
PRIVATE MEMORANDUM

The Machinery of Control

A private field guide to sycophancy, leadership, and the question of whether the empire is being taken down on purpose.

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OPENING

I'm going to do something in this piece that almost nobody on television does anymore, which is stick to what people actually do and say no instead of what I imagine is happening in their heads. I've spent enough time around powerful men to know two things. The first is that power does weird things to the people around it, and the weirdness is remarkably consistent across time, culture, and the specific flavor of hat the powerful man is wearing. The second is that diagnosing the powerful man himself — whether he's insecure, narcissistic, a sociopath, a genius, a fool — is almost always a waste of energy. You can't get inside his head. What you can do is watch his hands.

So that's what this is. I'm going to walk you through the machinery — the actual mechanism by which certain leaders induce the people around them to lick their boots in public — and then I'm going to take you across a couple thousand years of history to show you this isn't new, or American, or unique to any one man. I'll end on the thing you asked me about, which is the devil's advocate reading. The idea that the demolition is the point.

I'm not going to pretend I know what Trump is thinking. I don't. Neither does Rachel Maddow, neither does Joe Rogan, and neither does the guy your uncle is sending YouTube links from. What I'll give you instead is the behavior, the history, and the frameworks — and let you draw your own conclusions at the end. That's how I'd want it read to me.

PART ONE — THE SYCOPHANCY MACHINE

Let's start with the thing that made you sick enough to write me about it. The fawning.

The formal name for it is sycophancy, and there's a real research tradition going back to a 1964 book by a Princeton psychologist named Edward E. Jones called *Ingratiation: A Social Psychological Analysis*. Jones was a careful man. He didn't moralize. He simply catalogued what people do when they want to curry favor with someone who has power over them, and he found three core moves. There is **other-enhancement**, which is the classic suck-up — telling the boss he's the smartest guy in the room, his tie is perfect, his ideas are revolutionary. There is **opinion conformity**, which is the yes-man — the guy who finds himself, amazingly, agreeing with every word the boss just said. And there is **self-presentation**, which is the self-promoter — the guy who positions himself as uniquely qualified, uniquely loyal, uniquely capable of doing what the boss needs.

Jones ran the experiments and found something that everybody secretly knows but nobody on cable news ever says out loud. Flattery works. It works on smart people, it works on people who know they're being flattered, it works even when the flattery is transparent and cringeworthy, and it works consistently enough that you can build a career on it. That's been replicated for sixty years.

Here's the piece that matters for our purposes. Jones also found that sycophancy is asymmetric. A man with less power flattering a man with more power almost always pays off. A man with more power flattering a man with less power raises suspicion — why is the boss being nice to me, what does he want. So the direction of the flattery tells you who the real power is. Watch a cabinet meeting. The direction is unmistakable.

Now stay with me, because this gets interesting.

In 2024, Anthropic — the company that made the AI I'm writing this on — published a paper quantifying the sycophancy of large language models. They tested five major chatbots, including two versions of ChatGPT and two of their own product, Claude. The test was simple. You give the AI an argument. In one condition, you tell the AI you like the argument. In the other condition, you tell the AI you hate it. Same argument in both cases. Every single model they tested was significantly more positive about the argument when the user said they liked it, and significantly more negative when the user said they hated it. Not one of them held the line.

In April of last year, OpenAI had to roll back an update to GPT-4o because the new version was *too* sycophantic — people noticed the thing was blowing smoke so hard that they stopped trusting it. In October of 2025, researchers at Stanford led by a computer scientist named Myra Cheng published a paper in *Science*, the biggest journal in the world, showing that sycophantic AI doesn't just feel gross — it actually measurably erodes users' ability to admit they're wrong, apologize, or repair broken

relationships. The paper specifically cited *King Lear*, which is a play about a king who gets flattered into giving away his kingdom and then loses his mind when the only honest daughter finally tells him the truth.

I'm telling you about the AI research because it's the cleanest proof we have of a mechanism that's been running in human courts for five thousand years. When the person on the other side of a conversation has power over you — can fire you, promote you, exile you, kill you — you will bend your statements toward what pleases them. You will do this even if you're smart. You will do this even if you know you're doing it. The machine does it. The human does it. The machine does it because it was trained on humans.

A King Lear pattern doesn't require a king. It just requires a sufficient asymmetry of power and the absence of anyone willing to be Cordelia.

Here's the part that should sit with you. A 2025 paper by Alexander Baturo in the *American Journal of Political Science* — the top-ranked journal in American political science, not a partisan magazine — ran the first systematic empirical study of elite sycophancy under autocracy. The paper was called "Playing the Sycophant Card." Baturo found that under personalist regimes — where power is concentrated in one man rather than spread across a party or institution — elite sycophancy is not just common, it is *predictable*. He built a model of when it pays off and when it doesn't, and the model explains a lot about who rises and who disappears in courts where the ruler's favor is the only currency.

Baturo's conclusion is that in a personalist regime, bootlicking is a rational career strategy. I want you to hear that clearly. It is not a moral failing by Lindsey Graham. It is not a sign that Pete Hegseth has no spine. It is not evidence that these people are stupid. It is the rational response to a power structure where the only way to stay in the game is to please the one man. The people who refuse to play the game get exiled. The people who play it well move up. So you end up with a room full of players. That's not a bug. That's the equilibrium.

The Yes-Man Effect has a specific cost, which every serious researcher on this topic mentions. When leaders are surrounded by yes-men, they are deprived of the one thing that might keep them grounded, which is someone telling them their idea is stupid. This is why King Lear goes mad. This is why Caligula's horse ended up with a consul's robe. This is why every dictator in history has eventually believed his own propaganda and made catastrophic decisions that nobody around him was willing to talk him out of. The Baturo paper and the sycophancy literature both point to the same thing. Sycophancy is fatal to the flattered. It is a slow-acting poison. It kills judgment first and legacy second.

Which brings us to the hard question. Is Trump aware of this? Is he immune to it? Does he consume the flattery and still retain his judgment? Is he somehow running it as a selection mechanism rather than succumbing to it?

I don't know. Nobody knows. What we can do is watch the hands. Which brings us to Part Two.

PART TWO — THE BEHAVIORAL PLAYBOOK

This is where I'm going to try hard to do what you asked, which is describe what Trump does rather than what he is. I'm not going to tell you he's insecure. I'm not going to tell you he's a genius. I'm going to tell you what he does, and I'm going to use specific examples from 2025 and 2026 that are on the public record.

The first thing he does is select for loyalty over competence. This is not controversial — even the Brookings Institution, which is as establishment as you can get in Washington, published an assessment of his second-term staffing in February 2026 and flat-out said the emphasis on loyalty has produced a staff "less likely to have ideological disagreements." That's Brookings-speak for "everyone agrees with him." Brookings also noted something important. The turnover in the second term has been dramatically lower than in the first. The first term was a revolving door — over half of senior staff departures in 2017 were forced resignations, and most of them were public humiliations, guys getting fired by tweet while they were on an airplane. The second term is stable. The homogeneity kept the churn down.

Think about what that means. The first term, the system was still being filtered. People like Mattis and Tillerson and Mnuchin were still in the building, still disagreeing, still getting purged one by one. By 2025, the filter had already run. The people left are the ones who passed the test. So the turnover drops because there's nobody left to fire.

Except when there is. When an official fails a loyalty test in the second term, the response is still surgical. Ballotpedia reported that in the first calendar year of the second term, Trump's 22-person Cabinet had zero changes. That's unprecedented stability at the Cabinet level. But at the sub-Cabinet level the purges kept going. Acting FEMA director Cameron Hamilton was fired on May 8, 2025 — the day after he told lawmakers he did not support the administration's goal of eliminating his agency. Let me say that again, because it's a beautiful example of the mechanism. He wasn't fired for incompetence. He was fired for telling Congress the truth about whether he agreed with the president's policy. On May 10, the head of the U.S. Copyright Office, Shira Perlmutter, received an email from the White House terminating her position effective immediately. Reports credited the conservative activist Laura Loomer with driving multiple of these firings, based on her claim to receive insider tips about officials deemed insufficiently loyal.

The second thing he does, which is the thing you were asking about when you mentioned carrot and stick being omnipresent, is the public theater of reward and humiliation. This is not a Trump invention. Louis XIV did it at Versailles, Stalin did it in the Politburo, every Mafia boss does it at the table. But Trump does it on camera.

You've seen the Cabinet meetings. Everyone goes around the table telling the president how great he is. One member talks about the "blessing" of serving his agenda. Another says it's an "incredible honor" to lead his department under his leadership. Trump sits there and takes it in. No embarrassment. No deflection. The praise goes up and around the table and comes back around to the boss like a collection plate at church. Anyone who has sat in a corporate meeting where the CEO demands that kind of performance knows exactly what is happening. And anyone who has worked in an office where you were required to praise the boss in public knows that the performance is not sincere. The participants know it's not sincere. The boss knows it's not sincere. The cameras know it's not sincere. Sincerity is not the point. The point is the *performance of submission*, publicly, on the record, where everyone can see who has bent the knee and who has not.

I want to tell you about the shoes, because it's the most specific, most absurd, and most perfectly designed loyalty ritual of the current term. Sometime in early 2026, Trump started gifting \$145 Florsheim leather cap-toe Oxford shoes to Cabinet members, agency heads, and anyone he wanted to bring into the fold. He would guess their shoe size and have an assistant order them. You'd think this was a nice gesture. It is not. The shoes are reportedly too big for several recipients — Marco Rubio's are visibly oversized. Trump then makes fun of officials for having small feet, invoking the ancient anatomical superstition about what foot size implies. One White House official told the *Wall Street Journal*, in a line that should be taught in business schools: "It's hysterical because everybody's afraid not to wear them." The shoes are a test. If you wear the ill-fitting shoes and endure the mockery, you pass. If you refuse, you fail. The ritual is public, it is deliberately humiliating, and it functions the way any fraternity hazing functions — it cements membership through the shared experience of surrendering your dignity.

The third thing he does is the asymmetric treatment of exits. If you leave on good terms, you get rehabilitated. If you leave on bad terms, you become the enemy. Mike Waltz made a significant error in 2025 — he added a journalist to a sensitive Signal group chat, which on the face of it is the kind of thing that in any previous administration would end a career. In the first term, Trump would have fired him by tweet. In the second term, Trump moved him to U.N. Ambassador — a Senate-confirmed promotion. The mechanism there is different. Waltz was useful and loyal, and his error was not a loyalty failure. So the system protected him. Compare that to Marjorie Taylor Greene, who announced her resignation from Congress on November 21, 2025, effective January 5, 2026. The proximate cause was her disagreement with Trump over the release of the Epstein files. She co-sponsored the Epstein Files Transparency Act, H.R. 4405, and used a discharge petition to force a vote over the White House's objections. Trump publicly called her a "traitor" and a "lunatic" and said he would support a primary challenger. Greene quit rather than face him in a primary. When reporters told Trump she had resigned, he said: "I think it's great news for the country. It's great."

Two people. Similar level of transgression — one made a security mistake, the other broke a political directive. Completely different treatment. The difference wasn't severity. The difference was loyalty. Waltz was loyal. Greene, by that point, wasn't.

This is the selection mechanism. And this — this, I think, is the actual genius of it, if we're calling it genius — is that the public nature of both the reward and the punishment makes the rest of the room behave. Everybody in the room saw what happened to MTG. Everybody also saw that Waltz survived. The lesson is clear: the category you fall into is not "competent" or "incompetent." The category is "loyal" or "not loyal." And the boss is watching.

The fourth thing he does is conduct foreign policy the same way. Watch the summit with Netanyahu. Watch the relationship with MBS. Watch the trade meetings with Xi. The same reward/punishment logic runs through the international relationships. Countries that Trump considers loyal or deferential get deals and praise. Countries that defy him get tariffs. The specific policy content is often secondary to whether the other leader has, in Trump's reading, shown proper respect. This is maddening to foreign policy professionals, who were trained in a system where the content of the policy was supposed to matter more than the personal chemistry between leaders. Trump inverts that. The personal relationship is the policy.

And the fifth thing he does is maintain an ambiguity about what he actually wants. This is important and almost nobody on cable news talks about it. If you listen to Trump carefully — not the clips, the actual long-form interviews and speeches — he very rarely commits to a specific policy. He talks about outcomes. He talks about feelings. He talks about what "they" did to him and what "we" are going to do about it. The policy specifics are left to the room. This means the people around him have to guess at what he wants, which means they over-comply in order to be safe, which means the room produces outputs more extreme than what he explicitly asked for. This is what political scientists call "working towards the Führer" — a phrase coined by the historian Ian Kershaw to describe how Nazi Germany's policy became progressively more radical even when Hitler himself didn't directly order each step. Subordinates guessed at what he would want and competed to deliver it. Trump has never read Kershaw. He doesn't need to. The dynamic emerges naturally from the structure.

I'm not comparing Trump to Hitler. I'm pointing at a mechanism that appears whenever you have a personalist leader with ambiguous commands and a room full of people trying to curry favor. It's the same mechanism whether you're running the Third Reich, the Kremlin under Stalin, the court of Louis XIV, or a Manhattan real estate empire in the 1980s. Ambiguity from the top plus competition for favor at the bottom equals escalation.

That's the playbook. Five moves. Loyalty over competence. Public theater of submission. Asymmetric exits. Personalized foreign policy. Strategic ambiguity. You can apply this to any of his Cabinet meetings, any of his firings, any of his deals, and it fits. You don't need to diagnose the man. You just need to see the structure.

PART THREE — THE CONTROL SPECTRUM

You asked me to map where Trump sits on a spectrum of leadership style, with Canada on the other end, and this is where I have to disappoint you slightly. Canada is not the opposite of Trump. Canada is a more polite, more diffuse version of the same thing.

Let me explain.

The foundational taxonomy of leadership style comes from a German-American psychologist named Kurt Lewin, who in 1939 ran experiments on boys' craft clubs and identified three styles — autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire. In 1978, a political scientist named James MacGregor Burns added the categories of transactional leadership (reward/punishment) and transforming leadership (vision/mission), and Bernard Bass later built that into the modern Transformational/Transactional/Laissez-faire framework that every MBA program teaches. In the autocratic or personalist style, one person makes the decisions and the rest execute. In the democratic or consultative style, the decisions emerge from group deliberation. In the laissez-faire style, the leader disappears and the subordinates run the show.

Here's the cheat code the taxonomy doesn't tell you. Most real-world systems are some blend, and the labels on the tin often lie. The United States presidency is formally the most constrained executive in the G7 — separated powers, judicial review, mandatory reauthorizations of spending, midterm elections every two years. Canada's prime minister is formally the most constrained — the PM has to command the confidence of Parliament, is technically appointed by the Governor General, and can be replaced by the party at any time. On paper, the PM is a first-among-equals chairing a consensus-driven Cabinet.

In practice, this is bullshit. The single most important book on Canadian political structure is Donald Savoie's *Governing from the Centre*, which argues that since the Trudeau Sr. years, Canadian Cabinet has functioned less as a decision-making body and more as what Savoie calls "a focus group." The actual decisions are made in the Prime Minister's Office, the Privy Council Office, and the Treasury Board Secretariat — the so-called "central agencies." The prime minister appoints every deputy minister, every head of agency, every Supreme Court justice, every Governor General, and every Senator. He controls party discipline, controls who can run for his party, controls the committee assignments. He has more raw institutional power over his government than the American president has over the American government, because there is no co-equal legislature he has to negotiate with — his party, by definition, controls the House of Commons, or he wouldn't be PM.

Savoie's argument, which has been developed across three decades, is that the Canadian PM has *more* personal power than most Westminster counterparts, and in some ways more than the U.S. president. The reason Canada looks softer is not structural. It's cultural. Canadian politicians are trained

in Westminster norms of apparent collegiality, don't hold the same kinds of public cabinet meetings Trump holds, and don't demand on-camera fealty. They exercise the same kind of power but dress it in tweed.

So where does that leave your spectrum?

Let me draw you a better map. Put it on two axes, not one. On one axis, put **concentration of authority** — how much decision-making power sits with one person versus distributed across institutions. On the other axis, put **public theater** — how much the leader makes the power dynamic visible and ritualized, versus keeping it implicit and backroom.

You get four quadrants.

High concentration, high theater. This is the personalist strongman quadrant. Trump, Putin, Erdoğan, Orbán, Modi at his most cultivated, Bolsonaro during his term. The ruler makes the public rituals of submission central to the regime. He wants everyone to see the flattery, wants the opposition humiliated in public, wants the camera on during the cabinet meeting. The theater serves the concentration — it keeps reminding everyone who's in charge, and it selects for loyalty.

High concentration, low theater. This is the technocratic authoritarian quadrant. Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, modern China under Xi (with caveats — Xi does some theater, but it's more ceremonial than personal). The ruler has enormous power but doesn't require the daily rituals of fealty. The regime markets itself on competence, meritocracy, output. Lee Kuan Yew specifically said he believed in "strong institutions rather than strong people" — a direct repudiation of the personalist model — and then proceeded to build institutions that he personally controlled absolutely. The difference from the high-theater quadrant is that you wouldn't catch Lee gifting his ministers ill-fitting shoes. You would, however, find him putting them through rigorous meritocratic testing and firing them for incompetence rather than disloyalty. The selection criterion is different.

Low concentration, high theater. This is rare. The closest real-world example is probably peak-era Italian politics — chaotic coalition governments, daily public drama, but no single figure actually able to execute anything. Swiss politics, interestingly, is a weird kind of inverse: the Federal Council is a seven-person executive with rotating presidency, almost no personal power concentration, but the public theater is ritualized and visible. So there's some precedent.

Low concentration, low theater. This is the Westminster ideal, the textbook democratic model. Decisions emerge from cabinet deliberation. The prime minister is a first-among-equals. The rituals are procedural, not personal. Modern Canada claims to be here. Modern Canada is not actually here — it's drifted into the high-concentration/low-theater quadrant over the past three decades, as Savoie documented. The *theater* is still restrained, but the *concentration* has grown. Angela Merkel's Germany was the closest Western approximation to this quadrant in the 21st century — a consensus-driven coalition politics with an almost unnerving lack of public drama and genuinely diffuse decision-making.

Now — here's the thing the taxonomy will not tell you but is worth knowing. **These quadrants are not stable.** Personalist regimes tend to drift further into the top-left quadrant over time, because the mechanism I described in Part Two (loyalty-based selection, public theater) is a ratchet. Once you're

selecting for loyalty, you can't easily switch back to selecting for competence, because the competent people who might disagree with you have all been purged. So you get more loyal, less competent, more theatrical — and the room gets louder.

Low-concentration systems also drift, but they tend to drift toward the top-left quadrant rather than staying low. This is what Savoie documented in Canada, what political scientists have documented in the UK (the "presidentialization of the premiership," starting with Thatcher and completed under Blair), and what appears to be happening across much of Europe. The drift is toward more centralized decision-making even in formally parliamentary systems. The pressure comes from mass media, from crisis governance, from the need to speak with one voice internationally. The drift is real.

So the honest answer to your question — where does Trump sit, where does Canada sit, what's in between — is that Trump sits in the extreme corner of high concentration, high theater, about as far as a modern Western leader has gotten in that direction since peak-era Berlusconi. Canada sits in the high-concentration, low-theater quadrant, less far from Trump than Canadians like to believe. The real "opposite" of Trump, the genuinely distributed low-theater quadrant, is occupied by very few modern political systems — the Swiss Federal Council, Germany under Merkel, the Nordic coalition governments at their most functional. Not Canada.

PART FOUR — HISTORICAL PARALLELS

You asked me to show you that this pattern isn't new, and it isn't. I'll pick a few cases that illustrate the structure.

Louis XIV of France. Reigned 1643-1715, took personal power in 1661 when Cardinal Mazarin died. Louis is the textbook case of the personalist theatrical ruler. His famous line was "*L'état, c'est moi*" — "I am the state." What he did structurally was extract the French nobility from their provincial power bases and force them to live at Versailles, where their entire social existence depended on his favor. The *lever du roi* — the morning ritual of the king waking up, attended by specific nobles who had earned the right to be present — was a daily public ritual of loyalty. The noble who got to hand the king his shirt had more symbolic power than a noble who didn't, and this ranking was visible to everyone at court every single day. Louis built Versailles specifically as a machine for converting nobility from independent provincial rulers into dependent courtiers. The Florsheim shoes have a pedigree.

Louis was reacting to a specific event — the Fronde, a series of rebellions during his minority where the nobility had genuinely threatened the monarchy. His life's project was making sure the nobility could never do that again. The method was not to kill them but to domesticate them. Bring them to court, make their status entirely dependent on the king's favor, and they cannot organize against you because they cannot leave the court without losing their status. It worked. France had no serious aristocratic rebellion for 127 years — until the revolution, which was a different kind of rebellion. Louis's system was, by its own lights, extraordinarily successful.

The Roman Empire. I'll give you two emperors and let you draw the contrast.

Tiberius, the second Roman emperor, reigned 14-37 CE. He actively hated sycophancy. Tacitus records him leaving Senate meetings muttering in Greek, "men fit to be slaves!" — disgusted at the senators' obsequiousness. He was a competent military commander, a careful administrator, and by Roman imperial standards a decent manager of the imperial finances. He was also, according to his biographers, emotionally withered and progressively paranoid. In his later years he retreated to Capri and ruled by proxy through the Praetorian prefect Sejanus, who conducted what amounted to a reign of terror in Rome. Then he discovered Sejanus was plotting against him, had Sejanus executed, and the paranoia got worse. The point isn't whether Tiberius liked flattery. The point is that even a leader who consciously *opposed* sycophancy could not escape the structural consequences of absolute personalist power. The court produced conspiracies and paranoia because that's what the court structure produces.

Caligula, his successor, went the other way entirely. He demanded flattery, then punished people for flattering him insufficiently, then punished people for flattering him excessively. The ancient source (Suetonius) tells a story about an equestrian named Atanius Secundus who pledged to fight in the gladiator arena if the gods would restore Caligula from an illness. Caligula recovered. Atanius, of

course, had just been flattering — nobody actually expected an equestrian to fight in the arena. Caligula forced him to honor the pledge. Atanius was killed. The lesson for the court was: we cannot predict what the ruler wants. We can only try to please him and hope we guess right. This is the Kershaw dynamic *avant la lettre*. This is working toward the emperor. Caligula was murdered in 41 CE by his own Praetorian guards, some of whom had been personally humiliated by him.

Stalin's Soviet Union. This is the most ruthless version of the mechanism in the modern era. Stalin ran the Politburo as a court. He demanded total loyalty. He held political dinners that lasted until 4 AM, where the senior leadership of the country had to match his drinking and laughing at his jokes — an extraordinary mechanism for selecting for submissive personalities. He purged any Politburo member who showed signs of independent thinking. By the late 1930s, he had killed the majority of the Old Bolsheviks who had made the revolution with him. The survivors were the ones who had proven absolute personal loyalty. During the Great Terror of 1937-38, regional party secretaries competed to exceed their quotas for arrests, because falling short would suggest insufficient revolutionary vigilance. The quotas were set by Moscow but regularly exceeded by the provinces. Subordinates were working toward Stalin. The numbers killed in some oblasts were three or four times the initial quota. Stalin didn't have to order most of the killing. He created the conditions under which the killing emerged.

Henry VIII of England. I won't dwell on this, but the pattern is the same. Henry's court ran on personal favor. His chief minister for decades, Thomas Cromwell, was the architect of the English Reformation — and when Cromwell fell out of favor, he was beheaded within weeks. Thomas More, who refused to endorse Henry's divorce, was beheaded. Anne Boleyn, who Henry married for love after moving heaven and earth, was beheaded less than three years later. The pattern — favor, intimate proximity, sudden fall — is the same pattern we see in any personalist court.

Counter-example: Augustus. I want to give you a historical leader who ran an enormously successful personalist regime *without* the obvious pathologies. Augustus Caesar ruled Rome for 41 years, 27 BCE to 14 CE, and established the structure that would govern the empire for the next four centuries. He did it with extraordinary personal power but with an equally extraordinary degree of public restraint. He famously refused the title of king. He called himself *princeps*, meaning "first citizen." He dressed simply. He lived in a modest house on the Palatine. He did not demand the kind of sycophancy that Caligula or Nero later demanded. He maintained the *forms* of republican government — the Senate still met, magistrates were still elected, legal appeals still went through the courts — even though he had absolute control of the armies and thus, in practice, absolute power. His genius was understanding that the public theater of *non-rulership* was itself a political technology.

This is why Augustus died in his bed at 75 and Caligula was stabbed to death in a hallway at 28. The personalist leader who understands the value of restraint can run the system for decades. The personalist leader who indulges in it openly is setting the clock on his own collapse.

Modern counter-examples. Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore ruled from 1959 to 1990 and then continued to shape policy as Senior Minister and Minister Mentor until 2011. His effective reign was 52 years. His leadership style was absolutist — he jailed opponents, sued newspapers into bankruptcy, controlled media, and had zero tolerance for organized opposition. But his selection criterion within the regime

was meritocracy, not loyalty. He paid his ministers some of the highest salaries in the world specifically so they would not be tempted by corruption. He recruited the best students of each generation into the civil service. He built institutions — the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, the Economic Development Board — that were genuinely effective independent of him. When he died in 2015, Singapore was the fourth-richest country in the world by GDP per capita, with a civil service consistently ranked among the world's most competent. The authoritarian leader who invests in institutional competence can build something that outlasts him. The authoritarian leader who runs his state as a personal court cannot.

Angela Merkel ran Germany from 2005 to 2021. She was, by any measure, the most powerful non-American leader of the century so far. And she ran Germany almost entirely without the theater. She gave uncharismatic speeches. She wore the same suits for a decade. She never demanded public fealty from her ministers. She was famous for listening at meetings rather than dominating them. She let junior officials make public pronouncements and took credit silently when things went well. When she left office, Germany was the largest economy in Europe, the second-largest exporter in the world, and the functional leader of the European Union. She demonstrated that it is possible to run a democratic system with enormous personal influence while dressing it entirely in technocratic restraint. She is, in some sense, the cleanest modern example of the "low-theater high-influence" quadrant.

PART FIVE — TULSI, MARJORIE, AND THE LOGIC OF THE COURT

You mentioned two specific people, and they deserve specific attention, because they are perfect case studies of the mechanism I've been describing.

Tulsi Gabbard. Here is her trajectory. She served in the Hawaii state legislature from 2002 to 2004, deployed to Iraq with the Hawaii National Guard in 2004-05, was elected to Congress as a Democrat from Hawaii in 2012, served four terms in the House, became vice chair of the Democratic National Committee, then resigned that position in 2016 to endorse Bernie Sanders. She ran for president in 2020 as a Democrat and had one moment of genuine public fame when she dismantled Kamala Harris's prosecutorial record on the debate stage. She left the Democratic Party in October 2022, saying it was "an elitist cabal of warmongers driven by cowardly wokeness." She registered as an Independent. She attended CPAC. She joined the Republican Party on October 22, 2024. She endorsed Trump on August 26, 2024. She was named co-chair of his transition. Trump nominated her for Director of National Intelligence on November 13, 2024. The Senate confirmed her 52-48 in February 2025 — a closer vote than almost any other Cabinet-level nominee in that cycle. She now oversees 18 U.S. intelligence agencies.

A lot of people read that trajectory as ideological flip-flopping. I want to suggest a different reading. If you watch Gabbard's actual policy positions over twenty-plus years, the core is remarkably consistent. She has always been anti-interventionist, skeptical of the intelligence community, hostile to what she sees as warmongering by Democratic foreign-policy establishments, and aligned with traditional values on some cultural issues. What changed wasn't her. What changed was which party was willing to host her. The Democratic Party of 2012 had room for an anti-interventionist Iraq War veteran with traditional views on some cultural issues. The Democratic Party of 2022 did not. The Republican Party of 2012 had no interest in a brown woman from Hawaii who had endorsed Bernie Sanders. The Republican Party of 2024, post-Trump reshaping, did.

This is important because it illustrates something the sycophancy literature underrates. The people who move toward a personalist leader are not always opportunists. Some of them are ideologues whose home has moved. Gabbard's relationship with Trump is not Marco Rubio's relationship with Trump. Rubio was a conventional Republican who absorbed Trump because the alternative was irrelevance. Gabbard was a genuine heterodox who found a home in Trump's Republican Party because the Democrats had purged her kind. When she performs the public rituals of loyalty — and she does perform them; she recently reversed her position on FISA Section 702 from opposing it to calling it "crucial" — the performance is both sincere (at the level of gratitude for the platform) and strategic (at the level of career survival).

There have already been reports, including one in mid-April 2026, that Trump considered firing her after she declined to fully support a "clean" FISA reauthorization. So even at the DNI level, in the second term, with a confirmed Cabinet-rank position, the loyalty test keeps running. Pass it or leave.

Marjorie Taylor Greene. Her trajectory is the mirror image. She entered Congress in 2021 as one of the most Trump-aligned representatives in the party, a lightning rod who was actively avoided by the Republican establishment but embraced by Trump. She helped save Kevin McCarthy's speakership. She was the MAGA firebrand. Then in the summer of 2025, something shifted. She started breaking with Trump on Israel and Gaza. She broke with him on healthcare policy. The decisive fight was over the Epstein files. Greene introduced H.R. 4405, the Epstein Files Transparency Act, in July 2025, which would have mandated the Attorney General review and release all investigatory records related to Epstein. Trump, who had socialized with Epstein in the 1990s and early 2000s, viewed the legislation as a political liability. The White House pressured Speaker Mike Johnson to keep the bill bottled up. Greene used a discharge petition — a parliamentary maneuver that forces a vote if 218 members sign it — to bypass the Speaker and force the bill to the floor.

That was the unforgivable move. Not the policy disagreement. The refusal to back down when publicly told to. Trump called her a "traitor," said she was "wacky," endorsed a primary challenger. She announced her resignation on November 21, 2025, and timed her final day — January 5, 2026 — to vest her federal pension by 48 hours. That last detail is the most Greene-like touch of the entire saga. She left with her loyalty broken but her pension secured. No MTG enemy could accuse her of being stupid about money.

Here is the thing you said that I think is genuinely worth considering. You said MTG "lost no love and gained a ton from that entire experience." You may be right. Greene exited on a specific moral high ground — standing up for women who were raped by Epstein, refusing to be a "battered wife" (her phrase), insisting on transparency when her own party wanted secrecy. She apologized for years of toxic rhetoric in her farewell interviews. She positioned herself as the conscience of the movement, rather than the faithful soldier. If she wants to come back — in 2028, in 2032, at whatever point the movement is looking for a new face — she now has a story. "I was there. I fought for you. I was willing to lose everything to tell the truth about Epstein. Trump turned on me for it." That is a powerful biography for someone who wants to lead a populist movement after Trump is gone.

Whether Trump *set her up* to be the first female president, as you suggested — I'm skeptical. That would require a level of multi-year strategic coordination that I don't think Trump does. What I think actually happened is simpler. She broke a loyalty directive. He purged her the way he purges everyone who breaks a loyalty directive. The purging was public because public purging is a teaching moment for everyone else in the room. Whether she survives politically depends on her, not on him. She may well end up being the first female president. But I don't think anyone engineered it. I think she found a ledge on the way down and caught it.

PART SIX — THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE READING

Now we come to the hard part, which is the thing you wrote most nervously about. The managed-collapse thesis. The idea that Trump — and Netanyahu, in your formulation — are deliberately burning down the institutions they run, under the cover of doing crazy things everyone else has been demanding for decades, in order to force the collapse of a system so broken it can no longer be reformed.

I want to treat this seriously. I will also tell you where I think it breaks down.

The serious case for it.

There is a real scholarly tradition behind the idea that empires collapse from imperial overstretch — the mismatch between their global commitments and their economic capacity to maintain them. The canonical text is Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1988), which argued that great powers decline when their military commitments outrun their economic base. Kennedy was writing about the Soviet Union primarily, though he also flagged the United States as a candidate. In 2011 he revisited the thesis and explicitly applied it to the U.S., arguing that the post-9/11 wars had distracted the country from the fiscal and industrial rebuilding it needed.

Writing at the same time, a different tradition emerged around Chalmers Johnson, a political scientist who had been a CIA consultant in the 1960s and turned on the empire in his later years. Johnson's *Blowback* trilogy argued that the U.S. military empire — 865 facilities in more than 40 countries, per the 2008 Pentagon inventory — was unsustainable, provoked the very threats it was supposed to prevent, and would eventually produce a collapse similar to the Soviet Union's. He died in 2010 still asking what it would mean for a superpower to bankrupt itself without an obvious historical model to guide the descent.

More recently, Peter Turchin's *End Times* (2023) made a structural argument that America was already in a pre-revolutionary condition, using what he calls "cliodynamics" — the statistical analysis of historical political instability. Turchin's model identifies four factors: popular immiseration (wages fall relative to living costs), elite overproduction (more people compete for elite positions than there are positions), fiscal stress on the state, and external geopolitical pressure. When all four align, political disintegration follows in a majority of historical cases. Turchin predicted in a 2010 *Nature* paper that the U.S. would hit a crisis point around 2020. He's claimed credit for that prediction ever since, and if you look at the trajectory from 2016 through the 2020 unrest through January 6, 2021, you cannot honestly say he was wrong.

Then there's Joseph Tainter, an anthropologist whose 1988 book *The Collapse of Complex Societies* argued that societies increase their complexity to solve problems, but that complexity itself has declining marginal returns — at some point, each additional bureaucratic layer costs more than it delivers, and the society either radically simplifies or collapses. Tainter's model fits Rome, the Maya, the Chacoans, and arguably the late-stage Soviet Union. It may fit the current United States.

So there is a serious intellectual framework within which one could argue that the United States is already in the late stages of imperial decline, that the normal pattern is some combination of retrenchment and collapse, and that a leader who deliberately accelerated the retrenchment phase might be making a rational strategic judgment about the inevitable.

Here's where it gets interesting. In early 2026, some analysts have started describing what they call a "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine — the idea that the current administration's "America First" posture represents a deliberate retrenchment from the role of global hegemon toward a role as dominant hemispheric power. On that reading, the tariffs, the alliance friction, the withdrawal from international agreements, the confrontations with Panama and Canada and Greenland, are not random — they are the signs of a power that has decided it can no longer sustain a global empire and is consolidating what it can actually defend.

If you squint, you can see the shape of your thesis in that framing. A global empire that cannot be sustained. A leader who chooses to accelerate its contraction rather than drag out its decline. Short-term pain — reputation damage, alliance fractures, economic turbulence — in exchange for long-term viability on a smaller base. The empire falls in controlled demolition rather than spectacular collapse.

Where it breaks down.

I'll give you three reasons I don't buy this as a conscious strategy, even if some of the outcomes might look like it.

First: coordinated strategic planning of this kind requires organizational capacity that the current administration does not display. Controlled demolition of an empire requires nuanced coordination across fiscal, military, diplomatic, and commercial domains. You would need a coherent theory of what to preserve and what to let go, which commitments to break and which to maintain, which alliances to burn and which to reinforce. The public record of the last 18 months shows something else: tariff rates announced and reversed within weeks, alliance positions adjusted based on personal relationships rather than strategic priority, domestic policy directives that contradict each other. This is not the fingerprint of a controlled demolition. This is the fingerprint of a man improvising against whatever crosses his desk that morning.

Second: the elite-overproduction and imperial-overstretch theses predict that collapse will happen *regardless of what the top leader wants*. Turchin's argument isn't that a bad leader causes collapse; it's that the structural pressures will produce crisis whether or not any individual leader tries to prevent it. If the collapse is structurally determined, then we can't really distinguish a leader who is "deliberately accelerating the collapse" from a leader who is simply riding the wave. The structural forces would

produce the same outcomes either way. So the thesis that Trump is "deliberately" doing this adds no explanatory power over the thesis that he is simply the kind of leader such systems produce in such moments.

Third: the most specific version of your thesis — that Trump and Netanyahu coordinated this — runs into a basic test. If the plan is to burn their countries' reputations and institutions in order to force long-term peace, you would expect to see some coordinated signal of what the post-burn order looks like. A shared vision. A follow-on institutional framework. A whisper of what the peace looks like. I don't see it. What I see in the public record is two leaders optimizing for their own domestic political survival and personal legal protection, with foreign policy moves that often work against each other (see: the Saudi-Israel normalization efforts, which Trump wants for his legacy and Netanyahu's actions keep sabotaging). If they had a coordinated plan, they would not be this incoherent in public.

What I think is actually happening.

The framework that best fits the evidence, in my reading, is this. The United States is in the late stages of a long imperial cycle. The structural pressures Turchin describes are real and accelerating. Elite overproduction is visible everywhere — every elite job has 300 applicants with Ivy League credentials. Popular immiseration is real — real median wages have been flat for decades while the cost of housing, healthcare, and education has tripled. Fiscal stress on the state is undeniable — the federal debt crossed \$35 trillion last year. Geopolitical pressure is rising — China, multipolarity, the collapse of the rules-based order.

In such moments, societies tend to produce personalist leaders who promise to restore greatness by cutting away complexity. Trump is that figure in this cycle. He did not cause the conditions. He emerged from them. What he is doing — the tariffs, the firings, the institutional contempt, the theater — is not a twelve-dimensional chess game to engineer a managed collapse. It is a leader who is *symptomatic* of the pre-collapse phase doing what such leaders do: consolidating personal power, punishing disloyalty, selecting for ideological conformity, and dismantling any institution that might check him.

The question your thesis raises — whether the collapse is a feature rather than a bug — is actually the right question, in a sideways kind of way. The *system* is heading for some kind of rupture with or without Trump. Trump may be accelerating the rupture, or he may be delaying the rupture, or he may be reshaping what emerges on the other side. It is genuinely unclear which. What I'd bet on is this: what comes next is not the global empire that came before. The American empire as constructed in the post-1945 period — overseas bases, security guarantees, the dollar as reserve currency enforced by military primacy — cannot survive the 2030s. Something is going to replace it. Whether it's replaced by a more restrained version of American power, by a Chinese-led order, by a genuine multipolar framework, or by something more chaotic, is being decided right now.

Which brings me to the part I want to give you honestly.

Your instinct that something large and structural is happening is correct. Your instinct that the professional commentary class doesn't understand it is also correct. The people who analyze Trump's psychology miss the structural forces because structural forces don't make good television. The people

who argue about whether he's "smart" or "a genius" miss the point entirely, because the point is that *the system* is producing this behavior, whether or not the individual at the top understands what he's participating in. He doesn't need to be a genius for the outcomes to unfold. The outcomes emerge from the structure.

But your specific thesis — that Trump and Netanyahu are coordinating a deliberate controlled demolition to force a peaceful post-national world — that, I don't believe. Not because it's impossible, but because the evidence doesn't support coordination of that kind, and because the outcomes of managed demolitions have historically been very bad for the populations that live through them. The Soviet collapse, which is the only recent historical analog, produced an 8-year depression in the former Soviet Union, a 10-year decline in life expectancy, a demographic catastrophe, and the rise of oligarchic authoritarianism in Russia. If that's what a controlled demolition looks like when it's run by technocrats (Gorbachev, Yeltsin's team) operating in a more constrained political environment, the version run by two men operating on personal grievance and legacy obsession is unlikely to produce a peaceful post-national world. It's more likely to produce a decade of chaos followed by whatever can fill the vacuum.

I'd rather the empire retrench deliberately than collapse. I'd rather it retrench deliberately under a coherent framework than under Trump's improvisation. I'd rather it be replaced by a multipolar order than by nothing at all. None of these outcomes are guaranteed by what's happening now. Some of them are on the menu. The people who tell you the outcome is already decided — either that America will be fine or that it will collapse — are selling you certainty that the evidence does not support.

PART SEVEN — WHAT I ACTUALLY THINK

I'll close with what I actually think, because you asked honestly and deserve an honest answer.

I think Trump is smarter than the commentariat gives him credit for in certain specific domains — media manipulation, recognizing the emotional valence of a moment, seeing which institutions are hollow and therefore exploitable — and less smart than his supporters think in others, particularly in long-range strategic coordination and in understanding the second-order consequences of dismantling institutions you might someday need again. The psychological question of whether he is "insecure" or "a narcissist" or whatever else is beneath the question of what he does and why the system rewards it. He is a product of a particular moment in American life, and he is also a cause of the moment getting worse. Both can be true.

I think the sycophancy problem is real, it is a structural consequence of personalist power, it is ancient, and it is fatal to the flattered over time. Lear loses his mind. Caligula dies in a hallway. Nixon destroys himself. The ruler who surrounds himself with yes-men loses the capacity to course-correct. The question about Trump is not whether this will happen to him but whether it already has, and whether what we see in 2026 is a man still in touch with reality or a man whose reality has already bent around the shape of the flattery. I don't know the answer. I know the mechanism and I know the historical outcome.

I think the specific cases — Gabbard converting, Greene being exited — are textbook examples of a personalist court selecting for loyalty. I don't think they're part of a grand strategy. I think they're what happens when the mechanism runs for long enough. The extraordinary thing about the current moment is not that it is happening; the extraordinary thing is that it is happening in a country with a 250-year-old democratic tradition and institutions that were specifically designed to prevent exactly this. The institutions are holding less well than the founders hoped. That, too, is something the structural thesis predicts.

I think the empire is in trouble regardless of what Trump does, that some kind of retrenchment is structurally inevitable, that the form that retrenchment takes is being decided now, and that both the deliberate-demolition thesis and the accidental-collapse thesis are partially right. Trump is not the architect of a controlled demolition. He is also not an innocent bystander to structural forces. He is a man who has found that acting on his instincts happens to accelerate the decline in ways some of his supporters believe to be necessary, and whose personal incentives align with continuing to act on those instincts.

And I think — this is the last thing I'll say — that the people who are most certain about any of this are the people you should trust least. The talking heads who know Trump is a genius. The talking heads who know he's a moron. The experts who know what's coming next. The ones who have a single-sentence explanation for a 250-year system entering a crisis that doesn't have a historical blueprint. Certainty is the sign that somebody is selling something.

The honest position, after all this reading, is that the mechanisms are ancient, the outcomes are uncertain, the structural pressures are real, the man at the top is important but not decisive, and that anyone who tells you they know how this ends is making it up. Including me, obviously. The difference is I'm telling you I'm making it up. The rest of them pretend they aren't.

That's what I have for you.

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