

# An Analysis of Leadership and Political Scandals under the Trump Administration: 2017 - 2021

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**Abstract:** *The United States presidency has faced several turbulent periods. It has never been immune to scandals and other political vices like any other governments in the world. From simple accusations to impeachment, the White House has experienced domestic and foreign turmoil that almost caused it to crumble. But these scandals are minor in comparison to the series of slurs and behavior obscenities that prevailed on the American political sphere from 2017 to 2021. Being the most powerful country in the world, the US presidential elections attract attention. When the Americans elected a controversial media personality and businessman who campaigned for a “great America” as their 45<sup>th</sup> president, the world’s leading nation appeared to lose its statesmanship. This paper analyzes the political leadership of Donald Trump during his presidency from 2017 to 2021, focusing on the vulgarity, inelegance, cupidity, and extravagance (V. I. C. E.) that marked his administration. It highlights key scandals and political challenges that influenced domestic and international perceptions of the United States, revisiting past presidential scandals to provide context. The study concludes with an exploration of the lasting impact of Trump’s leadership on political maturity in the United States.*

**Keywords:** Donald Trump, leadership, presidential elections, statesmanship, US presidents’ scandals

## 1. Introduction

Two major political crises in the USA with Trump’s accession to power partly justify the writing of this paper. First, Trump had cast numerous slurs on the Third World countries, including Haiti and African nations (Vitali, Hunt & Thorp, 2017). Second, his protesting followers violently breached the US Capitol Building in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021 causing damage and harm (Lonsdorf, Dorning, Isackson, Kelly & Chang, 2024). These are just two examples among many others. Many events in Trump’s past before he became president are not elegant either.

As if the Americans suffer from chronic amnesia, Trump seems to conquer the hearts of most Americans. According to a weekly prediction initiated by *The Telegraph* about the 2024 US presidential elections, five experts have given their opinions on June 28, 2024. The predictions done in the period of June 28 come after Biden’s disastrous debate on Thursday. This raised serious questions about his status as the Democratic nominee for November’s election in 2024 (Sabur, Diver, Butcher, Stanley & Coburn, 2024). Though polls of the presidential election have moved toward former President Donald Trump, answers to specific questions about Biden’s age have not changed much. But that is not because Americans viewed Biden’s debate performance more kindly, it is because most Americans already thought Biden was too old and seemed to have reached somewhat of a ceiling with those concerns (Rogers, 2024).

There have been so far twelve US presidents sworn in office from 60. From John Adams elected at 61 to Donald Trump at 70 to Biden at 78, and as the oldest, the USA have experience in old presidents. The table below shows a descriptive list about 60 - year - old presidents at first term.

**Table 1:** List of US Presidents Who Took Office from 60

Presidents	Age at inauguration
2 <sup>nd</sup> John Adams	61
7 <sup>th</sup> Andrew Jackson	61
9 <sup>th</sup> William Henry Harrison	68
10 <sup>th</sup> Zachary Taylor	64
15 <sup>th</sup> James Buchanan	65
33 <sup>rd</sup> Harry S. Truman	60
34 <sup>th</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower	62
38 <sup>th</sup> Gerald Ford	61
40 <sup>th</sup> Ronald Reagan	69
41 <sup>st</sup> George H. W. Bush	64
45 <sup>th</sup> Donald Trump	70
46 <sup>th</sup> Joe Biden	78
<i>Source: My own observations</i>	

Biden is not the only target of criticisms on old age. Trump often faces such criticisms, but showing physical aptitude, this is often overlooked. Trump’s presidency raises controversies, divides the American people and questions the maturity of Americans who have been electing their highest officials since April 30, 1789. This brings up the statesmanship question, the qualities expected in leaders, especially presidents. If numerous American votes chose Trump as the best leader, there still are opposing votes. On July 13, 2024, an assassination attempt targeted Trump reopening a dark new chapter in America’s cursed story of political violence (Collinson, 2024).

In “Statesmanship and the Crisis of Political Leadership in America,” Gueguen (1981) evokes the threats of humanity, namely new barbarism, militant and expansive totalitarianism or despotism from the outside, and the pleasure - seeking secularism from the inside. He also mentions the threats of leadership, which include the erosion of prestige, growing apathy and the weakening of the foundational institution. This particularly makes one mull over Trump’s presidency between 2017 and 2021 as the 45<sup>th</sup> US president.

This study is significant because it provides a timely analysis of political leadership, scandals, and their broader

implications for governance, particularly in the context of one of the most controversial administrations in modern US history. It will first investigate the previous scandals before Trump. Secondly, it will examine the facts that confirm Trump as an American VICE, an American citizen known for his vulgarity, inelegance, cupidity and extravagance.

## 2. Presidential Scandals

Wikipedia has categorized the presidential scandals in the United States into many subcategories by alphabetical order from 1789 to 2023 (Wikipedia, 2023a). While this list may not reflect recent developments as for Biden's administration, it is worth reading and analyzing. The list enumerates the major scandals in the administrations of six presidents, namely Ulysses S. Grant (1869 - 1877), Lyndon B. Johnson (1963 - 1969), Ronald Reagan (1981 - 1989), Bill Clinton (1993 - 2001), George W. Bush (2001 - 2009) and Donald Trump (2017 - 2021).

Grant became president at 46, being the youngest inexperienced man theretofore elected as such. His appointments in the US government were uneven in quality. Grant and his first lady Julia Grant enjoyed an ostentatious life - style redecorating the White House lavishly and enjoyed state dinners sometimes consisting of 29 courses complemented by nine French wines. During Grant's second presidential campaign, newspapers discovered that prominent Republican politicians were involved in the Cr dit Mobilier of America, a shady corporation designed to siphon profits of the Union Pacific Railroad. More scandals followed in 1875, when Secretary of the Treasury Benjamin Helm Bristow exposed the operation of the "Whiskey Ring," which had the aid of high - placed officials in defrauding the government of tax revenues. Scandals have become the best - remembered feature of the Grant administration, obscuring its more positive aspects (Simon, 2024).

Grant's political opponents referred to his administration using the derisive term "Grantism". A fellow Republican, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, in a speech on May 31, 1872, a presidential election year, originally coined it. Sumner used it to differentiate the Republican Party from Grant. Grantism refers to the political incompetence, corruption, and fraud, during the administration of President Ulysses S. Grant. His presidency, which lasted from 1869 to 1877, was marred by many scandals and fraudulent activities associated with persons within his administration, including his cabinet, which was in continual transition, divided by the forces of political corruption and reform. Among them were Black Friday, corruption in the Department of the Interior, the Sanborn incident, and the Whiskey Ring (Wikipedia, 2023a).

Lyndon B. Johnson became the 36<sup>th</sup> US President after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, under whom he had served as the 37<sup>th</sup> vice president from 1961 to 1963. Johnson led the country in a period of societal unrest characterized by domestic and foreign crises. In the country, the Johnson administration faced pressing civil rights issues with the culmination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., but he also faced communism and grappled with the Vietnam War that was to become a big political and humanitarian mistake in and out of the country. Johnson was under fire for handling

all these internal and external matters illegally with unorthodox means such as COINTELPRO, counter intelligence program.

COINTELPRO was a program conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) from 1956 to 1971 to discredit and neutralize organizations considered subversive to U. S. political stability. It was covert and often used extralegal means to criminalize various forms of political struggle and derail several social movements, such as those for civil rights and Puerto Rican independence (Frederique, 2024). Hampton Sides, in his *Hellhound on His Trail: The Stalking of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the International Hunt for His Assassination*, details how the FBI took King so seriously that they had to tarnish his reputation revealing to the public his private life.

As Johnson committed more and more troops to fight in Vietnam, people of conscience began to doubt the wisdom of American involvement. Among those people of conscience was King, a well - known voice to Americans. King knew exactly the dangers of war and violence, and he was aware of the destruction caused by the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. According to James Melvin Washington, King had spoken against the Vietnam War several times from the pulpit of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, his first major public declaration came on March 25, 1967, when he led an antiwar demonstration in Chicago with more than 5, 000 black and white marchers. And exactly a year before he was assassinated, on April 4, 1967, King directly attacked the Johnson administration's war policy (King, 1986, p.135 - 136).

King's attacks on the Vietnam War were both scathing and genuine. He did not mince his words, and he did not care about people who saw no existing links between his moral fight and his civil rights struggle. Though many questioned the wisdom of his path, King broke the silence of the night and found that the calling to speak was often a vocation of agony, but he had to speak. He broke the betrayal of his own silences to speak from the burnings of his own heart. His conscience left him no other choice because for him silence at such a turning point in US history was betrayal.

King was right in his legitimate attacks on the war. Before the war ended, the military analyst Daniel Ellsberg unveiled a top - secret Department of Defense study of US political and military involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967. Ellsberg photocopied the report, known as the Pentagon Papers, and in March 1971 gave the copy to *The New York Times*, which then published a series of scathing articles based on the report's most damning secrets (History. com Editors, 2023).

These published portions revealed that the presidential administrations of Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson had all misled the public about the degree of U. S. involvement in Vietnam. Four presidents' administrations had got bogged down in the mud of the vast Vietnam jungle. From Truman's decision to give military aid to France during its struggle against the communist - led Viet Minh to Johnson's development of plans to escalate the war in Vietnam as early as 1964, even as he claimed the opposite during that year's presidential election,

a catastrophic humanitarian crisis emerged (History. com Editors, 2023).

A more scandalous action than Johnson’s unfurled in Ronald Reagan administration with the Watergate Scandal. The Watergate scandal was a series of interlocking political scandals that were revealed following the arrest of five burglars at Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters in the Watergate office - apartment - hotel complex in Washington, D. C., on June 17, 1972. On August 9, 1974, facing likely impeachment for his role in covering up the scandal, Nixon became the only US president to resign (Perlstein, 2024).

After Reagan, Bill Clinton also faced impeachment for having an affair with Monica Lewinsky while she was a White House intern in 1995 - 96. In January 1998, Linda Tripp, a coworker of Lewinsky, secretly recorded telephone conversations about Lewinsky’s affair with Clinton. Then she handed the recording to the independent counsel Kenneth Starr. Starr was given permission to expand the scope of his investigation on the Clintons and used the Tripp tapes as evidence that Clinton had committed perjury in denying under oath any relationship with Lewinsky. Lewinsky signed an affidavit denying the affair, but in July 1998 she accepted immunity in exchange for full disclosure and then testified before a grand jury. On the basis of the report produced by Starr’s investigation, the House of Representatives approved two articles of impeachment (perjury and obstruction of justice); however, Clinton was acquitted of the charges by the Senate in 1999 (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024a).

Unlike Clinton, his successor, George W. Bush, had no involvements in such scandals as president. But he got involved in other more scandalous things that caused the whole world to question the integrity of the USA. George W. Bush was the eldest son of 41<sup>st</sup> US President George H. W. Bush (Wikipedia, 2024d). As the table below suggests, George W. Bush was among the rare presidents that has links with other presidents, too.

**Table 2:** Family Links of US Presidents

	<i>Nbr</i>	<i>Presidents’ name</i>	<i>Presidents’ relation</i>
1 <sup>st</sup> presidential family link	2 <sup>nd</sup>	John Adams	Father
	6 <sup>th</sup>	John Quincy Adams	Son
2 <sup>nd</sup> presidential family link	9 <sup>th</sup>	William Henry Harrison	Grandfather
	23 <sup>th</sup>	Benjamin Harrison	Grandson
3 <sup>rd</sup> presidential family link	26 <sup>th</sup>	Theodore Roosevelt	Distant relation
	32 <sup>nd</sup>	Franklin D. Roosevelt	Distant relation
4 <sup>th</sup> presidential family link	41 <sup>st</sup>	George H. W. Bush	Father
	43 <sup>rd</sup>	George W. Bush	Son

George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush had in common a war fever on Iraq. Elected from 1989 to 1993, George H. W. Bush led the armed conflict of the Gulf War between Iraq and a 42 - country coalition from August 1990 to January 1991 (Wikipedia, 2024e). Elected from 2001 to 2009, George W. Bush engaged the USA in the Second Gulf War that was so bitter and protracted that President Barack Obama, his successor, made an electoral promise to end it and to send US troops home. The second invasion of Iraq led to the collapse of the Ba’athist government and to the capture of Saddam Hussein during Operation Red Dawn in December of that

same year and his execution three years later (Wikipedia, 2024f).

Bush faced one of the greatest disasters that hit the country in the year he took office in 2001. Throughout his office as president from that sad year to 2009, Bush spent most of that period waging war against Iraq. On September 11, 2001, series of airline hijackings and suicide attacks committed in 2001 by 19 militants associated with the Islamic extremist group al - Qaeda against New York City, Washington, D. C., and the Pentagon. These attacks killed 2, 750 people in New York, 184 at the Pentagon, and 40 in Pennsylvania (Bergen, 2024). In the sorrowful context of the September 11 attacks, Bush started his propaganda of a mass destruction - based argument of war against terrorism that would principally target Iraq and Afghanistan. In his 2002 State of the Union address, Bush began making the case for why the United States might need to use military force to remove Saddam Hussein from power. According to Bush:

Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. [ . . . ] The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons, for over a decade. [ . . . ] This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world.  
(Doherty & Kiley, 2023).

The Iraq war or the Second Gulf War began on March 19, 2003. It started to become an eight - year conflict that resulted in the deaths of more than 4, 000 US service members and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. Two decades after the war began, a review of Pew Research Center surveys on the war in Iraq shows that support for US military action was built, at least in part, on a foundation of falsehoods. (Doherty & Kiley, 2023). Ousting the regime of dictator Saddam Hussein had a heavy price on both sides and even on the world economy with impact on oil.

### 3. Trump and “Trumpism”

While “Grantism” refers to the scandals of Ulysses Grant, and “Bushism” evokes the unconventional statements, phrases, pronunciations, malapropisms, and semantic or linguistic errors made in the public speaking of George W. Bush, “Trumpism” started with Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign slogan “Make America Great Again”. Often referred to simply as the MAGA movement, this slogan was founded on the belief that the United States was once a “great” country but has lost this status owing to foreign influence, both within its borders (via immigration and multiculturalism) and without (via globalization, or the increased integration of multiple national economies) (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024b).

Seeing immigration, multiculturalism and globalization as threats to America greatness is tantamount to instituting a dictatorship of the mind. The world saw so many somber pages of its history that it easily overcomes the most elementary humanity issue, that of immigrating freely from one place to another, adopting others’ cultures and opening to others in terms of economic or political matters. MAGA members think that America’s fall from grace can be reversed through “America first” policies that would provide a greater

degree of economic protectionism, greatly reduce immigration, particularly from developing countries, and encourage or enforce what MAGA members consider to be traditional American values (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024b).

Some MAGA - supported policies, such as Trump's call in 2015 for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States," would involve egregious racial or religious discrimination. Some of the policies eventually adopted by the Trump administration did entail such discriminatory treatment of nonwhite immigrants (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024b). For example, Trump referred to Haiti and African nations as "shithole countries" during a meeting with a bipartisan group of senators at the White House moaning, "Why do we need more Haitians, take them out". He went on to say that the U. S. should have more people coming in from places like Norway (Vitali et al., 2017).

According to *The Times*, Trump also targeted Nigerian immigrants during that meeting, complaining that once they came to the United States they would never "go back to their huts." (Vitali et al., 2017). In addition to its political stances, the MAGA movement is known for its particularly combative character, which exemplifies the extreme partisanship of contemporary American politics. In keeping with that stance, controversial rhetoric has flourished within the movement, including messages that critics see as homophobic, sexist, or racist or as inciting violence (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024b).

America excels in contradictions. But no other example cannot surpass that of Trump's advent. Americans today see two contradictory futures looming in the middle distance: In one scenario, Donald Trump is convicted of serious crimes and sent to prison. In the second, he returns to the presidency in 2025 (McAdams, 2024). A bad language and misdemeanor specialist, Trump has created his own enemies because of what he says, writes and does. The most outrageous anti-Trump act committed against him happened on July 13, 2024, in Saturday evening. While speaking onstage at his rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, an assassination attempt from 20-year-old Thomas Matthew Crooks, shooting from a roof near the rally site targeted him. Fortunately for him, Trump was only wounded on his right ear (Herb et al., 2024; Sganga et al., 2024).

Trump has summoned forth some of the most incendiary rhetoric ever employed by an American presidential candidate (McAdams, 2024). The way Trump talks about women, high officials, counterparts, petty criminals, political adversaries, immigrants and the Third World countries is beyond offensive. In a released secret video from 2005, alluding at women, Trump said about the norms of being a famous man: "They let you do it. You can do anything. Grab'em by the p\*\*\*\*" (Nelson, 2016).

The recording starts part way through Trump telling a story about his unsuccessful liaison with a woman, "I did try and f\*\*\* her. She was married. I moved on her very heavily. In fact, I took her out furniture shopping. [...] I moved on her like a b\*\*\*, but I couldn't get there and she was married. Then all of a sudden I see her, she's now got the big phony t\*\*\* and

everything. [...] You should use some Tic Tacs in case you start kissing women. I'm automatically attracted to beautiful, I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss." (Nelson, 2016).

Trump's comments on women is not a new territory for him. An extramarital affair broke his first marriage. According to *New York Times*, his employees were subjected to "endless commentary on the female form" in his office (Nelson, 2016). As if the Americans suffer from chronic amnesia, Trump seems to still conquer the hearts of most Americans.

According to a weekly prediction initiated by *The Telegraph* about the 2024 US presidential elections, five experts have given their opinions on June 28, 2024. The predictions done in the period of June 28 come after President Joe Biden's disastrous debate on Thursday. This raised serious questions about his status as the Democratic nominee for November's election in 2024 (Sabur et al., 2024).

Biden's poor debate performance in June alarmed Democrats in Washington and sparked discussion about whether he could be replaced on the Democratic ticket. Facing growing calls to step aside from the presidential elections, President Biden finally announced that he would not continue his bid for reelection, saying it is in "the best interest" of the Democratic Party and the country to withdraw from the race, and he endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris to be the nominee (Watson, 2024).

Unlike Biden who realized that his mental and physical abilities did not meet the required presidential role and responsibility, Trump's presidency raised controversies and divided the American people. This questioned the maturity of Americans who have been electing their highest officials since April 30, 1789. This brings up the statesmanship question, the qualities expected in leaders, especially presidents. If numerous American votes chose Trump as the best leader, there still are opposing votes.

#### 4. Conclusion

No country in the world is free from scandals at the top of its administration. The particularity of the USA is that 45 presidents led the country. The USA has a long and rich experience of democracy and political maturity. One evidence is that when presidential elections come close and that candidates are nominated to represent their own parties, journalists, political pundits and experts start rummaging through the candidates' personal lives and careers to detect unforgivable flaws that can be exposed to the public. This paper has brought to the daylight the major scandals in the administrations of six presidents, namely Ulysses S. Grant (1869 - 1877), Lyndon B. Johnson (1963 - 1969), Ronald Reagan (1981 - 1989), Bill Clinton (1993 - 2001), George W. Bush (2001 - 2009) and Donald Trump (2017 - 2021). However, the focus is on the presidency of Donald Trump from 2017 to 2021 because Trump's special managerial behavior vis - à - vis US rivals on the economic and political spheres, women and poor countries, to list a few.

The US presidency, particularly under Trump, exemplifies the complex intersection of leadership, personal conduct, and

political scandals. This paper has shown how these elements shaped the national and global perceptions of American leadership. As the world continues to scrutinize the actions of powerful leaders, this study underscores the importance of statesmanship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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