

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

THE STATE OF THE NATION PROJECT: A COMPREHENSIVE DISCUSSION ON AMERICA'S  
SUCCESSSES AND FAILURES

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2025

UNCORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

PANEL

CAMILLE BUSETTE, Vice President and Director, Governance Studies and Director, Race, Prosperity, and Inclusion Initiative, Brookings

WILLIAM A. GALSTON, Ezra K. Zilkha Chair and Senior Fellow, Governance Studies, Brookings

MICHAEL O'HANLON, Senior Fellow and Director, Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology, Brookings

CHRIS STIREWALT, Senior Fellow, AEI (American Enterprise Institute)

MODERATOR: Elaine Kamarck, Senior Fellow and Founding Director, Center for Effective Public Management, Brookings

\*\*\*\*\*

**KAMARCK:** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Brookings Institution. For the next hour, we've assembled a great collection of experts on government for the purpose of reviewing Donald Trump. I'm going to -- Can you hear me now, everyone?

**STIREWALT:** Yes.

**KAMARCK:** I know you can't see me, but I'm going to go ahead and talk to you. Talk to you anyway, and get this panel started anyway. In the whirlwind nine days in office, Trump has signed dozens of executive orders. Some of them, like his order to rescind birthright citizenship, are of dubious constitutionality. Others, like disbanding DEI programs, withdrawing from the Paris Accords and increasing enforcement of immigration, are more clearly within his rights. And still others, like his recent offer of bailouts for the whole federal government or stopping grants, are fodder for protests, protracted legal battles. All in all, Trump's actions in his first nine days are a combination of actions which are so vague that they can only be described as messaging actions and actions that target specific, often longtime government operating rules. And finally, actions that erode the cherished separation of powers. To help us sort out these first days, we have a distinguished panel. Camille Busette is vice president at the Governance Studies program here at Brookings and director of the Race Prosperity and Inclusion Initiative. Dr. Busette came from Brookings, came to Brookings from the World Bank and a career in the private sector and is an economist whose work focuses on systemic racism, the economic advancement of Black and Native American boys, the importance of social relationships to economic mobility and equality and equity in health care. Bill Galston holds the Ezra Z - Ezra K. Zilkha chair here at Brookings, where he also serves as a senior fellow. He is a regular columnist for the Wall Street Journal. Bill came to Brookings from the University of Maryland, and his most recent book is "Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Democracy." Michael O'Hanlon holds the Philip K -- Philip Knight chair in defense and strategy here at the Brookings Institution and is, among other things, a member of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board. His most recent book is "Military History for the Modern Strategist: America's Major Wars Since 1861." And last but certainly not least, is our neighbor, Chris Stirewalt, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a host of The Hill Sunday with Chris Stirewalt on News Nation. Before that, he spent 11 years as the political editor of Fox News. He's the author of "Broken News: Why the Media Rage Machine Divides America and How to Fight Back." So what's going on with this second Trump administration? Clearly, he's the president in a hurry. He has only four years, not eight years to make his mark. And having been president before, he knows considerably more about the exercise of power than he did four years ago. In addition, he seems to have had a quite experienced brain trust behind him in

Project 2025, which he didn't have eight years ago. So let's start with the big questions about the presidency itself. And I'll start with Chris. Chris, is Donald Trump going to be better at being president this time around? Will there be unintended consequences to his desire to break crockery?

**STIREWALT:** Well, yes, as we're already as we're already having some. And thank you so much for having me here. Such a distinguished panel. I certainly feel both last and least in this company. But as a very cool and relevant person, I am thinking a lot these days about Everett Dirksen because that's just what that's that's what all the kids are talking about. And I'm thinking a lot about Everett Dirksen and how Lyndon Johnson was able to corral Everett Dirksen, support for the Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act. Lyndon Johnson believed that he had won Everett Dirksen, but what he failed to understand, and he only found out later, was that Everett Dirksen was voting close to his conscience. And when Lyndon Johnson demanded that he vote against right to work legislation that was moving through, that was essential to Lyndon Johnson's keeping faith with the unions that were supporting him, Everett Dirksen switched and he and he voted for right to work. I think about all of this because Donald Trump. Has an extraordinary opportunity, which is he has the fanatic, almost religious support of a third of the country. Right. There's a third of Americans who are in with Donald Trump all the way. The typical thing that a politician does is transact based, or the goal is to transact based support into broad popular support. Right. You leverage the strong support that you have in your base to try to achieve things. I call these folks wink candidates or wink politicians who are able to look at their base and say, look, I know you don't like what I'm about to do, but you know you can trust me. Barack Obama was able to do it. Ronald Reagan was able to do it. And Donald Trump is better situated than any president of my lifetime to do it because his people love him regardless of what he says or what he does or regardless of policy and constancy. We saw this week How? What Donald Trump did on an executive order written like it was from the desk of Hugo Chavez to to direct people to quit disbursing federal grant moneys that Republicans in Congress had no awareness of. No one had told them it was coming. There had been no discussion about this. And then after it came out, they said, well, it doesn't mean what it says. What it means is that we don't like DEI, as you say, Elaine. This is messaging, right? That's what they said after. We didn't mean for this to be construed as a serious policy undertaking. We meant this to show our enthusiasm for this stuff. The backlash against that will continue to affect Republican lawmakers in swing states and swing districts, and it will cause them heartburn and aggravation, and it will make them less able and less willing to accommodate Donald Trump later on. You're making Dirksen right there. They'll be with him when it suits their political interests. It won't be they won't be with him when it

doesn't. And each of these little catastrophes will make it harder for them to stay with him on the hard parts and the things that he will have to necessarily deal with this year.

**KAMARCK:** Thank you. That was a great introduction. Camille, I want to go to you now. As we know, inflation was perhaps the biggest issue in this election. What is Trump done or what does he plan to do to alleviate prices at the consumer level?

**BUSETTE:** Well, Elaine, thanks very much for having me on this panel. And it's an incredible honor to be here with such distinguished colleagues. So welcome to everybody who has joined us. I will say that, you know, Donald Trump certainly ran on lowering prices, lowering consumer prices, but none of the executive orders issued thus far has been directed at lowering consumer prices. And in fact, I think the frequent discussion of tariffs, the actual aggressive action on immigration and the likelihood that some some sort of tax cuts will be passed, I think has economists at the Fed and otherwise forecasting a rise in inflation from basically 2.2%, where we are now to 2.5 to 2.6% over the next year. So that's to say that inflation, if we continue along the path that we you know, that the Trump administration has started to plow here, we will, in fact, experience a rise in consumer prices. The second thing I'll add is that the executive orders that encourage energy exploration are intended, I think, to lower energy prices for consumers. At least that's the claim. The claim is that, you know, if you drill for oil, that will drive energy prices down, but that is not substantiated by the facts. I think one has to realize that the US already produces a lot of oil. In addition, the market for crude is pretty soft right now, which means prices are pretty low for crude per barrel. And the financial sector that would have to fund future drilling isn't going to rush into something that could lead to lower oil prices and therefore lower profits. So the I think the the hope that any kind of drilling would also lower consumer prices is probably not going to materialize. So in some where we are at the moment on consumer prices is that the actions I've been taking so far are likely to going to be going to be inflationary. And if we in fact move in the direction of tariffs, as has been discussed and proposed in some white papers and proposals that are circulating, we will also be on the road to higher consumer prices.

**KAMARCK:** Thank you. And I apologize to our audience for my in and out appearances here. Let's go to Bill Galston. Are some of these actions simply about messaging to his base or will the courts slow him down? The attorneys general from several states took to the courts immediately yesterday over Trump's freeze of of grants. What does this mean for the expanding power of the president?

**GALSTON:** Republicans have been talking about the unitary executive for more than 20 years now. The Trump administration, I think, is the first one that is dead serious about translating that theory into practice. The administration genuinely believes, I think, that independent agencies should not be independent of presidential power, that departments should not be independent of presidential power. Donald Trump, during his first term, says, y'know, offered a unique interpretation of Article Two portion of the Constitution dealing with the presidency. He said, and I just about quote, Article Two means that I can do whatever I want. I don't think he's changed his mind about that. However, there are other pieces of the political system that may have something to say about it. So let me let me distinguish three levels of the debate that's going on. Level one is policy debate. And, you know, if Trump can maintain support of his party, he can move forward pretty much unimpeded on the policy dimension. But there are two others. Law and constitution. So, for example, the you know, the decision to fire more than a dozen attorneys, rather, inspectors general, runs into the teeth of a law of a law that Congress passed, I believe, in 2022, laying down the terms and procedures for dismissing attorneys. Inspectors general, the administration, I think, very sloppily violated that. Well, it could have achieved its objectives legally if it had been willing to willing to wait for for 30 days and offer some reasons for what it was doing. But instead, the courts may very well stop him from doing what he wanted to do, at least the way he wanted to do it, because the violation of law is obvious. Then there's the constitutional damage. President Trump has already issued an order ending birthright citizenship. There's a small problem with that order. Article two of the 14th Amendment. Number one. Number two, a history of Supreme Court jurisprudence stretching back to 1898, interpreting Article two of the 14th Amendment to guarantee birthright citizenship. And third, a lot of contemporary scholarship, including by very conservative organizations, basically backing up the court's longstanding interpretation of the constitutional requirement of birthright citizenship. So those issues will ultimately go to the Supreme Court. And I think the net effect of policy arguments, legal arguments and constitutional arguments will be to slow and even halt the administration well short of its vision of unitary and plenipotentiary executive power. But it won't be dull.

**KAMARCK:** Thank you, Bill. Thank you, Bill. I want to go to Michael finally, Michael. Trump is causing at least as much turmoil abroad as he is at home. And give us your opinion about his plans for Israel, Ukraine, NATO. Not to mention Greenland and Panama, two places that several months ago I could never have imagined asking about on a Brookings webinar.

**GALSTON:** And Elaine, don't forget about the 51st state to our north.

**KAMARCK:** Yes, right. Haven't forgot Canada, too. Go ahead, Michael.

**GALSTON:** Michael, you're there. You muted.

**KAMARCK:** Unmute yourself. Unmute yourself.

**O'HANLON:** It's nice to be with you all, Elaine And thank you for the question. And I like to divide Trump foreign policy into Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde categories because some of his ideas really aren't so bad, or at least he has the potential to turn what may sound crazy into something that was even usefully disruptive. And what I might put into that category would be perhaps his thinking on Ukraine, where I think President Trump said some outlandish things about the prospects for a near-term peace deal when he was candidate for president, that he could negotiate a deal in 24 hours, etc.. But his basic instinct that this war is more or less stuck and Russia's actually got a slight edge, of course, but that it's more or less stalemated and that it doesn't matter that much for American national security interests. Exactly where a border might be drawn between Russia and Ukraine. I think he's right about those points. It's it's a shame to have to concede that Vladimir Putin, could it have any reward for his unwarranted and heinous aggression? But the military reality is what it is. And it's frankly more important for the United States that this war end and also not escalate than for Ukraine to gain back all of its lost territory in Ukraine. Ukraine can still maintain a claim to that territory. So Trump's even if he doesn't pursue that on the battlefield. So Trump's framework, his instinct on Ukraine is not all wrong. And appointing retired General Kellogg as an envoy suggests a certain seriousness, much more so than the promise of a deal in 24 hours that he used to make on the campaign trail. And we'll just have to see if they can develop a strategy that actually sways Putin and modifies Ukrainian concerns and still helps Ukraine develop a long term, stable path toward sovereignty that it can sustain indefinitely. So there's there's hope because the pieces are getting together, at least in terms of a reasonable approach. And there's been some thoughtfulness about what levers the United States has at its disposal with its allies. And there's now a greater patience about what kind of time may be required to change Putin's mind and to organize a negotiation. So that's in the category of Dr. Jekyll. It's not so bad, but in the category of Mr. Hyde is this talk of Greenland and Canada, the idea of physically violating sovereign state territory ourselves, almost Putin like if you were to take it to an extreme, which I don't think is the most likely, but President Trump's not saying anything to rule out the use of military force, especially against Greenland. And also his comments on where Palestinians might be relocated fly in the face of everything I've ever heard any Arab leader say and anything that the United States itself has been committed to by way of promoting a two state solution with a

homeland for the Palestinian people somewhere in the original Holy Land or lavant, you know, a state of their own. This has been US and UN policy, but more importantly, US policy for decades. And President Trump has no serious framework or idea here that I can. Detect for how this could happen and be made something that people like the King of Jordan would accept and the king would be a necessary partner in any such scheme. It's a nonstarter with him, I'm quite sure. So that's in the Mr. high category. I'll give you one last thought and then stop this overview, which is that there are, of course, some policies where it's not yet clear which way it'll break and it could go in a reasonable direction or it could go in an unreasonable direction. Let me focus on President Trump's interest in the Panama Canal. On the one hand, American presidents going back to President Monroe, and I know we have we have some good presidential historians on this panel, but most Americans learn in school the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, when the United States was a tiny little country with a tiny little navy. Well, I guess it was becoming larger since we had the Louisiana Purchase by then. But still we didn't have much of a Navy. And President Monroe asserts that every power outside the Western Hemisphere better keep their mitts off all of the Western Hemisphere because the United States has an interest, perhaps not in colonizing or dominating or invading South America, but nonetheless in making sure nobody else does. So we've got this in our DNA as a nation that we have a particular interest in the entire Western hemisphere and particularly keeping outside powers away. And then going back to the Theodore Roosevelt corollary to the Monroe Doctrine from the early 20th century, we basically said that for the Caribbean Central American base and sort of that subregion of the Western Hemisphere, we reserve the right to make sure nothing happens that we don't like. And there's no basis in international law for that. But it's a long standing American policy. And, you know, great powers do tend to care disproportionately about what happens near their own borders. Vladimir Putin isn't the only one to think that way. He has incredibly brutal methods of pursuing his interests in his near abroad. But we have a long standing tradition in the United States of intervening ourselves. And I'm not suggesting that's legitimacy or creates legitimacy for President Trump's threats to somehow seize the Panama Canal or take back what Jimmy Carter gave back to Panama or what have you. But I am suggesting there's a long American tradition of being especially sensitive when any power traditional European powers. But now China would have undue influence and presence so close to the United States. And so depending on how President Trump were to pursue this, whether you like it or not, it may fall very neatly within a long standing American tradition of feeling like we have and should have unusual influence over things that are close to our own shores, especially in terms of keeping other powers out. So I don't I don't object to him raising this question. I think it's going to matter a lot just how he pursues his agenda. But on that one, it's too soon to say. I'll stop there.

**KAMARCK:** Great. Thank you, Michael. Thank you. Listen, besides the inflation which we talked about and the the other issues around his first moves into the presidency, the other two big, big issues that have moved voters in 2024 are immigration and the cultural issues. As we've seen, the Trump administration has moved quickly to dismantle these programs across the government. And high profile immigration raids are being conducted even as we speak. The question again is how much of this is theater and how does this compare to deportation, at least in the Biden years? A couple things to throw out for discussion. In 2023, Ice made 170,570 arrests for an average of 467 per day. Biden removed more people in his first term. That did Trump, but he had Covid as an extenuating circumstance. And also many more people trying to come in on Sunday. This past Sunday, Ice made nearly a thousand arrests in one day. If they keep this up, he will surpass what what he did in his first term, where he was deporting people at a rate of 434 per day. But to keep this up, he's going to need extra resources, more agents, etc.. And I think that opens up another question about the theater of some of Trump's moves versus the reality. So with that, I would like to throw this open to the panel and ask you to comment on either of these things. But one of them is what has surprised you most about the early days of the Trump presidency? And let's start with Chris. Chris?

**STIREWALT:** What has surprised me most. I guess I would have been most surprised by the reaction from Oscar de la Renta to Tim Cook. The effort eight years ago was to not normalize Trump. Normalizing Trump was considered a bad thing. And or it was it was a question should Trump be normalized or not normalized? And big business and elites in art, the arts and entertainment and others kept their distance from Donald Trump. And I think the belief was eight years ago that Hillary Clinton was a bad candidate. It was fluky. Donald Trump got in by accident and he was something to be endured. Right. It was like a flu that had come in. And when Joe Biden whooped him four years later, it was proof of concept, right? Like this was an embarrassing thing that occurred. And we we could all explain. How many times did I say as a symptom more than a cause? It's a weird situation and dadadadada. Trump's victory this time is is not just legitimating. It's normalizing. And what you saw with all the billionaires sucking up to Trump and what you see where they're not going to let Elon Musk be the lone patootie kisser in the brigade of tech billionaires. And what you see, whether it's the first lady's gown or the attention being paid to Trump by all of these folks, Trump is normalized. It's normal now. And he is -- Ross Douthat wrote a piece, my AEI colleague Ross Douthat, wrote a piece talking about and I thought it was overblown at the time about this figure of of destiny. And I thought, come on, he's the host of The Celebrity Apprentice. But I definitely I definitely will admit this, that. We have we live now in the Donald Trump era of American history. And whether you think that's a good thing or a bad thing and Bill is going to talk, I not, I'm not going to steal. I only steal from Bill when he's not around. I'm not



going to steal his work in front of him. But if we look at the public opinion research on these questions. Not everybody likes it, right? Not everybody likes it. But I think everybody acknowledges that now that this this is where we are. And so I was truly that I was truly surprised to see Jeff Bezos and and company there with Trump and see how everybody's conducting themselves. Sort of cemented for me that that we're in a different historical era, certainly than we were eight year ago.

**KAMARCK:** Great, thank you. Camille?

**BUSETTE:** Yeah, I will just listen to what Chris said. In the following way, I would say in terms of what surprised me, I think the most recent freeze on loans and grants, I think surprised me in the following sense that it is it really went out without any notice. It was ill prepared. All that part didn't surprise me. But the fact that it equally affects, you know, Republican governors and folks in states that supported him surprised me that that he would do something quite as far reaching and quite as something that could really contract the economy really quickly when the very constituents who voted for him and the governors who and, you know, and senators and everybody else who supported him are equally affected negatively by the impact of that of that order should it go through. So I think that didn't seem very well conceived. The other area that I would say is a bit surprising is, you know, there's a lot of talk about how we want to shrink the federal budget. Budget talks are ongoing because we do have to come up with a federal budget by March 14th. And it seems like some of these executive orders strategically could would have been better placed in that discussion. So you could claim some credit there as opposed to coming out in the first week or so. So I would say in terms in terms of surprises, those are the two things. The other thing I wanted to mention around immigration and I very quickly is that, you know, I do think the current raids are obviously they're very destabilizing and I, you know, have real human consequences and consequences for our communities. But I do think this is largely theater. I think if we get to the point where we're actually going into schools and creating havoc and you see a lot of, you know, crying kids and screaming kids and that sort of thing. I think there will be some back door entreaties to try to get that kind of thing stopped, because ultimately we're going to head into the November election, that the 2026 elections. And then we also have a number of Republicans, not, you know, the least of whom is is a not the least of whom is J.D. Vance, who want to run on a record. And so eventually, where when you see things that are really unpleasant and that gets attached to the administration, the theater becomes less important. And the, you know, maintaining a in a positive image in front of the public becomes more important. So that's the thing I'll say on on immigration for the moment. The other thing I would say about DIY is that, you know, let's face it, the majority of Americans

under 18 are now people of color. And that trend is only going to increase until 2045, when the majority of the nation's population is going to be of color. So this is a fact. And, you know, while the Trump administration is trying to roll back policies and programs that focus on ensuring that a broad range of communities are able to walk along the path of economic independence, the reality is that these communities and these consumers whose spending fuels economic growth, whose talent will determine our ability to compete on the global stage. You know, we're going to have to address that at some point. So, you know, large companies like JPMorgan Chase, like Raymond James, Costco, they all realize that engaging with and servicing a diverse US is how they are going to drive profit profits and support the US economy. And so policies that harness the economic potential of American consumers are the ones that will ensure a strong economy. And, you know, I would say one of the things that the Trump administration has to really focus on after we get past this first couple of weeks is what is the agenda for the economy? How do we grow the economy, Meaning how do we create jobs? And that is what, you know, voters expect, and that's how they're going to be held accountable as we move into, you know, midterms, etc..

**KAMARCK:** Terrific. Bill, what's your, what surprised you most?

**GALSTON:** What surprised me most is the stark contrast between the amount of thinking and planning that's gone into executive orders. On the one hand, as opposed to the almost apps, the near absence of strategic thinking about the legislative dimension of the Trump presidency. And I think that. This is going to have consequences even for the executive action portion of the Trump agenda. That may be. Let me be specific. The deportation plan that Trump talked about during the campaign and is now beginning to execute as president. Will depend on a vast expansion. Of the infrastructure needed, you know, to carry it out. If you don't have enough agents, if you don't have enough detention centers, if you don't have enough airplanes and other means of transportation to get people back where they are said to belong, etc., then the effort hits a wall very quickly. And then Camille will be right that it's more theater than policy. So one would have thought that under those circumstances, the president and the people close to him would have understood the importance of having an early piece of legislation that allows the administration to ramp up the infrastructure of deportation, immigration, adjudication, etc.. In other words, you would have expected a clear preference for a two bill strategy as opposed to the one beautiful bill strategy.

**STIREWALT:** It's a big, beautiful bill.

**GALSTON:** I'm sorry, big as well as beautiful. You know, how could I forget? And so and the president has sort of wandered back and forth between these two strategies. And a lot of people in leadership in Congress were looking had him to come down firmly on one side or the other. And as far as I can tell, he really did, you know, which is making the life of the Republican leaders much more difficult. And so the biggest surprise for me to some to sum up, is the lack of attention to the legislative agenda by which the administration will ultimately be judged, because without legislation, there is a limit as to what the executive branch can do on its own. It's one thing to say is the as the Trump administration is saying, that it can refuse to spend money that Congress has appropriated. There's going to be a big fight about that so-called empowerment issue going all the way up to the Supreme Court. I think it's a very different thing to say that we can spend money that Congress hasn't appropriated, which is as blatantly unconstitutional as anything I can imagine. It's what cost King Charles the second his head back in the 17th century. So. I think I, I think that the administration will have to get serious about its legislative agenda because there are too many different voices and too many swirls and eddies of kind of conflicting opinions and currents within the legislative Republican Party for them to resolve it on their own without clear presidential leadership, which up to now has not been forthcoming.

**KAMARCK:** Thank you, Michael. Biggest surprise?

**O'HANLON:** I guess I'm going to be at risk of a Johnny-One-Note, Elaine, and just come back to where I answered before the I would say the reasonableness of the Ukraine approach so far. Paired with the unreasonableness of most of what President Trump has done in regard to Gaza, the Palestinians, and of course, the famous Greenland issue. So I don't. My head's still spinning. I don't know where I come down in terms of whether this is a crazier start or a more reasonable start than I might have predicted. But, you know, Ukraine's looking promising, at least in terms of the strategy, doesn't guarantee a good outcome. But the strategy is starting to make sense and perhaps even be better than where we might have been going under President Biden, because there's a greater realism about it. Whereas what's happening now in regard to the Middle East and the Greenland issue just are off the charts for unpromising and unproductive.

**KAMARCK:** Well, I'll tell you, that's a that's a that's a good summation of the whole thing. Right. This is reasonable versus unpromising and unproductive. I'll add my \$0.02 to this, which is that when Bill Clinton came to Brookings some years ago, probably almost a decade ago now, he had an interesting comment that I thought I've thought of ever since. He said the job of a president is to look down the street and around the

corner. In other words, what are your consequences? What are the consequences of what you're doing? And I'm kind of amazed that he has taken on the federal bureaucracy to the extent he has. Only because as you hollow out the federal government and take away people with a lot of experience, you are running the risk of the kind of massive implementation failures that always hurt presidents. Whether it's the chaos of the Afghanistan withdrawal, whether it's Obama's failure of the the websites to work when he announced Obamacare, whether it's hurricane Hurricane Katrina, the mess that George Bush presided over. All of those things really come back and hurt a president, deprive him of political power and the ability to get things done even in a second term. So I'm amazed that he isn't he isn't anticipating that he actually needs a functioning federal government and that when done when one doesn't happen, it comes around and bites him. And I will say where. Okay. But let me ask another question that's a little bit and then we'll go to some audience questions that this kind of related to this discussion. And Bill, you brought it up, but others may want to chime in. Maybe start with Chris, which is what about the Republican Party? Okay. We have seen instances of real splits in the Republican Party. We've seen a Steve Bannon versus Elon Musk fight, which seems to be indicative of some larger fissures within the party. Is the party going to remain completely steadfast behind Trump for all four years, or do you think the once we get through this initial honeymoon period, because let's face it, the guy is having a honeymoon in the old fashioned sense. We used to talk about presidential honeymoons. Once we get past this, where's the Republican Party? Will they have an opposition to Trump, at least on certain things?

**STIREWALT:** Well, Brother Galston having one upped me on Everett Dirksen with Charles the Second I will counter now with James K. Polk. When Polk got to Washington, the Democrats were united around had become united around the idea or idea of the annexation of Texas. They that's what got Polk the very dark horse, the nomination. And that's what got him really passed. Henry Clay In the general election. Texas was the thing. James K. Polk didn't tell anybody, but he took his Navy secretary into his confidence and said, it's not Texas. It's everything. It's everything. I'm -- what is now California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, a third, a third of what is now the continental United States, and he had not told anybody that he was going to do it. And then he pursued it relentlessly unto the point of death. Polk was dead three months after he left office. But he did it. He did it. But he broke his party. He triggered the the sectional crisis that led to the Civil War. He he achieved it at extraordinary cost to his party and to the country. Donald Trump is no James K Polk. And I think, Elaine, you you point to the the the very problem, which is. Donald Trump's a lame duck. Lame ducks have certain advantages. And when we look back on how the story of Joe Biden could have been different if he would have lame duck himself and said, I'm not seeking a second term, he might have had a

very different, more fruitful kind of presidency, right? It might have. It might have been a different story. But the disadvantages that Donald Trump has as a lame duck is that when implementation problems arise and unintended consequences of Trump's non-management managerial approach and different agencies and different people are doing things that are contradictory or upsetting or haven't thought through what they'll do to sorghum prices. And on and on and on. At whatever point the House of Representatives, which has the well, will have the narrowest majority in the history of the body of one seat, the only your own party can make you a lame duck. And they will make Donald Trump a lame duck on some issue. At some point. At some point, they will say, no, we can't. And to Bill's point earlier, excellent point earlier, the obvious thing to me seems to be you do a first reconciliation bill. That was all the goodies, right? You do all all the goodies that Republicans had run on and wanted. And you do increase defense spending, border security. You do a button, you do a bunch of stuff that was popular among Republicans. You'd win, you'd get it through, and then you'd let this big fight over taxes. Cook. We're coming up on a debt ceiling. We've got a fiscal cliff coming up. A lot of a lot of unpleasant stuff is going to transpire. I would suspect that by the time we get to St Patrick's Day, the -- well, I'll shut up by saying this. When Donald Trump went to primary Paul Ryan in the first midterm of his presidency or in the only midterm of his first term. When he when he came after Paul Ryan. How did he do? He failed. When the primary challenge of Paul Ryan failed, it emboldened other rebels in the Republican Party who needed, needed or wanted to vote what was good for them in their districts. And as we were talking about before, midterms are on now. We are now in midterms. It's now it's now the midterm election. And the -- I'm drawing a blank on from inland Orange County, the Republican congresswoman, who, when asked about Donald Trump's statement that aid for California wildfire victims might be -- Young Kim -- that aid for California wildfire victims might be conditioned on implementing voter voter fraud deterrence because Trump believes he would have won California had it not been for that. She was unprepared, gobsmacked, and, of course, had to say, no, I don't support that, I don't believe in that, because it would be poison in her district to say the same thing. So I think that's what we'll see. And then once the bubble gets punctured, it will embolden, it will embolden others. And if the midterm curse visits itself on Donald Trump, as it has every president except for George W Bush in modern history, I suspect it'll get worse and weirder after that.

**KAMARCK:** Wow. Thank you. Bill, Bill and Camille. And then I want to ask Michael to comment on this, but also I have a very specific question from the audience for Michael. Bill?

**GALSTON:** The Republican Party, is split on some very important issues. Let me just name one. Donald Trump famously declared, I love debt. Right? Because he's so among other things, he's so good at repudiating it. Now, he can't repudiate the debt of the United States. But Donald Trump is not underscored, not a fiscal hawk. In his heart of hearts, I don't think he gives a bleep about the budget deficit or the ratio of the federal debt to the nation's economy, which is a very important indicator of the debt burden. He does not care. And I think that if he could simply reenact his tax cuts without even asking the question of their fiscal impact, he would be delighted to do so. There are a lot of people, particularly in the House of Representatives, who don't agree with it. No. And I would say, you know, I would say there at least 35 members of the House Republican caucus. Who will not go along with an increased debt burden and perhaps not even with increases from current levels or current levels for that matter. And so. The the party is going to have to figure out how to square that circle because it's going to be extraordinarily difficult just to keep the accounting of the federal deficit and debt where it is and everything that's been put on the table so far, if you add it all up, suggests that that will be almost mission impossible, which I guess is why the party or some people in the party are now starting to talk about changing the accounting rules, you know, so. Right, right. So that instead of taking the CBO, yo, you know, CBO current law baseline, which means that renewing the tax cuts increases the deficit, which of course it will, you would simply say, well, if we stick with current policy, that means we aren't spending any more money and therefore all is well, except perhaps for the Senate parliamentarian. So, yeah, I, I think that the fissures that have been papered over so far are going to come out in the wash. And I strongly suspect, though I can't prove it, that the reason that the reason that many in the party do not want the one bill strategy, particularly leaders in the House of Representatives, is that they think that all of Christmas goodies are going to have to be deployed to buy off the debt, the, you know, the deficit and spending hawks. And if you put them all in a first bill, then you can't get the tax bill done. And so I'll just stop here by saying it's complicated and it's not going to get simpler.

**KAMARCK:** Camille and then Michael.

**BUSETTE:** Yeah. I'll just add really quickly, I think Chris and Bill really covered well the kind of fissures that are going to open up in the next couple of months as we head towards the federal budget and, you know, having to raise the debt ceiling. What I will add here is that 20 with 2026 around the corner. Not only do you have to solve those fiscal challenges and come out and have some solution that comes out of the party with the party relatively intact. So that is going to be a challenge. But secondly, I would say that, you know, Americans may have decided they didn't want the decided they didn't want Joe Biden at the helm, but they

did want some improvement in their individual economic situations. The economy as a whole, the macro economy is very, very strong. But people do need some relief, right? We're talking about, you know, inflation potentially going up. We know right now that housing is really unaffordable. You know, it's really hard to buy a home. It's hard. And rents have gone up, particularly when the subsidies were removed from from the Covid era. This is this this is like this is reality and this is what people want. The president and his party to solve. So what that means is the Republican Party, in addition to dealing with the fiscal issues, is also going to have to come up with an affirmative agenda to actually improve people's lives in a way that they can feel it by, you know, late 20, 25. That, I think is going to be the bigger challenge.

**KAMARCK:** Right. Michael, I've got sort of two questions for you. One is, anything you'd like to add to the discussion about the Republican Party and the fissures in it? And I know that we've seen some some of those on foreign policy in the past. But there's one that came from several people in the audience. And it is something that I dealt with in the Clinton White House. For years, there's been opposition, particularly from Republicans, to USAID, which is the source of so much of our sort of humanitarian funding around the world. Do you think that the that some of the actions that have taken place so far, particularly the freezing of foreign aid, are a prelude to trying to basically dismantle USAID or, as was talked about several decades ago, fold it into the State Department?

**O'HANLON:** Thanks, Elaine. I will not worry about the first question, we've had some very thoughtful comments already. I'll get straight to the second one. And, you know, it's fascinating to watch what's happened even in the last 48 hours. I'm relieved that it appears some of the initial, more austere, draconian kinds of implications of this freeze in US assistance have already been granted waivers or alleviated in some sense, you know, immediate humanitarian tragedy and so forth. But there still seem to be, at least in my mind, from what I've most recently seen, seems to be confusion about things like funding for vaccinations for President Bush's amazing pet fire program to counter Aids in Africa. A lot of things where human lives really are on the line. And I'm not going to make a prediction so much as issue a challenge to President Trump that he was remarkably effective in gaining the religious vote in this last election and I guess in in earlier elections as well. And now it's time to sort of prove that he at least partially deserves it and that it's not just the abortion issue that he's going to link to to try to justify that he is doing more, you know, noble things. I mean, we all have disagreements. I might very strong disagreements with President Trump. I don't think of him as a particularly impressive spiritual leader. But I also would challenge him not to be blatantly hypocritical. And he's going to make programs like PEPFAR, but, you know, incapable of functioning and saving millions of

lives around the world. That is unconscionable. It's perfectly fair to have a debate about foreign assistance for development. Camille knows these issues better than I do. There are some that have worked better than others over the years. That debate is fair game. But to cut off humanitarian and medical programs or even to sow doubt about their longevity, I think is simply unethical. And I would hope that the administration not go down that path.

**KAMARCK:** Wonderful. Now, for our last five minutes, I've got a question from the audience, which is really a sort of great question, and it's a great summation question. Imagine that this is 2028. And I want to ask you, what do you think is the biggest change we will see in the United States, in the United States government? I mean, there's a lot of stuff been put out there. I suspect this is a little bit like spaghetti being thrown up, thrown against a wall. Some of it will stick and a lot of it won't. What do you think will stick? What do you think is the biggest prospect for success of the second Trump administration? And why don't we go backwards? We'll start with Michael and then go to Bill, Camille and Chris.

**O'HANLON:** Thank you, Elaine. I'll just mention maybe three things very quickly. One, I think that the military will not change that much, that a lot of the debate now about gender and DCI will wind up Secretary Hegseth will realize the military is in pretty good shape. And you'll realize that these concerns that he's had have been exaggerated. And he'll do a few symbolic things with the president to say they've addressed them. But, you know, he doesn't really have the luxury of messing with the best all volunteer force in human history unless he really wants to, you know, challenge or deny himself the opportunity to pursue the peace through strength agenda that he's articulated. So I think not too much will change there. I hope very much that a lot will change on Ukraine and that, in fact, Ukraine will be able to start recovering, that there'll be a peace between Russia and Ukraine or at least an armistice well before 2028. And I'll be prepared to give President Trump some of the credit for that if indeed things play out the way they might under his new approach. And on immigration and the border. There are other people who can correct me who know this issue better. I expect that some things will change substantially because it is possible to fortify a border. It's hard, but it's it's not going to become airtight. But it is possible to reduce flows of illegals. And I wouldn't be surprised if President Trump has some effectiveness there. But I think he's going to be very severely challenged to address what I think is the really serious problem, which is fentanyl. And, you know, the shipment of weapons from the United States to Mexico and vice versa on narcotics and that trade, I hope he can make some dent in. But I, I wish him luck because it's going to be hard.



**KAMARCK:** Great, Bill. And again, quickly, because we're running up against the hour.

**GALSTON:** I understand. There are two things that I can't predict with any confidence, but which which would be huge. Number one, if the Supreme Court sustains his effort to overturn birthright citizenship. And number two, if the court sustains his effort to take back the impoundment power, which was removed from the president in 1974, those would be huge changes if they happen. But that's not in Trump's court. It's in the court of court of the courts. The one thing I expect to change significantly is the federal bureaucracy, something you know a lot better than I do, Blaine, because I believe that his effort to turn tens of thousands of of civil servants into political appointees is likely to succeed in legal terms, and that that will change the nature of the relationship between the president and the bureaucracy.

**KAMARCK:** Camille.

**BUSETTE:** Yeah. I'll just add really quickly that I think we have a showdown on the power of the executive branch. And I think the executive branch is going to end up getting its wings clipped.

**KAMARCK:** Good, Chris.

**STIREWALT:** Yeah, I, I think the I agree entirely with every, with on everyone's point which is the power of the executive. We are we are in a strange new territory. Right. And what has to happen to have a well-functioning republic is that we have to have a Congress. And we haven't had much of a Congress for quite a while. The conservative project to change the courts was wildly successful. It was a 40 year project and it was wildly successful. And if we look at the composition of the Supreme Court today, we see the proof. The question now is, can both parties fall back in love with the idea of having a Congress, the the treatment of Congress by every president. But it gets worse with every ratchet, every turn is it knows no bounds. Donald Trump's pardon of the January 6th attackers was a clear response to a Senate that wouldn't convict him for sending a mob to disrupt their work. You. Trump did it. He did it in broad daylight. They wouldn't convict him. Trump gets back in power and the first thing he does is pardon these people, which is a total affront to the decency or dignity of the Senate. And maybe they deserve it because they failed to act appropriately the first time. We are in in a pot. We are in an apocalypse struggle about whether we're going to have a Congress. And for most of the past 40 years, 50 years, Congress has been devolving its own power because it's politically inconvenient to exercise its Article one powers. Well, Donald Trump is going to push the is going to

push the limit. And we'll see if there's a snap point where Congress says, no, we I'm sorry, we have to have a Congress.

**KAMARCK:** That is a wonderful ending. I want to thank Michael, Bill, Chris and Camille for some very incisive comments. All of these people write extensively so you can locate them at their institutions, Brookings and the AEI. And you can find out their further thoughts pretty easily. Let me apologize for being the ghost on the webinar, but you didn't miss anything because the other ones were really so good. So thank you very much for tuning in to this Brookings webinar.