

## IDEAS

# Trump's \$1.8 Billion Slush Fund Is Worse Than Stealing

Recasting the January 6 insurrection as the work of heroic patriots remains the president's highest priority.

By Jonathan Chait



Illustration by The Atlantic. Sources: Jon Cherry / Getty; kampee patisena / Getty; Matt Anderson Photography / Getty.

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Among the very first things Donald Trump did upon assuming the powers of the presidency for the second time was commute the sentences of, and grant pardons to, everybody involved in his attempt to overturn the 2020 election. Republican allies expressed moderate disappointment but vowed to move past this ugly blemish. Senator Susan Collins called it a “terrible day for our Justice Department.” Senator Tommy Tuberville admitted, “It’s a hard one, because we work with them up here,” referring to Capitol Police who were viciously beaten by Trump’s allies. Tuberville

concluded, “At the end of the day, we’ve got to get Jan. 6 behind us.” Senate Majority Leader John Thune said that Republicans were “not looking backwards; we’re looking forward.”

It was not, however, just one terrible day. Trump’s loyalty to his most violent and criminal supporters was a signal of his highest priority and has been a reliable guide to his decisions ever since. The impulse to rewrite the history of January 6, 2021, appears to be the inspiration even for the establishment of a \$1.8 billion Treasury Department slush fund for victims of so-called weaponization of government.

Last week, when the administration floated the notion of disbursing payments to alleged victims of government weaponization, cynics assumed that Trump meant to divert the money to himself. But this assessment may have turned out to be too naive. Trump already has ample ways to profit from office, including from stock trading with the benefit of inside knowledge and by accepting gifts from client states. The Justice Department told reporters yesterday that Trump, his sons, and his family business would not receive payments from the fund. The recipients will almost surely be insurrectionists and other allies.

From the February 2026 issue: Donald Trump wants you to forget this happened

How, exactly, can Trump hand out taxpayer dollars at his whim? The putative mechanism is a settlement with the Internal Revenue Service. In 2020, an IRS contractor leaked a few years of Trump’s tax records. (Before Trump, major presidential candidates had for decades voluntarily released their returns, an essential step in demonstrating that they had no conflicts of interest.)

The contractor was caught and sent to prison. Trump nevertheless sued for the offense of being subjected to a portion of the scrutiny his fellow candidates have voluntarily undergone. Because Trump runs the IRS, it is no longer in a position to place any limits on his demands. He has already exploited the loophole of suing his own government to pay a series of allies investigated for or convicted of committing crimes out of loyalty to him. The recipients include the family of Ashli Babbitt, an insurrectionist who was shot and killed on January 6 while smashing her way into a corridor behind which members of Congress had taken shelter from the mob.

Trump’s Justice Department describes the forthcoming payouts as a “systematic process to hear and redress claims of others who suffered weaponization and lawfare.”

The process is, in fact, the opposite of systemic. It is designed to be controlled personally by Trump and sheltered from any judicial scrutiny.

If the government were actually compensating victims of lawfare, it would direct payments to James Comey, Mark Kelly, Adam Schiff, and other targets of Trump's vindictive prosecutions. Trump has described his actions as turnabout—"I was hunted by some very bad people. Now I'm the hunter."—which, given that he has called his own prosecutions political targeting, is tantamount to confessing that he is targeting his enemies.

But, of course, nobody entertains for a moment the thought that the fund could conceivably reward an *actual* victim of weaponization. To ensure that it will never be used for a deserving victim, the fund is scheduled for termination on December 15, 2028.

Asked by a reporter yesterday whether people who committed violence against police officers should receive payments, Trump replied, "It'll all be dependent on a committee. A committee's being set up of very talented people, very highly respected people." The committee is being selected entirely by Trump, who retains the power to replace any member who displeases him, and who in any case has argued in multiple contexts that he is entitled to exert full control over any decision by the executive branch.

The most dystopian explanation for this scheme comes from sources who sketched it out to ABC News last week. As ABC's reporters characterized it, the sources described the fund as "a hybrid between a victim compensation fund—similar to the civil claims process that followed the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill—and a truth-and-reconciliation-style commission."

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Trump's commission is deviously inverting the original and most famous truth-and-reconciliation commission. South Africa established its commission to document the crimes committed under its apartheid regime. Rather than uncovering the truth to facilitate the state's transformation from authoritarianism into democracy, Trump is doing the reverse, inscribing his lies into the historical record in an effort to undermine democracy.

It is common to describe Trump's steps as vengeance, but he has more in mind than

merely settling old scores. This obsession drove Trump to support a successful primary challenge to Senator Bill Cassidy, whose offense was casting a symbolic vote to impeach him after January 6. Cassidy had long since surrendered any independent impulses, to the point of violating his own pro-vaccine convictions to cast a humiliating, decisive vote to confirm Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as secretary of health and human services. Yet Cassidy's penitence did not satisfy Trump.

Trump considers it essential both to intimidate anybody who would stop him from carrying out illegal orders—hence his attempts to imprison Democrats who truthfully advised military members that they should not obey illegal orders—and to reward anybody who does follow them. He has reportedly promised mass pardons before he leaves office. Trump could have waited until after the 2028 elections to set up his slush fund, but he is doing it now in a high-profile way, presumably to communicate directly that loyal allies can expect lavish rewards.

The government's operating ethos during Trump's second term has followed the dictum that the president and his allies are immune from the law, while his enemies can expect to be hounded. As his party watches silently and cowers, his intentions grow only more naked.

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