

BRIAN TYLER COHEN

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *SHAMELESS*

THE DAY AFTER

How to Wield Power in a Post-Trump World



FOREWORD BY MARC ELIAS

THE DAY AFTER

*How to Wield Power in a
Post-Trump World*

BRIAN TYLER COHEN



HARPER

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Note to Readers

This ebook contains the following accessibility features which, if supported by your device, can be accessed via your ereader/accessibility settings:

- Change of font size and line height
- Change of background and font colours
- Change of font
- Change justification
- Text to speech
- Page numbers taken from the following print edition: ISBN 9780063495104

Dedication

TO MY PARENTS
*FOR THE BOTTOMLESS WELL OF LOVE,
SUPPORT, AND ENCOURAGEMENT*

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Note to Readers

Dedication

Foreword by Marc Elias

Prologue

1. The Long Game

2. The Wrong Game

3. Blank Checks and Balances

4. The Untouchables

5. We the People

6. Not a King

7. The Con in the Economy

8. Live and Let Die

9. Breaking the News

10. Greenhouse Gas

11. Lawfare

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

Index

About the Author

Also by Brian Tyler Cohen

Copyright

About the Publisher

Foreword

Every day we are reminded of the terrible consequences of the 2024 election. Donald Trump's return to office has been characterized by an aged autocrat surrounded by cowards and sycophants. Any pretense that there are guardrails has been disproven. There are no adults in the room.

His cabinet and those in the White House see their roles as facilitating his illegal and unconstitutional actions. They shower praise on him as if he were an insecure despot. They execute his wishes and cater to his every whim as if he were a powerful dictator. They are the court jesters in Trump's pretend kingdom.

Even worse are the Republicans in Congress. Under our system of government, they are supposed to put their constituents' interests first and jealously guard their legislative power and prerogatives. They are supposed to check executive overreach and balance the president's power with the powers they uniquely control.

Instead, Congressional Republicans act as though they are part of the administration rather than members of a coequal branch of government. They tried to forfeit their taxing power—part of which is the power to impose tariffs—to Trump, until the Supreme Court stepped in. They permitted Trump to take the nation to war without a congressional declaration. But worst of all, perhaps, has been their refusal to conduct meaningful oversight of the corruption and abuses committed by Trump, his friends and family, and the administration.

The Republican Party—once the Grand Old Party—is now little more than a vessel for Trump’s cult of personality. It has been gutted of any meaningful role in national politics other than to effectuate his policies. It has no platform other than what Trump posts on social media. It supports the candidates he tells it to support and spends money at his behest.

As damaging as the collapse of governmental checks has been to our democracy, the retreat of our largest private institutions has been even more devastating. Early in his tenure, Trump made clear he wanted to neutralize the two pillars of American democracy that could hold him to account—law firms and media companies.

When Trump targeted the nation’s largest law firms, many people assumed they would fight back. Instead, while a handful stood tall, most fell into line. The worst cut deals with Trump to provide him with hundreds of millions of dollars worth of free legal services. But many more simply stayed silent while the rule of law was attacked.

The large media corporations that promised to hold power to account are instead settling bogus claims that put money in his pocket. They have proven that democracy can die in the full light of day just as easily as in the darkness of night.

If all of this sounds deeply pessimistic, it is not meant to be. Yes, the system is broken. However, if we only focus on how to fix it, we will miss the big opportunity that awaits us. No matter what happens in 2028, we will not return to the governmental and political systems of the past.

In many respects, the failure of the Biden era was a belief that our democracy could be restored to what it was before Trump. It can *not* be. More importantly, that should not be our ultimate goal.

Instead, those in the pro-democracy movement should focus on what comes next. We must not seek to restore the past, but insist that it be replaced with something bolder and built for the future. Our goal should be the transformation of our institutions, not merely their restoration.

Shortly after Trump’s election in 2024, I wrote about the need to move beyond a “resistance.” The problem with that term is that it is both reactive

and temporally limited. A resistance is necessarily built to push back against something, rather than to expand to fill a vacuum left by the absence of power. It will also, therefore, be limited to the period in which there is something to resist.

For the same reason, I am skeptical of any plan that begins in 2029 and lasts only four years. Many of the structural changes needed must start now. And many of the policies will take much longer to enact and implement.

Take media, for example. We need to build a vibrant, independent media ecosystem now. It cannot wait for the next election or the next movement leader. Yes, Democratic candidates need to embrace it—but we must build it before that will become possible.

For the last several years Brian Tyler Cohen and I have had an ongoing conversation around these issues on our *Democracy Watch* YouTube podcast. It was during those conversations—and others off-air—that Brian first outlined to me some of the arguments at the heart of this book. I remember thinking: *Someone needs to write this down*. He did.

Together we have spent countless hours documenting in real time what Trump and his enablers are doing to our elections and our institutions. Week after week, Brian has shown a remarkable ability to cut through the noise and explain what is actually at stake in language that reaches people where they are. This book does the same thing in written form—and it could not come at a more critical moment.

Rebuilding governmental institutions will take years—more likely decades—to design, test, and implement. So too will the development of new lines of jurisprudence and legal thought. In fact, most of the assumptions underlying our past policies may be no longer correct. We must challenge them to determine whether they will be ready to meet the moment ahead or are simply ideas from the past.

None of this will be easy. There will be disagreements among the pro-democracy camp on policies, strategies, and tactics. That is a good thing. We need to foster open debate and disagreement. We need to be a big tent of ideas and approaches.

This book, and others like it, are part of that process. That is why I wrote this foreword, and why I encourage you to not simply read it but to wrestle with it and debate it in your own minds before drawing conclusions. If you do, you will find it will make you think and inspire you to act.

I have watched Brian do this work up close. As a part of our work and our friendship we have pushed each other to think harder about what democracy requires of us right now. This book reflects that same rigor and urgency. Brian does not ask you to simply resist. He asks you to imagine—and then build—what will come next. That is exactly the right ask for this moment.

The fight for democracy is the challenge of our generation. We all need to do our part. With this book, Brian Tyler Cohen has made exactly the kind of contribution this movement needs—not a eulogy for what we have lost, but a blueprint for what we can build.

—*Marc Elias*
March 2026

Prologue

It never used to feel so cold in Mar-a-Lago. There was an empty chill that came not just from the overworked air-conditioning. The weather outside was still delightful in late January 2029, the usual damp warmth that brought all those old snowbirds to Palm Beach. But inside, the old source of heat—the anxious crowds of influence peddlers and stargazers—had slipped away, week by week as the battleground states had fallen one by one.

The unlit chandeliers and vacant sofas were the only witnesses to the old man in the white polo shirt tucked into his black pants hobbling through the darkened room, his phone pressed close to his pale, dry lips. He refused to lean on a cane or walker, even though he had desperately needed one since his eighty-second birthday the previous summer. The last thing he wanted was to look as old and weak as Joe Biden had in his final months in office. So he limped and shuffled around the antiques, consumed by his calls to the businessmen, advisers, and sycophants about the pathetic campaign run by his vice president. *I should never have trusted Don Jr.'s advice. Vance was always a fake, a fraud, a fucking Yale lawyer. My people knew he wasn't MAGA. He said I was America's Hitler. What the hell is he? He's America's Loser. His name isn't even JD.*

He thought about pushing his Supreme Court to stretch the Constitution a little more. There was always a domestic insurrection or alien invasion that could have called for a few more years in the Oval Office. But as it turned out, losing power wasn't what stung him most. Like his thinning hairline and

fattening waistline, he could always cover that up. Power was perception. Power was money. And he had made billions.

No, what was worse than leaving the White House was the absence of eyeballs. With every passing day it was getting harder and harder to keep his gold-plated grip on public attention. There was so much slop out there on social media, so many jaw-dropping videos that looked so real. In truth, on Truth Social, he'd lost the power to shock and awe some time before, around the 2026 midterms that had swept away his fragile hold on Congress. The economy had gone sideways for three years, with only the AI billionaires feeling flush. The MAGA party was over; the job had turned into a grind. The prosecutions of his enemies—James Comey, Adam Schiff, Letitia James—had fallen apart. The tariffs had been taken down; first by the courts, then by necessity. The crypto bubble had burst a couple of billion in meme coins. The Middle East still burned, and the Nobel Peace Prize had never landed.

Still, he had left his mark. There was the new triumphal Trump Arch opposite the Lincoln Memorial; the new Trump ballroom that dominated the old White House; and a huge Qatari plane parked at Palm Beach International Airport at great expense. All he needed to do was raise a billion dollars for the brand-new skyscraper in Miami that would be home to his presidential library and luxury spa hotel.

Everyone was vying to be the next Donald John Trump, but they were only pale imitations. He would make sure to remind anyone and everyone that the Big Dog overshadowed all the little chihuahuas.

* * *

Back in the nation's capital, the newly elected Democratic president stared at a pile of executive orders ready for signature on the Resolute Desk. The Oval Office still smelled of fresh paint from the rapid switchover on inauguration day. Outside there was a steady beat of metal against metal as the construction crews dismantled the viewing platforms for the inaugural parade. Dismantling the last four years would be much louder.

Despite all the very real fears of mob violence, foreign interference, and fake video reports about fake votes, the results of the presidential election of 2028 had been certified. That might have been the result of JD Vance's unbridled arrogance. Defeat had been so unthinkable that he had waited too long to embrace fully the 2028 Big Lie conspiracy. It was too little, too late.

The relative ease of the transition had passed over Washington like some political anesthetic. So many of the capital's traditionalists felt a long-lost sense of calm. After four years of turmoil and terror, rumor and repression, corruption and criminality, the pain was receding. Life *could* return to normal. Institutions *could* be rebuilt. Elected officials *could* speak their minds, stand on their principles, reclaim the constitutional powers bequeathed by the founders. Bipartisanship, civility, and the truth lay right around the corner. The rest of the world had celebrated November's results in the streets of London, Paris, Tokyo, and Beijing. World leaders could sleep soundly once again, banishing their nightmarish fears of alliances broken, commerce disrupted, diplomacy destroyed. Trump had talked about slapping his illegal tariffs on the world as Liberation Day. Now America's allies were partying like they had truly been liberated from a long international nightmare.

Inside the White House, however, the conflict had not come to an end. The new president faced a stark choice between two rival sets of advisers. On one side were the Washington veterans. They had grown up on Capitol Hill and congressional campaigns, and their networks had proved to be invaluable with donors, endorsements, ad agencies, and traditional media. They knew how to lock in convention delegates, schmooze the interest groups, and whip votes. They believed, deep in their bones, that it was time to heal the fractured nation, bind up the wounds of the Trump years, turn the page on a painful past, and begin to rebuild. They had signed up for the restoration of the Washington they knew. They wanted to shy away from the politics of conflict and confrontation.

On the other side were the insurgent upstarts, who were gunning for the fight of a lifetime, the rejects and newcomers who had failed to get a job on

one of the many campaigns led by purple-state governors and senators—or had never wanted one of those jobs in the first place. They had carried the torch for the newly inaugurated president when the candidate had been unsure of victory in the first primary states. They didn't believe in the status quo, because they had no trust or place in it. The voters wanted change, and they embodied the forces of change. The best way to restore democracy was not to return to the old ways of 2024 or even 2016; it was to build a fortress of democracy that the next brand of neo-fascist MAGA heads would be unable to destroy. Surely the biggest lesson of the Biden presidency had been to extinguish the naive belief that once there was a Democratic president again, the world would just revert back to normal.

Caught between the old guard and the new, between the traditionalists and the reformers, between the middle and the muscle, was the forty-eighth president of the United States. Alone at the Resolute Desk, the new president stared at the walls of the Oval Office, where all the fake gold decorations had been stripped and shipped down to Florida, and wondered what, besides the paint job, would have to be done to renovate this office.

* * *

Here's the reality. We're not teetering on the brink of autocracy; we've fallen off the cliff of democracy, and we need to be ready for what comes next. One of the main reasons Trump 2.0 damaged these United States so much more than Trump 1.0 was because they planned for it. In detail, in unison. Project 2025, which candidate Trump made such a transparent pretense of disavowing, was not some cut-and-paste job the interns had slapped together; it was the culmination of years—no, decades—of planning and patient building, the kind of planning that Trump himself couldn't manage if it involved a casino in Atlantic City or a high-rise hotel in Riyadh. He was the perfect host for a virus that infected not just our country but half the world. To cure the patient will need more than hydroxychloroquine or ivermectin or—dare I say—Tylenol. It will take a clear-eyed diagnosis of how we got sick

and how powerful the virus remains. We need to learn from our weaknesses and from their strengths. Like the best vaccines, the ones that scientifically save lives, we'll need to mimic the virus so we can beat it with our own natural defenses. Because after four years of wanton vandalism and corruption, it will take guts to do this. And it will take power; not just winning power but wielding it effectively, once progressives have gotten it back.

This is no time for the fainthearted. You can't chew your fingernails, worrying about whether the old guard will like or respect what you're doing. Or whether the other side will cry foul when they are forced to contend with the same exercise of power they once enjoyed. In the fight to save what's left of our democratic republic, we will need to break the rules—because the rules have already been broken, repeatedly and shamelessly, by the corrupt opponents of our own Constitution.

That's not just a job for our elected officials, although they carry more of the burden than their voters do. It's also our job, the job of each and every one of us. What are we going to do to seize this moment, to recognize the gravity of our times, beyond shaking our heads at the news? How will we exercise our power as citizens while we still have it? Because it's not good enough to share a video about yet another ICE raid on the streets. When you're face to face with the secret police on your sidewalk, you need to stand up for those being terrorized in the name of Trump. It's not good enough to applaud the establishment candidates who promise that everything can get back to normal. When you vote in the primaries, you will need to select candidates who understand the urgency of the moment we're in. And when the day after Trump finally arrives, it won't be good enough to get back to your old life—because the repair and rebuilding of our communities and country are the work of millions of people, not just members of Congress.

It's time to look at power with the cold, clear eyes of the great Italian analyst of how to rule. Niccolò Machiavelli wrote five hundred years ago that a leader needs to be a mixture of a fox and a lion: a fox to recognize the traps

and a lion to frighten the wolves. This is the playbook for the progressives who are the foxes and lions of a world that Trump changed forever.

The Long Game

If you're shocked by the speed of descent of our democracy, you've probably seen the easy explanation of why Trump 2.0 is so much worse than Trump 1.0. The pundits say that Trump learned from his last time around: He now knows how to wield power, punish enemies, and purge the establishment that slowed him down. All of which is true, but it's only part of the story—a story that stretches back several decades. Because the broader right-wing movement also learned its lessons and saw its greatest opportunity in the second coming of Donald Trump.

The project didn't start in 2025. It took a half century of plotting and scheming, but it finally came to pass on the fourth attempt. You see, Donald J. Trump is just the endpoint of a very, very long conservative campaign to wield power for the profit of the few. What started with the imperial presidency of Richard Nixon found its popular expression in Ronald Reagan, its military force in George W. Bush, and its brazen lawlessness in a reality TV star. Autocracy is the just cost of doing business, and it's one the oligarchy is more than ready to pay.

To understand how we got here and what we must do now, we need to get our heads around the world the baby boomers lived in. Yes, the actual baby