

# International political overview



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Sara earned an Emmy for coverage of the shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado and the Overseas Press Club of America Citation for Excellence for her report on Australia's Stolen Generation.

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## The Trump tempest

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### January 2019

The winter storm which barrelled through Washington, DC in January 2019 offered the perfect backdrop for a swirling political tempest. President Donald Trump told reporters gathered on the South Lawn of the White House, "I never worked for Russia."

That denial – one no US citizen ever expected to hear, and no American president ever had cause to declare – came in response to a pair of shock-and-awe reports which exploded like fireworks left over from New Year's Eve.

"FBI opened inquiry into whether Trump was secretly working on behalf of Russia," read the headline in *The New York Times* on 11 January.<sup>1</sup> Two days later, *The Washington Post* published another stunner: "Trump has concealed details of his face-to-face encounters with Putin from senior officials in administration."<sup>2</sup>

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## Russian turbulence

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Trump dismissed questions of whether he might be a Russian asset as a "big fat hoax" and "the most insulting thing I've ever been asked."<sup>3</sup> *Fox News*, Republican allies and the Trump faithful rallied to his defence.

But the ensuing frenzy over the very possibility of a US president as the pawn of a foreign power evoked comparisons to Richard Condon's 1959 novel *The Manchurian Candidate* and movie of the same name. "Like I said: A puppet," tweeted Hillary Clinton, Trump's Democratic opponent in the 2016 presidential election.

Special Counsel Robert Mueller's probe of Russian interference in that presidential campaign continued as this report went to press. In addition, there are investigations into the Trump Foundation, Trump's tax payments, his business associates, and other matters of concern to the president.



“Clearly this Senate race wasn’t just about the personalities and policies of rival Texans. The 2018 US Midterm was a referendum on Trump.”



## A tsunami

Trump also must contend with Congress. The 116th US Congress convened on 3 January, 2019. It is the most diverse in US history and includes a record number of women. Many newcomers say they ran because of Trump. While Republicans retained control of the Senate, Democrats got their ‘blue wave’ and won the House of Representatives. Democrats have promised to investigate Trump.

Trump is a pugnacious president who has proven time and again he has the will and the skill to stay in the ring. In addition to the controversy about Russia, Trump’s populist approach and divisive style have prompted soul-searching about what his presidency means for America and the world. Such debates will intensify as the 2020 presidential race gathers steam.

I got a taste of what to expect on a visit to Houston, Texas in the days before the US Midterm Election in November.

## Taste of Texas: Cruz v Beto

**November 5, 2018**

The Creekwood Grill in Cypress, Texas boasted a country-western décor and a down-home vibe. The US and state flags on the wood-panelled wall above the bar were crafted of corrugated iron. The suburban watering hole served frosty beer, fried pickles, and politics, as I discovered when I dropped in on a rally for Republican Senator Ted Cruz.

Although organisers sold merchandise emblazoned ‘Cruz, Tough as Texas,’ the most popular

items were ‘Make America Great Again’ baseball caps and ‘Keep America Great! TRUMP/PENCE’ T-shirts. Cruz was an incumbent. A staunch conservative in a ruby-red state with Ivy League credentials. But as the polls made clear, he faced the fight of his political life.

The Democratic candidate who threatened to unseat Cruz was an affable rising star called Beto. Congressman Robert Francis ‘Beto’ O’Rourke shot to national fame based on liberal credentials and a grass-roots, media-savvy campaign. The one-time punk rocker live-streamed his tour driving through Texas and raised \$70 million – more than any Senate candidate in US history – thanks in part to donations from the East Coast and the West.

## Referendum on the president

Clearly this Senate race wasn’t just about the personalities and policies of rival Texans. The 2018 US Midterm was a referendum on Trump. Trump knew it. He criss-crossed the country to campaign for Republicans, including former primary rival Cruz. “Pretend I’m on the ballot,” Trump told crowds.

For the president’s devoted followers, Trump is a secular Alpha and Omega. Other Republican candidates are viewed in large measures as the remaining letters in a populist alphabet with which to enact Trump’s agenda and inscribe his creed.

“President Trump has held up his end of the bargain,” a retired teacher said, explaining why she considered her vote for Cruz to be a vote for Trump, too. “What he promised he would do for us and our country, he is doing. As best he can. In amidst all the Democrats fighting him tooth and nail.”

## Weathervane

In Texas, Trump's benediction helped Cruz to defeat Beto. (Ironically, Beto's loss may be the Democrats' gain. He is now touted as a potential Democratic candidate for president.)

In other sections of the country, the Trump Effect worked in reverse. Fury at Trump drove Democratic voters to the polls. While Republicans increased their majority in the Senate, Democrats 'flipped' the House. They picked up 40 seats, the most for the party since Watergate.

The Midterm Election was like a political weathervane which indicated a significant change in direction, yet offered limited data on exactly where this blast of fresh air might take the country. But it does appear that the Trump whirlwind which swept into Washington in 2016 shows signs of abating.

Nevertheless, a consistent 35–40 per cent of Americans support the president. The 'Trump Base' views the president with a devotion uncommon in the annals of American politics. It remains to be seen if there is any factor or scandal which might shake their trust in Trump.

The months ahead will also illuminate the big Democratic field, as candidates jockey to become the party's nominee for 2020. It is far too early to predict who might win the primary, or the election.

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## Democracy doldrums

Such enthusiasm was welcome, as Trump's presidency had prompted much soul-searching about the fate of democracy. How much had Trump himself been responsible for the slump in confidence in America's bedrock principle and most famous export?

A study by the non-partisan Pew Research Center concluded:

“A majority says Trump lacks respect for democratic institutions. Fewer than half of Americans (45 per cent) say Donald Trump has a great deal or fair amount of respect for the country's democratic institutions and traditions, while 54 per cent say he has not too much respect or no respect.”<sup>4</sup>

And how did average Americans feel?

A poll by news organisation AXIOS with Survey Monkey conducted in October 2018 showed that only half of Americans – 51 per cent – said they have faith in democracy, while 37 per cent say they have lost faith. AXIOS says the poll is noteworthy because, “It suggests that political turmoil has caused people to doubt the very foundation of American society, particularly leading up to election day.”<sup>5</sup>

## Fractures

Understanding the full impact of the Trump Effect on America and the world is complex, but several key factors are worthy of mention.

US politics is famously binary, but Trump's presidency has turbo-charged the animosity between 'us' and 'them.' Politics is red-hot and personal.

Trump supporters want the Wall. The Supreme Court. Tax Cuts. They resonate to Trump's pledge to, “Make America Great Again,” or “MAGA.”

Democrats worry about Affordable Health Care. The Supreme Court. Climate Change. DACA. (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals offers a path to citizenship for 'Dreamers' brought illegally to the US as children.) The Mueller Investigation.

America is a house divided over Trump's tone, tactics, and Twitter feed. The president's shoot-from-the-hip style. Scandals swirling around Trump and some members of his Cabinet. The administration's revolving door. The verbal napalm Trump lobs at those with whom he disagrees. Trump's intense focus on immigration and the administration's treatment of asylum seekers. The bewildering way in which Trump heaps scorn on America's allies and treats former foes like best mates. The ongoing investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016

Presidential campaign and its potential consequences for the president and his administration.

Americans loathe or love the president. There are few agnostics. Many contend Trump is both an expression of a bitterly divided nation and its provocateur-in-chief.

Former Republican Senator Bob Corker, among Trump's fiercest critics, said in November, "...instead of appealing to our better angels and trying to unite us like most people would try to do, the president tries to divide us." Corker said he believes Trump's divisive remarks "are not an act."

Corker warned Trump's conduct will, "Squander the well-earned good will that we have around the world at a time when our leadership is more important than ever."<sup>6</sup> Corker saw his popularity plunge in his largely Republican home state of Tennessee and chose not to run for re-election.

## Fact and falsehood

Another striking feature of this administration is that President Trump frequently tells lies. Mainstream journalists struggle for the best way to report on this.

Other presidents have told lies. But President Trump stands out for the sheer number of his demonstrably proven falsehoods and for the way he repeats misstatements again and again, even when the truth has been pointed out.

President Trump's nonchalance about spreading misinformation was evident from the first days of the administration, when he blasted the media for underestimating the size of the crowd at his inauguration and his then-press secretary erroneously claimed, "This was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration – period." Photographs clearly showed the opposite. In the brouhaha that ensued, the novel concept of 'alternative facts' was born.

As Trump's overstatements and misstatements piled up, journalists began to keep tally. *The New York Times* pointed out that Trump claimed millions of illegal votes cost him the popular vote in 2016 (false) and that NATO nations "owed" the US money, (nope). The president repeatedly claimed Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh graduated first in his class from Yale (he didn't) and that the Trump tax cut was the biggest in history (it wasn't). Then there was that head-scratcher in the *Wall Street Journal* on 24 October 2018. The article began:

"'We don't have tariffs anywhere,' President Trump said in a recent interview with the Wall Street Journal. In fact, his administration this year has placed levies on more than \$300 billion in imports."<sup>7</sup>

The *Washington Post* launched Fact Checker during the 2008 Presidential campaign and the feature became permanent in 2011. *Fact Checker* is a "verified signatory to the International Fact-Checking Network code of Principles." It's accountable. The *Post* ranks statements on a scale of one to four – from mild exaggeration to whopper – using 'Pinocchios,' a nod to the famous wooden puppet whose nose grew when he told lies.

By the time the Midterm rolled around, the *Washington Post* reported that President Trump had made 6420 false or misleading claims during his first 649 days in office. That's an average of 30 a day.<sup>8</sup>

There is no small irony in the fact that a president who dishes up falsehood with such relish popularised the term, Fake News.

In December 2018, The *Washington Post* launched the Bottomless Pinocchio for politicians who "repeat a false claim so many times that they are, in effect, engaging in a campaign of disinformation." The criteria include having made a statement which gets three or four Pinocchios at least 20 times. So far, President Trump is the only politician to have made the list.



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## Disinformation

Disinformation is a sobering word, particularly when linked to a world leader. But Trump’s disregard for accuracy has consequences.

In an article entitled, “Trump’s Lies vs Your Brain,” for *Politico* magazine in 2017, Maria Konnikova points out, “When we are overwhelmed with false, or potentially false, statements, our brains pretty quickly become so overworked that we stop trying to sift through everything.”<sup>9</sup>

Falsehoods repeated can begin to *sound* like fact.

## Truth decay

If a president, or anyone else, jettisons or ignores significant information, this can pose another sort of threat to democracy. We need facts and expert analysis to make informed judgments and the lack of it is a major worry. The respected, nonpartisan Rand Corporation calls this, “Truth Decay”.

RAND defines Truth Decay as, “the diminishing role of facts and analysis in American public life.... RAND is concerned about the threat Truth Decay poses to evidence-based policymaking.”<sup>10</sup>

I thought of that when I chatted to a loyal Trump supporter who expressed support for the president’s decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement for climate change. “There is no climate change,” the man said emphatically. He saw no need to couch his opinion with a disclaimer such as “I believe,”

even though he was not an expert on the topic and his opinion was at odds with the conclusions of the world’s top scientists.

In late November 2018, the US Government released its Fourth National Climate Assessment, which began, “Climate change creates new risks and exacerbates existing vulnerabilities in communities across the United States, presenting growing challenges to human health and safety, quality of life, and the rate of economic growth.”<sup>11</sup>

The Trump Administration released the report the day after Thanksgiving, a decision viewed by many in the media as an attempt to bury the findings.

## Feuds and insults

President Trump appears to relish a scrap, a feud, a rivalry. Trump’s Twitter feed amplifies his message, including name-calling of rivals. The *New York Times* kept track.

Trump called Democratic Presidential Rival Hillary Clinton ‘Crooked Hillary,’ ‘who loves to lie’ – ‘LOCK HER UP!’; former Florida Governor and Republican presidential rival Jeb Bush “lightweight”, “desperate and sad;” and a “hypocrite;” and MSNBC co-host Mika Brzezinski “dumb as a rock,” and “crazy,” his insult for CNN Correspondent Jim Acosta and *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, too.

Trump’s negative comments about minorities, including comments directed at African-American politicians and public figures, have drawn condemnation. He called Democratic Representative Maxine



Waters of California a “low IQ person,” former White House aide, Omarosa Manigault Newman a “dog,” and a “crying lowlife.” Trump called gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams of Georgia, “not qualified,” and Andrew Gillum, the African-American mayor of Tallahassee running for Governor of Florida, a “thief.” The *New York Times* estimates that if Trump keeps up the pace, he will have insulted approximately 650 people, places and things by the end of his first term.<sup>12</sup>

The impact of Trump’s comments is difficult to quantify. In Georgia, Democrat Stacey Abrams lost a close race to Republican Brian Kemp, whose ad, “So Conservative,” said in part, “I got a big truck, just in case I need to round up criminal illegals and take ‘em home myself. Yep, I just said that.”

In Florida, Democrat Andrew Gillum lost to Republican Ron DeSantis, who carefully moulded himself in Trump’s image. In one ad, DeSantis playfully encouraged his children to build a border wall out of toy blocks and read them *The Art of the Deal*. DeSantis was accused by some of employing a racist “dog whistle” when he told Floridians not to “monkey this up” by voting for Gillum.

President Trump denies any suggestion that he himself is racist. In January of 2018, after reports he described Haiti, El Salvador and several African nations as “shithole” countries, he told a reporter, “...I’m not a racist. I’m the least racist person you have ever interviewed, that I can tell you.”<sup>13</sup>

## Fear

Politicians of all stripes know fear is a powerful weapon. Many use it in political campaigns. But President Trump stunned fellow Republicans as well as Democrats when he launched his presidential campaign in 2015 vilifying Mexican immigrants. “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”<sup>14</sup>

Immigration and border security have become the defining issues of the Trump presidency. Prior to the Midterm, Trump decried drugs “pouring” across the border, railed against gangs from Central America, and raised fears about the “migrant caravans” of refugees fleeing Central America.

Trump claimed that members of the caravan were “criminals” and “Middle Easterners.” *USA Today* reported in December 2018, that approximately 4.4 per cent of those who crossed the border without proper documentation were criminals, 0.3 per cent were gang members, and 0.8 per cent were “special interest aliens,” according to the Customs and Border Protections authorities.<sup>15</sup>

Trump’s language sounded substantially different, as when he told a crowd in Florida, “Democrats are openly encouraging millions of illegal aliens to break our laws, violate our sovereignty, overrun our borders and destroy our nation in so many ways.”

As this article goes to press, a partisan debate over Trump’s demand for billions of dollars to build a wall between the US and Mexico has shut down the US government.

## Nationalism and beyond

President Trump has repeatedly challenged the accepted political vocabulary. At a mega-rally for Senator Cruz in late October 2018, Trump told the crowd, “You know what I am? I’m a nationalist, OK? I’m a nationalist, use that word.”

The crowd responded with chants of, “USA! USA!”

CNN reporter Jim Acosta later grilled Trump about his use of the term, and whether it was a signal to those associated with the far-right. “There is a concern that you are sending coded language or a ‘dog whistle’ to some Americans out there that what you really mean is that you are a white nationalist?”

Trump said he’d “never heard that” – “I’m somebody that loves our country.”

But Trump’s language unnerved many. Writing in *The Washington Post* in October 2018, Aaron Blake quoted George Orwell, who wrote that, “Nationalism...is inseparable from the desire for power.”<sup>16</sup>

Meantime, white nationalism has been on the rise in the US. In January 2019, House Republican leaders took the extraordinary step of stripping Iowa Representative Steve King of committee assignments following an interview with the *New York Times* in which he said, “White nationalist, white supremacist, Western civilization – how did that language become offensive?”<sup>17</sup>

“Berger says his analysis of 30,000 Twitter accounts shows that there are many splinter factions.”



The picturesque university town of Charlottesville, Virginia is still recovering from a deadly ‘Unite the Right’ rally by hundreds of neo-Nazis and white nationalists in 2017. One Hitler-admirer drove his car into the crowd of counter-protesters and killed a woman. Trump ignited a firestorm when he told reporters, “...you had some very bad people in that group, but you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides.” It is widely considered one of the worst weeks of his presidency.

## Hate crimes

It is important to note that hate crimes are on the rise in the US. In November 2018, the FBI reported that hate crimes in 2017 were 17 per cent higher than in 2016, and that hate crimes rose for the third year in a row.

The FBI noted that nearly 60 per cent of victims were targeted, “...because of the offenders’ race/ethnicity/ancestry bias; 20.6 per cent were targeted because of the offenders’ religious bias.” Other victims were targeted based on sexual orientation or because they had a disability.<sup>18</sup>

In October 2018, two African-Americans were killed in a racially-motivated attack in Kentucky. Several days later, 11 people were massacred at a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The alleged killer was a neo-Nazi.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) says anti-Semitic incidents increased 57 per cent from 2016 to 2017<sup>19</sup> and several organisations called on politicians to refrain from partisan attacks. “The reality is words have consequences,” said the ADL’s George Selim.

Speaking on National Public Radio (NPR), Emory University Professor Deborah Lipstadt attributed some of the increase in anti-Semitism to opposition to the rise of Barack Obama, the first African-American president. “I never say that President Trump and those around him created this, they didn’t. But they lit a fire under it.”

J.M Berger, author of *Extremism* and co-author with Jessica Stern of *ISIS: The State of Terror*, writes about white nationalism in the October 2018 issue of *The Atlantic*.

Berger says his analysis of 30,000 Twitter accounts shows that there are many splinter factions. But what united white nationalists, he says, are opposition to immigration or Muslims, conspiracy theories and support for President Trump. Berger notes as evidence the use of #maga and #trump, and entitles the article, “Trump is the glue that binds the far right.”<sup>20</sup>

## Trump of the Tropics

There are signs that Trump's presidency, in particular his hard-line approach to immigration and embrace of nationalism, may embolden nationalist and far-right movements outside of the US.

On New Year's Day, 2019, the newly elected president of Brazil, a former Army captain and far-right lawmaker dubbed the Trump of the Tropics, received a shout-out from the original Trump on Twitter. "Congratulations to President @JairBolsonaro who just made a great inauguration speech – the USA is with you." Reeling from a recession and a high crime rate, Brazilians elected a politician who once said he wouldn't rape a fellow lawmaker because she was "very ugly" and told *Playboy* he'd prefer a son "die in an accident" than be homosexual.

Poland's nationalist Law and Justice party has skirmished with the European Union over what the EU views as anti-democratic efforts to pack the courts and restrict free speech. When nationalists and far-right groups scheduled a march in Warsaw in November 2018 to celebrate Polish independence, the government first tried to ban the event, then scheduled its own independence parade simultaneously.

In April 2018, Viktor Orban won a decisive victory in Hungary with an anti-immigration platform. The country's Prime Minister is turning, "this former Soviet bloc member from a vibrant democracy into a semi-autocratic state under one political party's control," reported the *New York Times*.<sup>21</sup> The newspaper reports that the US ambassador says Trump "admires strong leaders and looks forward to this relationship going forward."

In October 2018 in Australia, *ABC Background Briefing* reported it had uncovered a plot by an obscure alt-right group to 'infiltrate' political parties in Australia, like the New South Wales Young Nationals. The ABC said the group had a Facebook page, shared "alt-right talking points," "racist in-jokes: with coded references to Hitler and had a hard-line, racist stance on immigration. The ABC also reported that the National Party said "hate and racism" had no place in its party and senior leaders would "not rest" until all extremists were expelled.<sup>22</sup> As of November 2018, 19 Young Nationals had resigned.

When President Trump gathered with European leaders in November 2018 to commemorate the end of WWI, he received a lecture from French President Emmanuel Macron. "Patriotism is the exact opposite of nationalism, nationalism is a betrayal of patriotism...In saying 'our interests first and who cares about the others,' we erase what a nation has that's most precious, what makes it live, what is most important: it's moral values."<sup>23</sup>

In *How Fascism Works, The Politics of Us and Them*, philosopher and Yale University professor Jason Stanley says a nation's leader also needs to be honest about history and warns against those who paint in too rosy a hue.

"In order to honestly debate what our country should do, what policies it should adopt, we need a common basis of reality, including about our own past. History in a liberal democracy must be faithful to the norm of truth, yielding an accurate vision of the past, rather than a history provided for political reasons. Fascist politics, by contrast, characteristically contains within it a demand to mythologize the past, creating a version of national heritage that is a weapon for political gain."<sup>24</sup>



"There are signs that Trump's presidency, in particular his hard-line approach to immigration and embrace of nationalism, may embolden nationalist and far-right movements outside of the US."

## Friend or foe?

President Trump's frostiness to allies and cosiness to adversaries has confounded many.

Former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull encountered Trump's mercurial wrath in a testy phone conversation about a refugee swap just days into Trump's presidency.

The US president took a swipe at Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau after the G7 summit in Quebec and accused him of making false statements. This prompted a former Canadian ambassador to the US to label Trump a bully.

Trump's impulsive, transactional approach has its fans. It has also infuriated and bewildered world leaders and some in his own administration. Trump withdrew the US from the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate agreement. He announced the pull-out of US troops from Syria, a decision which prompted the resignation of Defence Secretary James Mattis in December 2018. Retired US General Stanley McChrystal told CNN, "The kind of leadership that causes a dedicated patriot like Jim Mattis to leave should give pause to every American."

Trump has sparred with respected outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel, yet shown surprising deference to Russian leader Vladimir Putin. At an infamous press conference in Helsinki in July 2018, Trump appeared to take the word of the former KGB agent over that of American intelligence agencies regarding Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election. The late Senator John McCain called it "one of the most disgraceful performances by an American president in memory."

President Trump's maverick approach has also met with success, notably with North Korea. His relationship with North Korea's Kim Jong Un has improved since their historic summit. As this report goes to press there is word that a second summit could take place as soon as February.

But Trump's frequent criticism of NATO – the military alliance of the US, UK, Canada and Europe which assures mutual defence and is credited with keeping the peace in Europe since WWII – has alarmed America's allies and many within the US government. Weakening NATO is a goal of Putin's.

On 14 January 2019, the *New York Times* reported that Trump discussed withdrawing from NATO in 2018, to the alarm of national security officials. The newspaper quotes the former supreme allied commander of NATO as calling any such plan a gift for Putin and "a geopolitical mistake of epic proportion."

"Reporters and presidents spar, but President Trump's antagonistic relationship with mainstream media has been more dramatic."



## Media

Finally, the president has had a contentious relationship with mainstream media.

A free press is central to any democracy and this liberty is protected in the First Amendment to the US Constitution. Reporters and presidents spar, but President Trump's antagonistic relationship with mainstream media has been more dramatic.

In CEDA's 2018 EPO, Dr David Glance noted that, overall, social media has had a negative impact on news quality. We now see entire news stories based on a single Tweet – a hallmark of the Trump presidency – or Facebook post.<sup>25</sup>

When Trump tweets, the world takes notice. Twitter has given the president a pulpit from which to preach to the world.

On February 17 2017, the President fired a blistering tweet at the media: "The FAKE NEWS media (failing New York Times, NBC News, ABC, CBS, CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American people!"<sup>26</sup>

Trump's attack prompted swift condemnation. David Axelrod, President Obama's former advisor, said, "Every president is irritated by the news media. No other president would have described the media as 'the enemy of the people'".

Trump has derided the media as "fake" and an "enemy" on Twitter and in front of crowds ever since, despite expressions of alarm from journalists.

In June 2018, a gunman opened fire at the *Capital Gazette* in Maryland, killing five people. The president condemned the attack. The newspaper's staff released a letter. "We won't forget being called an enemy of the people...Because exposing evil, shining light on wrongs and fighting injustice is what we do."



“As 2019 unfolds, two major factors could alter the trajectory of the Trump presidency. The first is that investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential race.”



In October 2018, a fervent Trump supporter was charged with sending a dozen pipe bombs to critics of the president, including outspoken Democrats and CNN. CNN president Jeff Zucker said, “There is a total and complete lack of understanding at the White House about the seriousness of their continued attacks on the media. The president, and especially the White House press secretary, should understand their words matter.”<sup>27</sup>

In August 2018, UN and Inter-American Commission on Human Rights experts David Kaye and Edison Lanza called Trump’s attacks on media “...strategic, designed to undermine confidence in reporting and raise doubts about verifiable facts...”<sup>28</sup>

Trump’s contentious relationship with the media continues. CNN White House reporter Jim Acosta had his credentials revoked after a news conference. A federal judge ruled the press pass must be reinstated, a victory to all news organisations.

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## Final forecast

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As 2019 unfolds, two key factors could alter the trajectory of the Trump presidency.

The first is that investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential race. President Trump has repeatedly said there was no collusion and called the investigation a witch hunt but the inquiry has resulted in a raft of guilty pleas and indictments. Mueller hasn’t said when he might finish. In January, Trump’s nominee to be the new US attorney general,

William Barr, told Congress, “I think the Russians interfered or attempted to interfere in the election” and he repeatedly said Mueller must be allowed to complete his probe.

Virtually every organisation Trump has led is under some sort of investigation. The publication *Wired* details 17 different court cases stemming from seven sets of prosecutors, and says, “Donald Trump faces a legal assault unlike anything previously seen by any president.”<sup>29</sup>

The second factor is the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives. As mentioned, the Democratic-led House will have the power to investigate Trump. How will they use it? There are rumbles of impeachment, although that political move also carries significant risks for Democrats. Furthermore, a Republican-controlled Senate is extraordinarily unlikely to vote to remove a Republican president.

For 2019, Trump’s top priority is getting funding for the issue that galvanises his base – a wall along the border between the US and Mexico.

Democrats have their own agenda. Under Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, their to-do list includes infrastructure spending, protecting voting rights, prescription drug prices, and background checks for gun owners.

But the government shutdown caused by the partisan divide over a border wall serves as a stark reminder of perhaps the greatest problem facing everyone in Washington. In a democracy, it takes negotiation and consensus to get things done. And those are qualities in short supply.

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## Endnotes

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