

Is Corruption the New American Dream — A Nation Rebuilt on the Gospel of the Grift?

Where honesty is punished, power is bought, and every rule has a price, Trump's turned the dream of opportunity into an industry of deception...



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OCT 27



When corruption becomes endemic, democracy dies from the inside out. Trump's family's gift is teaching America's elites that power can be bought, just as it is in Putin's Russia and Orbán's Hungary, and it's already distorting our economy.

When I was working for an international relief agency in the early 1980s, I [went into Uganda](#) during the war and famine that began when Tanzanian troops invaded to throw out Idi Amin. To get there, I had to pay a fifty-dollar bribe to the Ugandan official at their embassy in Nairobi to get my visa.

When I was leaving through the half-destroyed Entebbe airport, three soldiers pointed their automatic weapons at my face and demanded “half” of whatever money I had left before letting me through to the boarding area.

In Haiti, a cabinet-level official tried to solicit a \$15,000 bribe from me in exchange for our agency getting permission to operate there (I turned it down). In a remote part of Mexico on a business trip, a police officer drove me off the road to demand \$100 or else I’d “spend the night in jail.”

They were all quick, unforgettable lessons in how corruption works: when it becomes the default operating system of a country, it drains not only cash and makes it tough for honest businesspeople to earn a living, but — far more importantly — destroys democracy itself. That same poison is now spreading here.

The corruption of Donald Trump and his children — the open solicitation of bribes

disguised as “investments,” the jet plane, the crypto windfalls, the foreign hotel projects and “licensing fees,” the “donations” and “gifts” that appear tied to pardons, tariffs or regulatory relief — have begun to teach America’s morbidly rich and business leaders that access to our government is now a purchasable commodity.

Remember when Apple’s Tim Cook brought a [chunk of 24 karat gold](#) to gift Trump, apparently hoping for tariff exceptions?

The [long list of corporations](#) that are paying for the Epstein Ballroom, presumably in expectation of better treatment from the Trump regime? The billions the [UAE gave Trump’s kids](#) just before Trump gave them chips they weren’t supposed to have because of national security? [Tom Homan taking \\$50,000](#) in a paper bag from an FBI agent and Trump, Bondi, and Noem laughing it off?

Or headlines like today’s: “[Close Friend of JD Vance Skirts Normal Channels to Take Over Key](#)

[Health Research](#)” and “[\\$130M Pentagon Donor Has Ties to Jeffrey Epstein.](#)”

Once that expectation of corruption takes hold, it reshapes an entire economy. It tells corporations, billionaires, and foreign governments alike that the fastest way to win contracts or avoid tariffs and other regulations isn't through innovation or competition but through flattery, payment, or tribute to Donald, his [wife](#), or his [children](#).

This is exactly what happened in Trump's role models of Russia and Hungary.

In Russia, researchers estimate roughly [15 to 20 percent](#) of the nation's entire GDP vanishes each year into the pockets of Putin, his oligarchs, and loyal politicians; some analysts put it even higher, approaching a quarter of the economy when you include the broader shadow sector.

In [Hungary](#), corruption is smaller in absolute size but just as corrosive: public contracts are

routinely overpriced by 20 percent or more, and a fifth of companies operate not on market principles but on loyalty to Viktor Orbán. The result is predictable: stagnant productivity, collapsing services, and a hollowed-out middle class as the Orbán family becomes fabulously rich.

Corruption functions like a tax, but one that never funds schools or bridges. It rewards obedience and punishes competence. Once leaders and their families start selling favors, the smart business move isn't to innovate but to curry favor; the fastest path to profit is proximity to power.

Small businesses get crushed because they can't afford the "entry fee." Big ones stagnate because every decision runs through political connections. Ordinary people watch their roads crumble, their wages flatten, and their faith in fairness evaporate. The economy quietly re-optimizes itself around bribery instead of merit, and *everyone* — except the oligarchs — pays.

That's where America is today. Trump has already normalized the spectacle of CEOs and foreign leaders making pilgrimages to the White House or Mar-a-Lago with million-dollar checks or lavish gifts. His family's private ventures, from crypto to foreign hotels to golf resorts, are magnets for anyone seeking goodwill from the man with the power to sign their contracts or reduce their tariffs.

And with five corrupt Republicans on the Supreme Court having legalized unlimited political bribery of themselves and politicians through [*Buckley v. Valeo*](#), [*First National Bank of Boston v. Bellotti*](#), and [*Citizens United v. FEC*](#), there's barely a law left to stop it.

We've seen this movie before. In every kleptocracy, every dictatorship throughout history, the leader's personal enrichment becomes national policy. Regulators are neutered, watchdogs are fired, and the press is bullied into silence through lawsuits, regulation, and oligarchic purchase.

Then come the strong-arm tactics: the intimidation of lawyers, journalists, and opponents under the guise of “law and order.” It’s what [Putin did when Alexei Navalny](#) exposed Gazprom’s graft and paid with his life; it’s what [Orbán did](#) when he had critics of his corruption prosecuted and bankrupted. And now, here, attorneys defending protesters are being detained at airports while Trump suspends enforcement of the [Foreign Corrupt Practices Act](#) so he, his billionaire buddies, and his family members can profit from foreign deals.

Corruption doesn’t just rot morality; it wrecks economies. When a nation’s leadership is for sale, domestic and foreign corporations start bidding instead of building.

Economists call it “[state capture](#)”: private interests rewriting the rules for their own benefit. Studies from the [IMF](#) and [World Bank](#) show that captured states lose growth,

investment, and trust, while inequality soars. In Russia's case, that loss adds up to hundreds of billions of dollars every year. In Hungary's, GDP per capita has fallen far behind its once-equal neighbors.

The same dynamic is taking shape here as tax breaks, tariffs, and deregulation are auctioned off to the highest bidders.

For most Americans, this translates into worse schools, fewer jobs, and higher prices. Every time a corporation pays a bribe to secure a contract, it folds that "cost of doing business" into what you and I pay at the store or in taxes. Every time a billionaire buys a loophole or a pardon, the rest of us pick up the tab.

Meanwhile, the honest business owner who refuses to play along loses bids, the worker loses bargaining power, and democracy itself loses credibility. The economy becomes a closed club, guarded by money, loyalty, and fear.

Recovering from this kind of rot isn't easy, but history shows it can be done.

Countries that have clawed their way back from systemic corruption did it by prosecuting openly corrupt leaders while making the sale of influence difficult and dangerous: forcing transparency in contracts, requiring officials to divest from private holdings, empowering independent prosecutors, protecting whistleblowers, and putting every government transaction online where citizens can see it.

The sunlight approach works because it raises the cost of corruption higher than its payoff.

That's the crossroads we face now. We can follow Russia and Hungary down the path where 15 to 20 percent of national wealth disappears into private hands each year, or we can defend the idea that government exists to serve the public, not enrich the Trump dynasty.

If we fail, America will cease to be a democracy in any meaningful sense. We'll

become a market; one where laws, tariffs, and justice are just products to be bought and sold by those with the closest access to Trump or his family members.

I've seen what that world looks like up close, staring down the barrel of a soldier's rifle at Entebbe Airport. The stakes aren't abstract. Corruption is the moment when fear replaces fairness, when power replaces principle, and when Americans become "customers" of their own government instead of citizens.

If we let Trump and his circle finish that transformation, America won't just resemble Putin's Russia, it will have become just another tinpot dictatorship with a fabulously rich "royal" entourage and a vast class of the struggling, working poor who can't afford to spiff the First Family.

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