Article

Unmasking the Authoritarian Mob Boss: A Critical Analysis of Donald Trump’s Political Leadership

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Abstract: This article comprehensively examines Donald Trump’s political leadership, arguing that his tenure as the 45th President of the United States exhibited characteristics commonly associated with authoritarian mob bosses. Drawing upon various empirical evidence and theoretical political science frameworks, the study sheds light on the underlying dynamics that shaped Trump’s leadership style and its implications for democratic governance. The analysis begins by contextualizing Trump’s rise to power within the erosion of democratic norms. It explores how his rhetoric, characterized by demagoguery and the demonization of opponents, mirrors the tactics employed by mob bosses to consolidate their power and suppress dissent. Moreover, the study uncovers the striking similarities between Trump’s administration management and the hierarchical structures of organized crime, highlighting his reliance on loyalty, personal connections, and a disregard for institutional checks and balances. Furthermore, this research delves into Trump’s autocratic tendencies, as evidenced by his disdain for the free press, attacks on the judiciary, and attempts to undermine the integrity of democratic processes. It reveals how these actions align with the strategies employed by authoritarian leaders to silence opposition and perpetuate their dominance. By examining Trump’s presidency through process tracing, this study contributes to our understanding of the complex relationship between authoritarianism and the erosion of democratic institutions. The findings underscore the urgent need for continued scholarly and public scrutiny of leaders who exhibit traits akin to authoritarian mob bosses to safeguard the principles of democratic governance and protect the integrity of liberal democracies.

Keywords: authority; presidential politics; mob boss; authoritarianism

1. Introduction: A Boy Who Would Become a Mob Boss

“I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn’t lose any voters, OK? . . . It’s, like, incredible” (Dwyer 2016; Keller and Foster 2012). Iowa and New Hampshire are pivotal sites for distilling presidential candidates during the primaries (U.S. Embassy Japan 2020). Making the wrong move in these states could have dire consequences for presidential campaigns (Hetzenberg 2008). Like those in the first sentence, remarks made in Iowa became familiar to then-presidential candidate Donald J. Trump. However, why did he choose Fifth Avenue? And should not advocating violent crime automatically disqualify a presidential candidate? Mob bosses capitalize on legal and illegal enterprises, sometimes using violence, mix that with government authority, and that is the 45th president, Donald Trump. We have witnessed Trump’s transition from an international businessman to promoting mob-boss-style politics (Franzese 2010).

An authoritarian mob boss is a term used to describe a leader of a criminal organization or mafia who rules with absolute power and control, often using coercive and violent tactics to maintain their authority. Such a figure typically operates within a hierarchical criminal structure, demanding loyalty and obedience from their subordinates while wielding significant influence over criminal activities such as drug trafficking, extortion, racketeering, and other illegal enterprises. For the sake of this research, mob not only refers
to organized crime but to a mob of American citizens, seen on 6 January 2021, under the control of former president Donald J. Trump.

Authoritarian mob bosses are known for their ruthless methods of maintaining control, which may include intimidation, violence, and even murder to eliminate rivals or those who pose a threat to their power. They often operate in secrecy and rely on fear and manipulation to ensure compliance from their followers.

These individuals are often seen as highly dangerous and corrupt figures who exploit their power for personal gain, often at the expense of others. Law enforcement agencies work to apprehend and prosecute such individuals to disrupt their criminal operations and bring them to justice.

When we unmask the 45th president, what does his political leadership style reveal? While his personality closely resembles that of a mob boss, in this article, we will also examine his political actions to determine the nature of this president. Trump symbolically removed himself from the leadership of his multinational organization. Still, his gold hotel in Las Vegas towering over the remains of mob bosses from time past is a reminder that his climb to power in the political world was as vicious and sinister as his ascension to the pantheon of American capitalism. An interesting research question emerges: How did the leadership style of Donald Trump before, during, and after being the 45th President of the United States demonstrate characteristics akin to authoritarian mob bosses, and what were the implications of these traits for democratic governance and the integrity of liberal democracies?

Political leadership styles are associated with the degree of influence or lack thereof of a leader’s personality (Hermann 2005). Some studies observe that citizens’ personalities influence outcomes, while others contend that political outcomes result from political actors (Getimis and Grigoriadou 2004; Hermann 2005; Mondak 2010). To avoid “reductionism,” these studies contend that political leadership is complex and monolithic (Greenstein 2006, p. 5). Various conditions influence political leadership. Concerning presidential leadership, the more malleable an environment, the more likely the personality of the presidential influence will intensify (Post 2010).

What these studies could not predict was the surge in racial hatred during the presidency of Barack Obama, the 44th president. During his tenure, we witnessed a new wave of conservatism with the creation of the Tea Party and its candidates, which morphed into Trump’s mob: Trumpettes and Trumpeters (ABC News 2016; Pew Research Center 2019). This commonality between conservatism and authoritarianism is studied with nationalism, religiosity, and militarism (Adorno [1950] 2019; Eckhardt 1991). Neoconservatives sought an archetypal president who was a businessman and non-establishment candidate, and Donald J. Trump fit that description. Conservatives may not be aware of the overlap between businesspeople and mob-boss leadership (Ferrante 2011).

Considering these developments, we will analyze the scholarship on presidential leadership styles. We commence by comparing traditional presidential traits with those of Trump. Next, we scrutinize Trump’s policy decisions while in office. Finally, we explore the relationships among the 2020 elections, his January 6 insurrection speech, subsequent Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) indictment, and 91 felony counts in other states (Mckinley 2023; Associated Press 2023). By examining these pivotal events in Trump’s presidency, we delve deeper into the ideology and actions that created a mob-like environment for the 45th president to thrive.

2. The Emperor Has No Clothes

The presidency of Donald J. Trump was marked by a series of unconventional and often polarizing actions, communication tactics, and governing approaches. His presidency generated significant debate and scrutiny, not only within the United States but also throughout the international community. This section analyzes critical aspects of Trump’s governing style, political communication, and rhetoric. We examine the essential literature covering presidential leadership styles and powers and the ever-evolving notion of the
Presidential bully pulpit. Trump can be characterized as a mobster-style president who evolved past the traditional concept of the presidential bully pulpit to engage in bold and unpredictable behavior. The term “mobster-style president” encapsulates Trump’s approach to governance and communication, exceeding conventional boundaries and norms and setting him apart from his predecessors. His presidency witnessed an evolution in what was viewed as possible in exercising presidential powers and rhetoric and utilizing the bully pulpit. This evolution ultimately reshaped the contours of modern presidential leadership to one more defined by unpredictable, reckless, and unashamed polarization—like that of an organized crime leader.

Trump’s stylistically defiant sense of governance and political communication marked a turning point in the evolution of the presidential bully pulpit. The term was first coined by President Theodore Roosevelt when describing his “vehicle to sell his views to the nation” by combining “T.R.’s favorite expression, ‘bully,’ meaning good, with a speaking platform, or pulpit” (Cullinane 2014, p. 80). Since then, the term has been widely used to encompass the uniquely situated platform that the president is provided to communicate an agenda and the persuasive capacity of the office. For much of presidential history, this pulpit came in the form of the president’s close relationship and access to the press, as illustrated by Doris Kearns Goodwin’s (2013) Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism. As the spread of information grew, the world grew more interconnected, and the presidential pulpit was used to address audiences faster and more detail. Whether it be FDR’s fireside chats or televised presidential addresses, the pulpit seemed to evolve along with the nation. Gabriel Michael’s and Colin Agur’s (Michael and Agur 2018) study of the presidential pulpit in the social media age, “The Bully Pulpit, Social Media, and Public Opinion: A Big Data Approach”, offered a more robust understanding of the contemporary presidential bully pulpit by “examining a major social media communication platform (Twitter) for evidence of changes in public opinion before and after President Obama’s high-profile statements” (p. 264). Their study concluded that the internet-age bully pulpit could stir conversation and inspire support and opposition.

What makes Trump’s engagement with his presidential pulpit unique is how he has harnessed unorthodox rhetorical strategies and cashed in most of his chips on specific platforms. Unlike most previous presidents, Trump did not build a positive relationship with the American news media with his endless attacks on the press and its legitimacy. Trump focused heavily on the social media aspect of his bully pulpit but used it to recklessly attack and criticize his opponents instead of harnessing its persuasive potential. Having been suspended and banned from platforms throughout his political career, Trump has even attempted to create his pulpit in the form of his new social media platform, TruthSocial (Gerard et al. 2023).

Jeffery Tulis’s seminal work, The Rhetorical Presidency, traced this evolution from a presidency that once mainly focused on convincing Congress to enact its policy goals to one that used its position to appeal directly to the American people instead (Tulis 1987). That work is crucial to understanding how presidents have historically used rhetoric in conjunction with the bully pulpit. However, scholars had never encountered a president who would use the scale of his pulpit and the power of his rhetoric not only to persuade and mold public opinion but also to strong-arm by shamelessly attacking, insulting, and promoting grossly inappropriate and mean-spirited political behavior and attitudes. Here, we see how President Trump altered the use of the bully pulpit to match his novel leadership style.

Before diving into Trump’s mobster-style presidency, it is necessary to examine mobster-style leadership. The limited yet valuable study of organized crime leadership provides essential insight into the traits and behaviors distinguishing mob bosses, or their presidential imitators, from other types of leaders. The literature on the subject typically examines the structures and dynamics within leadership that characterize criminal organizations, emphasizing the importance of decentralization, compartmentalization, and the isolation of leadership from direct criminal activities. These traits starkly contrast traditional leadership styles and offer a framework for analyzing non-traditional leadership.
figures and political actors who exhibit similar behaviors. More importantly, analyzing how they align and differ from Trump’s leadership traits further explains their relationship to organized crime characteristics. This comparison provides both the nuanced ways in which Trump’s leadership style reflects the attributes of organized crime in his approach to power and governance.

The Oxford Handbook of Organized Crime is a comprehensive resource on the complexities and dynamics of organized crime worldwide and throughout modern history. This collection of essays by varying authors delves into a wide breadth of elements within organized crime, most notably for us, organizational structures, and the roles of leaders and bosses. Letizia Paoli’s chapter dissecting the history and organization of the Italian mafia highlights many crucial leadership and organization traits within the mob and, accordingly, Trump’s political and business organizations. Paoli highlights organizational complexity, familial insulation, political influence, intimidation, and financial incentives by which bosses create longevity within their organizations (Paoli 2014). Many of these concepts will be familiar to anyone who has lived through the Trump presidency, campaign, and criminal trials. From an organizational standpoint, Trump elevating his blood and extended family through his political and business organizations to insulate his criminal behavior has been a hallmark of his leadership style. Using his political influence to pressure state officials into finding non-existent votes or inviting Hell’s Angels members to his court trials to intimidate jury members are only incidental examples of the much larger pattern of tactics utilized by Trump to achieve his goals, many of which expressly laid out by Paoli (Haag and Feuer 2024; Shear and Saul 2021).

Jay Albenese’s corresponding chapter on the emergence of the Italian American mafia highlights many of these same traits in mob leadership but also emphasizes a new stricter hierarchy among the organization consisting of underbosses, capos, and soldiers (Albanese 2014). This again resembles the hierarchical makeup of Trump’s leadership style and chain of command, with Jared Kushner and Donald Trump Jr.’s major roles in political strategy and business making them underbosses. Trump also has had his gang of caporegimes, or capos, in the form of Eric Trump’s managing of The Don’s business ventures, Paul Manafort directing political strategy and outreach, and Steve Bannon’s trusted consultations. Finally, Trump also follows the long-documented mob hierarchy with foot soldiers who handle his messaging and legal dirty work in the form of Rudy Giuliani, Roger Stone, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, and Hope Hicks. The literature on Italian and Italian American organized crime leadership offers not only a crucial organizational structure from which to compare the Trump internal hierarchy to the mob but also provides a better understanding of the inner workings of his organization.

Valentin Pereda’s study of the Sinaloa Cartel’s resilience also offers a vital lens to view the durability of other complex organizations, including political entities such as Trump’s. At the same time, not a mafia in the traditional sense, the cartel’s ability as a criminal organization to weather internal and external disruptions is partly attributed to its sophisticated illegal governance practices, which include judicial, financial, political, and regulatory governance (Pereda and Décary-Hetu 2023). These mechanisms enable the cartel to maintain internal cohesion, foster loyalty, and manage external relationships effectively, tools that have proven effective within their organized crime group and for the 45th president. Comparing this to Trump’s organizational strategies, one can see parallels in maintaining loyalty, managing conflicts, and leveraging external alliances to ensure stability and longevity. Such insights highlight the broader applicability of organized crime governance models to understanding resilience in various organizational contexts, including political and business realms. Criminal law struggles to hold such leaders accountable due to decentralized management and isolation of top ranks, and much of the existing literature on leaders within criminal organizations focuses on the difficulties of legally reprimanding them. The doctrine of “leaders’ liability” suggests holding leaders responsible based on their overall role and influence within the organization rather than direct involvement in each criminal act (Eldar 2012). This perspective shifts the focus...
from concrete intent to the leader’s awareness of organizational objectives, providing a framework to understand Trump’s leadership dynamics within this context. We can see similar tactics being undertaken by Trump’s upcoming RICO trials and charges about his lies regarding the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election.

The historical behavior of mob bosses in their leadership styles is imperative to understanding Trump’s leadership style, particularly in how he mirrors the tactics of organized crime leaders. Like mob bosses, Trump uses familial insulation, political influence, and intimidation to maintain power and control. His organizational structure, with family members in critical roles and loyalists executing his strategies, closely resembles the hierarchical setups found in the mafia. Moreover, the difficulty of legally holding leaders accountable due to decentralized management and insulated leadership is evident in organized crime and Trump’s legal battles, including his RICO trials related to the 2020 election. This comparison underscores the parallels between Trump’s approach to governance and the strategies of criminal organizations, offering a novel perspective on his tenure and tactics.

Much of the political science literature on modern presidents has focused more on their policy goals and achievements than on their methods and strategies in the public sphere. Still, inquiries into the latter behaviors have multiplied in response to the 45th president, whose bully pulpit style has been much more memorable to the American public than his policy accomplishments. Political scientist Richard Neustadt pioneered the study of individual presidential leadership styles concerning their policy goals and how their behaviors, mental states, and modes of communication-related to their political effectiveness. Neustadt’s (1960) seminal work, *Presidential Power*, is an iconic analysis of the presidential office and its powers. Neustadt offered Machiavellian advice on how potential presidents could effectively wield such power with the skill to achieve their policy goals and maintain a positive relationship with the office and the citizens it serves. Ultimately arguing that the president’s foremost political responsibility is to persuade Congress and the American public that the president’s political goals are in their best interest, Neustadt posited that the American president, most importantly, “makes his personal impact by the things he says and does” (p. 150).

The broader studies of presidential leadership styles fathered by Neustadt are exemplified by James David Barber’s (1972) *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House* and by Fred Greenstein’s more recent work dissecting the leadership characteristics of contemporary presidents. Barber distinguished a set of leadership categories that presidents fall into, with their labels determined by juxtaposing a president’s leadership abilities and political savvy with their mental stability (Barber 1972). Greenstein’s (2009) recent works, such as *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from F.D.R. to Clinton* and *Inventing the Job of President: Leadership Style from George Washington to Andrew Jackson*, incorporated the ideas of Neustadt and Barber into case studies of individual presidents’ leadership styles. In doing so, he offered several criteria by which to evaluate presidents, including “proficiency as a public communicator”, “cognitive style”, and “emotional intelligence” (p. 6). All these works share the common sentiment that an effective presidential leadership style incorporates the emotional stability, levelheadedness, and discretionary traits required to focus on persuading Congress and the American public.

There is considerable academic precedent for focusing on the bully pulpit patterns of individual presidents. With Greenstein’s work concludes by briefly addressing the Obama presidency, Trump’s presidency leaves a large gap in the study of presidential leadership styles (Greenstein 2012, p. 207). However, looking at Trump through previous academic criteria has proven challenging, given his radically unique, inconsistent, and non-conforming style of governance. That style is precisely why our label of “mobster-style president” is crucial to fully understanding and contextualizing Trump’s evolutionary step in using the presidential bully pulpit for political communication. This mobster-style presidency features intentional public abrasiveness and ruthlessness, emotional instability and unpredictability, disregard for the law and social norms, valuing loyalty over competence and ethics, and verbal or physical intimidation. While countless presidents have occasionally
resorted to any one or a combination of these tactics throughout American history, no other president has adopted this leadership style as consistently and unapologetically as Trump. The mobster-style presidency has triggered an evolution of the bully pulpit to its most extreme and relentless level, defying what political academia deemed imaginable for the limits of presidential behavior before 2016.

The comparison of Trump’s behavior to organized crime is not new rhetorical territory, with plenty of articles, legal experts, and primetime media pundits using the metaphor over the years. Still, using such a framework, little effort has been made to classify the distinctness of Trump’s political leadership habits. Most important research on the mobster-style presidency has examined Trump’s unorthodox and unhinged political behavior during his administration. Robert Lieberman’s (2020) essay “Trumpism and the Future of American Political Development” examined the policies, rhetoric, and social issues that marked the Trump administration to probe how this era broadly fits American political development regarding democratic norms and executive powers. These broader analytical works are critical in addressing the issues of criminality and deviant behaviors involved in the presidency, such as Gregg Barak’s (2022) _Criminology on Trump_, which used sociopolitical reasoning to study the president’s unique ability to maintain and grow his political influence amid accusations of tax evasion, sexual assault, fraud, and corruption. In extensively examining the Trump presidency, Barak used the lens of criminology to argue that the key to Trump’s political success was that he “is a classic Mertonian ‘innovator’ who ignores the legitimate means to success”, and that “for the Donald, it is not about the money as much as it is about the leveraging of money, people, power, or whatever to defeat his opponents whomever they may be” (p. 275). There is also no shortage of intimate insider accounts of Trump’s presidency, with books such as Leonnig and Rucker’s (2021) _I Alone Can Fix It_ providing deep inquiry into Trump’s erratic behavior behind the scenes during the twilight of his administration. The book offers insights into Trump’s discussions surrounding overturning the election, his verbal intimidation of his staff, and his demands for unquestioning loyalty.

In addition to the personal accounts, sociopolitical and criminological analyses of the Trump administration, and critical formative works on the importance and intricacies of presidential governing styles, there is a wealth of literature upon which to build the concept of a “mobster-style president”. Trump’s behavior and the insights from primary sources within his administration make much more sense in the context of this label. Trump’s willingness to throw out America’s longstanding tradition of peaceful power transfer by encouraging his followers to “fight like hell” on 6 January 2021 is perhaps the culmination of his administration’s mobster-style tactics (Trump 2021), but these appeared throughout his presidency. One of the more notable instances was his channeling the likes of Denzel Washington’s _American Gangster_ during his campaign run in 2016, boasting, “I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn’t lose voters” (Trump 2016b). Here, Trump exemplified the exact style of leadership in which Gotti-era organized crime syndicates, and Scorsese-style gangster cinema elevate the untouchable mobster who can commit atrocities openly and with impunity.

Trump continued to allude to violence throughout his campaigns and presidency, relying on implied physical intimidation to demean his opponents. Another moment during his 2016 campaign came when Trump reminisced about the “good old days” in response to a protestor at one of his rallies. Trump recalls, “You know what they used to do to a guy like that in a place like this? They’d be carried out on a stretcher, folks”, adding, “I’d like to punch him in the face” (Trump 2016a). In a recent campaign speech, Trump echoed similar threats when he responded to an earlier insult from President Biden by mimicking an imagined fistfight with the current president as the crowd cheered, stating, “I’d hit him right in that fake nose. They’d have plastic lying all over the floor” (Trump 2023a).

Trump unmistakably enjoys such “gangster” behavior and rhetoric. Lately, Trump tends to complain (or boast) that he has been indicted more times than “The Great Alphonse Capone”, whom he deemed “The great head of the mafia” (Trump 2023b). In one recent
speech, he went on a bizarre tangent detailing Capone’s violent tendency, explaining, “If he had dinner with you and if he didn’t like the way you smiled at him at dinner, he would kill you. You’d be dead. By the time you walked out of the nice restaurant, you would be dead” (Trump 2023b). It is worth noting that Trump’s claim that he holds more indictments than Capone is false, with Capone being indicted six times versus Trump’s four. However, his mobster style of governance raises the psychoanalytical question of whether Trump is spinning the truth to highlight perceived legal injustices against him or whether he is trying to claim more “street-cred” than old Scarface himself. Like a crime lord, the former president does seem to take deviant pride in his criminal acts, stating, “Every time the radical left Democrats, Marxists, communists, and fascists indict me, I considered a great badge of honor”. Trump has, after all, adopted Capone’s strategy of wearing his legal troubles on his sleeve to challenge their legitimacy in the public eye and speak against them to the press at any given opportunity, all the while continuing to make violent political threats. In early 2023, for example, Trump reshared a post on his platform TruthSocial in which one supporter claimed, “people my age will physically fight for him this time”, given the chance, and that “we are locked and loaded” (Blake 2023).

Trump’s public behavior is so classically gangster that he brazenly denies attempting to use violence for political means while continually doing so on a public platform. As any organized crime leader would, Trump also uses his access to the media and bully pulpit to satisfy his urges. One right-wing comedian and acquaintance of Trump recounts golfing with the former president while a female reporter was seeking an interview. Trump asked his aide plainly, “First question: is she pretty?” When the aide answered in the affirmative, Trump said, “Let’s do it” (DJ Akademiks 2023). For Trump, every aspect of political life, whether it be the media appearances, bully pulpit platforms, or the endlessly loyal cronies he surrounds himself with, bolsters his sense of status and provides him with more wealth, power, and even women.

Trump’s mobster-style governance has ultimately become more than simple rhetoric, making research on the matter even more pertinent. The January 6 insurrection set a new precedent for what is now deemed acceptable presidential behavior, and scholars are still trying to grapple with these implications. Meanwhile, in early 2024, Trump’s legal team suggested in federal court that Trump could order the assassination of a political opponent with SEAL Team Six and not be held criminally responsible, given that he was impeached but acquitted twice (Doherty 2024). These allusions to a mob-style whacking of an opponent, while not necessarily new for Trump, show that his outlaw governance style is continuing to devolve further into deviancy and criminality. Trump is already laying the legal groundwork to scale up his mobster-style leadership given the opportunity in the upcoming presidential election, making further study and research on the matter a valuable and timely undertaking.

3. Criteria for Assessing the Last Don

Examining Donald Trump’s presidency in terms of resembling a mob-like structure or behavior is a highly contentious and controversial topic, as it involves mixing political analysis with criminal connotations. However, some critics and observers have drawn parallels between certain aspects of Trump’s leadership style and tactics with characteristics commonly associated with authoritarian mob bosses.

We provide four criteria, although not an exhaustive list, to assess Trump’s presidency and mob-like style and employ a process-tracing method (Collier 2011; Beach and Pedersen 2013):

1. Loyalty and obedience: Trump has prioritized loyalty among his inner circle and administration members. He often rewards those who show unwavering support while punishing or marginalizing those who criticize or oppose him. This kind of loyalty test is reminiscent of the loyalty demanded by authoritarian leaders and mob bosses.

2. Personalization of power: Trump has been criticized for centralizing power around himself, often making decisions unilaterally and disregarding traditional norms and
processes. This consolidation of power can be seen as mirroring the autocratic tendencies of authoritarian figures.

3. Use of intimidation and threats: Trump has been known to use aggressive rhetoric, personal attacks, and threats of legal action against critics, opponents, and even members of his party. This combative and intimidating approach has drawn comparisons to the tactics used by mob bosses to maintain control and silence dissent.

4. Allegations of corruption and unethical behavior: Trump’s presidency was marked by multiple allegations of corruption, conflicts of interest, and unethical behavior, including issues related to his business dealings, personal conduct, and interactions with foreign governments. These allegations have fueled comparisons to the corrupt practices often associated with criminal organizations.

It is essential to approach such comparisons cautiously and critically, as they can oversimplify complex political dynamics and lead to unfair characterizations. While some parallels may be drawn between some aspects of Trump’s presidency and mob-like behavior, it is crucial to consider political leadership’s broader context and complexities when discussing such matters. In the next section, we will present the trajectory of Trump’s mob-like activities before, during, and after his presidency.

4. Politricks of a Mob Boss

Once a president is duly elected, several events take place. The peaceful transfer of power signals the stability of American democracy and the acknowledgment of peace. Next, the president assumes the role of chief executive by filling his cabinet with his close friends and honoring the pacts made during the campaign trail. Finally, the president uses executive orders to manage the government’s operations and establish the branch’s legitimacy (Branum 2002). Trump’s presidential actions do not reflect the norm. His mobster leadership and psyche are evident from his campaign promises to his first day in office. In this section, we will highlight his strong-arm tactics intended to define his enemies clearly, honor pacts with other entities, and avoid the transfer of power in January 2021.

5. Define Your Enemies

Glimmers of his strong-arm tactics to define his enemies and those of his supporters appear both domestically and internationally. He clearly defines his enemies, as seen during the presidential debates. Asserting his policy positions in a toxic and vindictive manner was an alluring element of his campaign. For instance, he wielded toxic masculinity and sexist tropes against his 2016 opponent, Hillary Clinton. During the middle of Clinton’s allotted time speaking on her tax policy, Trump rudely disrupts her, calling her “a nasty woman” (Diaz 2016). In one phrase, he dismisses taxes for the rich and embraces the inferiority of women. Mobsters never see women as equal or worthy of inclusion in discussions they feel only men should have (Longrigg 2007).

The objectification and hyper-sexualization of women are nothing new for Trump. In 2005, during an unscripted interaction with Billy Bush, Trump was heard boasting about his fame like John Gotti, promoting harassment and sexual assault of women. Another policy he leaned into during the campaign was border security, upholding the racial profiling of Black and Brown bodies. His racially discordant summary: “We have some bad hombres here, and we’re gonna get ‘em out” (Gurdus 2016). Television shows like The Sopranos highlight the use of racial epithets to describe Black and Brown bodies. Trump utilized this mobster tool to frame the American opioid epidemic and his war on drugs as a direct result of foreign countries. He continued to spew this toxic rhetoric throughout his presidency.

After a controversial presidential election in which Trump lost the popular vote and won only in the Electoral College, he needed to establish dominance. Immigration policy other than Mexico reflects his vehement hate towards those throughout the African diaspora. No executive order signals this more than Executive Order 13769, or what has aptly been named the “Muslim ban,” targeting seven countries: Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia,
Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Within 24 h, the Department of Homeland Security became the enforcer of “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States”. Two U.S. military personnel from Iraq became the first victims of this mob-style bullying (McGraw 2017). He doubled down on his racial animus by posing the question of why we allow immigrants from “s-hole countries, minimizing the continent of Africa, dismissing the triumphant sovereignty of Haiti, and the existence of El Salvador” (Vitali et al. 2018). Trump’s venomous rhetoric continued well into his presidency in domestic policy and other racially charged events.

Domestically, Trump’s anti-Black rhetoric abounds, and ultimately, his policy position is displayed through his responses, from his throwing Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists out of his campaign rallies to suggesting that White nationalists use violent Jim Crow tactics to remove protesters to his Blue Lives Matter, which was directly opposed to Black Lives Matter (Diamond 2015; Action News 5 2018). Another indicator of Trump’s domestic policy on race relations came after the traumatic events of Charlottesville. White nationalists violently attacked peaceful counter-protesters over the continued presence of statues of treasonous Confederate Robert E. Lee, causing the governor to declare a state of emergency (TIME 2017). White supremacist violence ensued from the “Unite the Right” rally; white supremacists carried torches chanting anti-Semitic and racist slogans and songs such as “Blood and Soil”, “You will not replace Us”, and even singing the Confederate song “Dixie” (TIME 2017). To protect his interest and avoid having to intervene, Trump, in mob-boss fashion, contended that there were “very fine people, on both sides” to create a false equivalency to violence performed by those who would eventually become part of this mob on January 6 (Kessler 2020). Trump used such phrases as strong-arm mob tactics to avoid political responsibility. His political positions are pro-racial profiling, pro-police brutality, and pro-government suppression, used to quash the demands of Black citizens and entice more conservatives to join the ranks of his mafia.

6. Honor Your Pacts

Loyalty is a significant key for mafia-style politicians. If a mob boss gives his word, he keeps it or is seen as untrustworthy. Trump said he would appoint many associates to different positions in his cabinet. These included Wall Street figures, neoconservatives, and even white supremacists—the presidential cabinet functioned like the hierarchy of the mob. Certain people fill specific roles to ensure continuity, and loyalists will follow orders. Each appointment that Trump made reflected his mob-style policy position. Those given these roles showed unwavering loyalty to the mob boss president while pretending to uphold the Constitution.

As a favor to wrestling mogul and Wall Street businessman Vince McMahon, Trump gave a cabinet position to his wife, Linda McMahon. On its face, this seems like a routine appointment. However, Trump’s meteoric rise to fame was mainly due to his appearance on WWE’s WrestleMania. Trump established himself as a villain willing to fight back for Wall Street, appointing Linda McMahon as administrator of the Small Business Administration. She was a business executive and a former Republican candidate for Senate. Trump settled other debts in this way with high-level appointments.

One of the most notorious such appointments was that of Jeffery Beauregard Sessions—a well-known white supremacist with ties to neo-Nazi organizations. Trump’s appointment signaled mob ties to the most racist elements in American society. One of the first acts of Sessions as the newly appointed Attorney General was to defund the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department and support religious liberty. In doing so, Trump allowed his capo to sterilize any current or future demands for the civil rights movement. The Department of Justice, the agency tasked with combatting violations of immigration, policing, criminal justice, and voting rights, was disabled to promote the president’s mob-boss position that he supported law enforcement and all those who supported him (Newkirk 2020).

All of Trump’s actions aligned with the mobster mentality of “Death before dishonor”. He was also able to orchestrate a hostile takeover of the Republican party. By gaining
control of the party, he converted Tea Partiers into Trumpeters (Elving 2022). La Cosa Nostra is a well-organized group that carries out the orders of the “Boss of All Bosses”—the Don, in this case, Donald Trump, and the mob is the insurrection of January 6.

7. The Mob Follows the Mob Boss: January 6 (Violence)

“When you can’t borrow another buck from the bank or buy another case of booze, you bust the joint out. You light a match”.

~Tommy Devito (played by Joe Pesci in the 1990 movie Goodfellas).

Contesting the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election, Donald Trump gave orders for his mob to gather in Washington, DC. A mob boss is as a mob boss does, even if he is the president. Calling the election “rigged” signaled that the incoming presidential candidate, Joe Biden, was illegitimate. With every sentence, Trump incited the crowd to stop what he called the stealing of the presidency and the country:

“By the way, Pennsylvania has now seen all of this. They didn’t know because it was so quick. They had a vote. They voted. But now they see all this stuff, it’s all come to light. It doesn’t happen that fast. And they want to recertify their votes. They want to recertify. But the only way that can happen is if Mike Pence agrees to send it back. Mike Pence has to agree to send it back.

(Audience chants: “Send it back”.)

And many people in Congress want it sent back.

And think of what you’re doing. Let’s say you don’t do it. Somebody says, ‘Well, we have to obey the Constitution’. And you are because you’re protecting our country, and you’re protecting the Constitution. So you are.

But think of what happens. Let’s say they’re stiffs and they’re stupid people, and they say, well, we really have no choice. Even though Pennsylvania and other states want to redo their votes. They want to see the numbers. They already have the numbers. Go very quickly. And they want to redo their legislature because many of these votes were taken, as I said because it wasn’t approved by their legislature. You know, that, in itself, is legal. And then you have the scam, and that’s all of the things that we’re talking about.

But think of this. If you don’t do that, that means you will have a President of the United States for four years with his wonderful son. You will have a president who lost all of these states. Or you will have a president, to put it another way, who was voted on by a bunch of stupid people who lost all of these states.

You will have an illegitimate president. That’s what you’ll have. And we can’t let that happen”. (Trump 2021)

Trump’s goal was not to sway public opinion but to bring legitimacy to views deemed irredeemable in American society. After hearing Trump’s speech, rioters violently stormed Capitol Hill. Politicians had to be rushed out of the building, especially Mike Pence, whom the mob personally threatened because the Don primed them to do so, saying that if Pence did not perform his job, they would lose the election and should be dealt with. This transcript was entered into evidence in Trump’s impeachment trial. Like John Gotti, this Teflon Don would face even more cases and charges, including a RICO charge.

Nineteen people, including Trump, were charged under Georgia law for election schemes: “...those charged in Monday’s indictment face a slew of charges, including racketeering, violating the oath of a public officer, forgery, false statements, and other offenses” (Brumback and Cooper 2024). Only seven states, including Georgia, currently enforce the federal RICO act, used initially to dismantle the Italian mafia in the United States. Georgia is not the only state where Trump faces charges. In New York, along with his family, Trump was charged with exaggerating his worth on tax documents. The Trumps are currently barred from owning a business in New York and have been fined 350 million dollars (Reiss and Gregorian 2024). In true mob-boss fashion, Trump’s response was to
admit nothing, deny everything, and counter-argue by promoting his new shoe line and a GoFundMe account that has raised over half a million dollars as of February 2024.

Trump demonstrates not only the traits of a mobster-style leader but also his behavior before, during, and after his presidency displays how he operates as a mob boss who is not afraid to engage in witness tampering, voter intimidation, and fraud—a mob boss who advocates violence and gives orders to a mob of people in a way that ensures that violence is carried out. We are now faced with a sobering reality. Trump is still running for his second term as president as a convicted felon after being found guilty on 34 counts in a criminal trial (ABC News 2024). His daughter-in-law is now the co-chair of the Republican National Committee (RNC) (Laney and Slattery 2024). His followers/mob, self-proclaimed “Trumpeters”, will use any means necessary to advance his agenda and ensure his election (Bykowicz 2016). If we are to move toward a more perfect union, we will have to draw firm lines in the sand. We must make Trump’s leadership style and position unacceptable in the America we want to live in or we will be doomed to suffer the authoritarian control of the last Don.

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