



**THE POWER TRIP** | SEPT. 9, 2024

# The Afterlife of Donald Trump

At home at Mar-a-Lago, the presidential hopeful contemplates miracles, his campaign, and his formidable new opponent.



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Photo: Jacob Holler. Art: Isabelle Brouman.

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*Update: [A note to readers.](#)*

**P**ink. An ovular rose. Big and smooth. A complex commonplace instrument. And, as far as these things go, a rather nice one. Isolated from the head and all that roils therein, and to which it is, famously and miraculously, still attached, you have to admit, if you can: It is beautiful. In Palm Beach, sunlight streamed through the window to find its blood vessels, setting the whole device aglow. Auris Divina, Divine Ear, protector of The Donald, immaculate cartilage shield, almighty piece of flesh.

Donald Trump raised his right hand and grabbed hold of it. He bent it backward and forward. I asked if I could take a closer look. These days, the former president and current triple threat — convicted felon, Republican presidential nominee, and recent survivor of an assassination attempt — comes from a place of “yes.” He waved me over to where he sat on this August afternoon, in a low-to-the-ground chair upholstered in cream brocade fabric in the grand living room at Mar-a-Lago.

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“Let’s see,” he said. He tapped the highest point of the helix. “It’s a railroad track.” He tapped it again. “They didn’t need a stitch,” he said. “You know, it’s funny. Usually, something like

that would be considered a surreal experience, where you sort of don't realize it, and yet there was no surrealism in this case. I felt immediately that I got hit by a bullet. I also knew it was my ear. It's just a little bit over here — ” He used his hand to wiggle the ear. “Right next to — ” He gestured at the side of his head, at his brain, and raised his eyebrows. “It's amazing.” He shook his head in disbelief. “And the ear, as you know, is a big bleeder.”

It did not feel surreal. Trump kept mentioning that. How unexpected it was, the matter-of-fact way in which he managed to process the attack as it unfolded. But on July 13 in Butler, Pennsylvania, he was tethered to the Earth as if by cosmic cord. He could not be pulled into the void. He was so clear about each moment of that afternoon. At Butler Memorial Hospital, he said, he asked the doctor, “‘Why is there so much blood?’” This was due to the vascular properties of cartilage, the doctor told him. “These are the things you learn through assassination attempts.” He laughed. “Okay, can you believe it?”

He can never fully see his own ear. He can never fully see himself as others do. I inched closer and narrowed my eyes. The particular spot that he identified with his tap was pristine. I scanned carefully the rest of the terrain. It looked normal and incredible and fine. Ears do not often become famous, and when they do, it is because they have suffered some sort of misfortune. Van Gogh's self-mutilation. Mike Tyson's cannibalistic injury to Evander Holyfield. J. Paul Getty III, whose kidnappers cut the whole thing off and put it in the mail. And now this, the luckiest and most famous ear in the world. If you were the kind of person inclined to make such declarations, which Donald Trump is, you might call it the greatest ear of all time.

An ear had never before been so important, so burdened. An ear had never before represented the divide between the organic course of American history and an alternate timeline on which the democratic process was corrupted by an aberrant act of violence as it had not been in more than half a century. Yet an ear had never appeared to have gone through less. Except there, on the tiniest patch of this tiny sculpture of skin, a minor distortion that resembled not a crucifixion wound but the distant aftermath of a sunburn.

This is, of course, part of the legend. When Ronny Jackson, the White House physician for Barack Obama and then for Trump, who now represents one of the most conservative congressional districts in Texas, described the injury, even the words he chose were delicate. The wound was “kind of a half-moon shape,” he told me. “There was nothing to stitch.” The bullet had “scooped” a small amount of “skin and fat” off the top of the ear. (By which he did

not mean to imply that Trump has especially fat ears. “Everybody has fat and skin on top of their ears,” he said. “He’s got good ears.”)

Jackson admitted he was responsible for the funny-looking bandage Trump sported at the Republican National Convention. Because the ear was inflamed and easily irritated, and because irritation caused it to start bleeding again, and because the shape of any ear makes it unwieldy to dress, his solution was to apply antibiotic ointment, then gauze to absorb blood, and then he secured the whole system with the envelopelike bandage that inspired so much derision and a brief niche fashion craze. “I thought that was pretty cool ... I should’ve patented it,” he said. “I’m an emergency medical physician. I’m not a nurse,” he added. “I did the best I could.”

It had been three weeks since the rally. Since the bullet had launched from the barrel of an AR-15 and pierced the Pennsylvania sky. Since God’s hand had moved Trump’s head, as he had come to see it, sparing his temporal lobe, the part of the brain directly behind the top of the pinna, the medical term for the region of the outer ear that directs sound waves into the ear canal, responsible for functions related to emotions, memory, language, and visual perception. Since he had been tackled to the ground. Since he rose up, disheveled and defiant, to negotiate with his armed guards the terms of his exit from the stage. He wanted first to put on his shoes, which had been knocked off by the force of his defensive detail. He looked down at his feet. “Not these,” he said. “But ones like these. They were pretty tight. They weren’t loafers or anything.” And then he wanted to lead. That is how he saw what he did next. It was just what a leader would do. He recalled that when he looked into the crowd, he saw confusion spread across the faces of his fans. “They thought I was dead,” he told me. As a performer, he knew how to calibrate his actions onstage to address the needs of his audience. Blood running down his face, he raised his fist and punched the air. “Fight, fight, fight!” he said.

His iPhone, on the wooden table a few feet away, interrupted his story with the sound of Apple’s Reflection, its default ringtone. An aide got up to retrieve it for him. “Unless that’s important, I’ll just call back. Let me see — ” He took the phone and squinted at the screen. “Uh ... Oooh!” His face curled into an expression of intense interest. He ignored the call but fixated on something else he had seen on the screen. “That was a big — that was a big day for us, today.” He was referring to Kamala Harris picking Tim Walz as her vice-presidential nominee. He asked to go off the record.

It was hurricane season, the offseason at Mar-a-Lago, and throughout our conversation, thunderclouds darkened the living room and then parted to reveal the light again. The historic estate is where Trump decamped a sore loser at the end of his one-term presidency three and a half years ago, having first failed in his campaign against Joe Biden (though he insists, still, that he won) and then failed in his efforts to overturn the results of that election through harebrained legal schemes and firing up a mob that attacked the United States Capitol and threatened to hang his vice-president. But that was all so long ago. Cocooned in this palace between the moats of the Intracoastal and the Atlantic Ocean, as he was impeached a second time and charged with 91 crimes and embroiled in many lawsuits, he became more convinced than ever of his invincibility. He plotted his return to power.

The “deep state” and its lawfare could not trap him. Members of his inner circle might be indicted, too, and some sent to jail, but he was different. He was an escape artist, better than El Chapo — who, unlike Trump, had been captured. Meanwhile, the Republican primary field turned out to be a joke, even easier to level than it had been in 2016. And best of all, Biden was weak and getting weaker. It had all been going so well, as he saw it. The day of the shooting, things could not have been going better.

The whole world finally agreed with what he had been saying for years: His opponent did not appear fit to serve. Compared to Biden, Trump looked practically like Zeus. And after his brush with death, his political future seemed all but secure. In the days that followed the attack, the Democratic Party panicked. The race was now a contest between undeniable strength and undeniable frailty. “Game over,” read one representative text from a party operative at that time. For so long, he had played the role of tough guy, and now he had finally done something so tough that he never had to pretend again. Even liberals had to admit that his response to the attack went pretty hard.

Trump was running for another term in the White House on the explicit pledge to do what he had not been empowered or wise enough to do the first time. The first campaign had been about promises and the second campaign about excuses. The third campaign was a threat. He would do what he wanted. He would be not just more powerful than he had ever been but more powerful than any president in American history. There would be tax cuts for the rich, regulation cuts for big business, mass deportations, a greater retreat from global commitments, and on and on — everything his opponents hated last time, just more and worse. Through a massive expansion of executive authority, independent agencies would enter his possession, most important of all the Justice Department, through which

he vowed to exact revenge on his enemies in politics, law enforcement, and the media. For a while, all of this had seemed, to the roughly half of the country that would never support him, irrelevant. He was a fool and a felon, a disgrace to the office he had held and lost and now sought again. They didn't want to hear about him or think about him again. Then, almost overnight after the shooting, the specter of another four years of MAGA set in.

In response, Trump received his belated prize for winning the debate, insult added to literal injury: a coup, as he saw it, that replaced the man he would almost certainly beat with the woman whose defeat was much less certain.

“Think of it,” he said. “So I went out and focused all this energy and talent and money and everything else on defeating him and then he starts going down very — you know, I was up by 16, 17 points in some polls. That's when they went to him and said, ‘You can't win.’ They told him, ‘You can't win, and we want you out.’ It's sort of never happened before. They took him out, and they put somebody else in. You know, they put a new candidate in, a candidate that we didn't focus on at all. We never even got the — we had this big convention, and we were all focused on Biden, and now, now you take a look at it, and we were focused on a person that wasn't running anymore. So it's quite an unfair situation — but it's okay.”