.S. government](#), a [former FBI director](#), the Department of Justice and the [U.S. Agency for International Development](#), among many others, are all corrupt in Trump’s view.

Despite his fondness for using the word “corrupt” as a negative epithet, Trump has taken steps since returning to the Oval Office that create opportunities for conflicts of interest and corrupt practices. A recent example of this is the Trump Justice Department’s decision earlier this month to [drop the prosecution](#) of New York Mayor Eric Adams.

Adams had been indicted by a grand jury for a variety of acts of corruption. The Justice Department’s [rationale for dropping the case](#) was political, not legal. Adams had agreed to help enforce Trump’s immigration policies. Seven prosecutors in New York and Washington, D.C. [resigned](#) rather than execute an order they viewed as a corrupt bargain.

Trump seems to have a soft spot for corrupt politicians. In addition to dropping Adams’s prosecution, he [pardoned](#) Rod Blagojevich, the former Democratic governor of Illinois who had been convicted of several corruption charges.

Trump’s Department of Justice also [dropped](#) campaign finance cases against former Rep. [Jeff Fortenberry](#) (R-Neb.) [and](#) Rep. [Andy Ogles](#) (R-Tenn.), the latter of whom, perhaps not coincidentally, has [introduced legislation](#) to permit Trump to serve a third term.

Trump has also taken systemic actions that create room for corruption and make it less likely to be challenged. For example, on Feb. 10, Trump signed an [executive order](#) requiring a 180-day pause in enforcing the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, saying the law, which makes it illegal for U.S. businesses to bribe foreign entities, “impedes U.S. foreign policy ... and harms national security.” The executive order called for developing new enforcement guidelines that would require the attorney general to approve future prosecutions.

Interestingly, this “pause” in enforcement came a few days before Trump’s meeting with Indian Prime Minister Modi, one of whose close friends, businessman Gautam Adani, [was being prosecuted](#) under the act for activities that misled U.S. investors.

Similarly, in early February, Trump fired the head of the Office of Government Ethics and the head of the Office of Special Counsel and in late January fired a number of [inspectors general](#) at government agencies, despite a law requiring Congress be given advance notice and specific reasons for firing an inspector general. Each of these officials had roles in finding or preventing waste, fraud, mismanagement and/or ethical breaches that produce corrupt acts. Their forced departures signal that Trump places little importance on ethics regulations and norms or the independent pursuit of waste and fraud in government agencies.

Additionally, Trump’s desire to reclassify [tens of thousands of positions](#) from the merit-based civil service to presidential appointments of loyalists would mean at least a partial return to the 19th-century spoils system for government hiring, which was rife with corruption and took decades to reform.

As in his first term, Trump effectively [retains control](#) of his family business interests, which present even more conflicts of interest as he begins a second term in office. The Trump Organization has more real estate deals in foreign countries than it did in his first term, some involving foreign governments.

Trump's social media platform, which he uses regularly, is an ongoing business in which his family retains an interest. Additionally, he is selling Trump-branded merchandise, ranging from Bibles and basketball shoes to digital Trump trading cards.

Trump is also known to own a significant amount of a specific brand of cryptocurrency. Shortly before his inauguration, he and his wife issued their own [crypto tokens](#), which have already earned them substantial sums and will be affected by the administration's approach to cryptocurrency regulation.

Interestingly, on Feb. 21, the cryptocurrency firm Coinbase announced Trump's Securities and Exchange Commission would [drop its lawsuit](#) against the firm, which is seen as a win for an industry that backed Trump's election financially.

Finally, there is [Elon Musk](#), whose multiple businesses deal with several government regulators and receive billions of dollars from U.S. government contracts. Trump has put Musk in charge of a less-than-transparent process for reducing the federal workforce and reshaping the government.

The potential for Musk to have [conflicts of interest](#) during this process abounds. For example, his social media company X is considering a finance option that would be subject to review and oversight by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, which Musk says in his social media postings he will close. Musk also has significant business interests in other countries, including China, where he also has significant debt.

The Gilded Age did not work out well for the American people or economy. Corruption contributed to that outcome and sparked calls for reform that led to the Progressive Era of citizen activism on behalf of good governance. These reforms turned the tide on rampant corruption, in Washington, as well as in city and state governments.

Trump's second term has begun with questionable actions related to ethics, conflicts of interest, political corruption and government officials such as inspectors general, whose job is to find and stop government waste, fraud and mismanagement.

If Trump's cavalier attitude toward the norms and legal requirements of ethics in government is left unchallenged by Congress, Trump's Golden Age may spark the same kind of citizen activism to prevent corruption and return high ethics standards to government that occurred at the end of the Gilded Age, beginning as early as 2026.