



The World Ahead

The World Ahead 2022

The second coming of Donald Trump

Many on the right love him more than they love democracy



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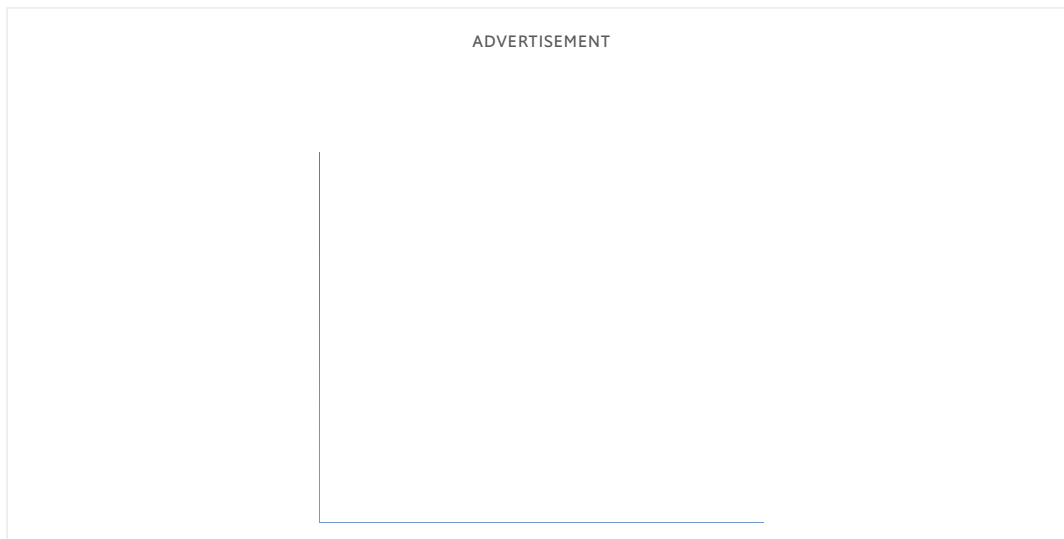
BY JAMES ASTILL: WASHINGTON BUREAU CHIEF AND LEXINGTON COLUMNIST, THE ECONOMIST, WASHINGTON DC



THE USUAL routine for former presidents is to sink into the background, graciously refuse to criticise their successor and plan a library. But Donald Trump does not do background or graciousness or books. In rallies, interviews and impromptu speeches to wedding parties at Mar-a-Lago, his Florida estate, Mr Trump has lambasted President Joe Biden, the media and the handful of Republicans who have dared acknowledge that he suffered electoral defeat in 2020. He has repeatedly teased the possibility of a comeback. In 2022 that will look increasingly inevitable.

It already seems that only a health crisis could deny Mr Trump the second tilt at the presidency he clearly craves. Most Republican voters want him to run again. He has raised well over \$100m just by hinting that he will. And if the Republican establishment did not roll over for him that could only be because it was too prone already to effect the contortion. Trump cheerleaders such as Lindsey Graham began exhorting him to retain command of their party the day he left office. Mr Trump's only serious rivals for the nomination, such as Governor Ron deSantis of Florida and Mike Pompeo, his former secretary of state, are his imitators. Every indication

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Mr Trump also appears to have pre-arranged the politics of his return—through his claim to have been robbed of electoral victory against Mr Biden by a corrupt establishment. Around 80% of Republican voters say they believe that lie. This explains why Republican lawmakers quashed an effort to hold a serious investigation into the January 6th insurrection on Capitol Hill that it inspired; and also why the handful of Republicans who resisted that, such as Representative Liz Cheney, have been pilloried. Republican lawmakers and candidates at every level are meanwhile sounding the alarm on “election integrity”. The implication in many Republican-controlled states, where the delusion is most pronounced, is that the Democrats cannot win legitimately—and that special measures are therefore required to stop them winning at all.

“ Few of the 75m voters who chose Mr Trump in 2020 appear to have been repelled by the January 6th insurrection

At least 18 Republican-controlled state legislatures have passed election laws that will make it harder to vote, many of which appear to target African-Americans and other traditionally Democratic groups. Probably worse, many of those Trumpified legislatures have also seized control of their states’ handling of elections.

This is especially troubling given how concerted Mr Trump’s effort to steal the election in 2020 turned out to be. Had a handful of state officials buckled, he might have produced more chaos; or conceivably succeeded in his attempted heist. And that handful has already been reduced. Brad Raffensperger, the Republican secretary of state for Georgia whom Mr Trump importuned to “find 11,780 votes” could not reprise his role in defending democracy, for example. The state’s Republican legislature has stripped his office of the power to do so.



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The Republican congressional primaries, mostly due in the first half of 2022, will indicate how far the party has succumbed to this extremism. Of the 212 Republican House members, ten voted to impeach Mr Trump over the insurrection, of whom one, citing death threats, has already announced his intention to quit politics. The other nine, including Ms Cheney, will face Trump-backed primary challengers. If most lose, as appears likely, Mr Trump's grip on his party will be tighter and its adoption of election scepticism as a strategy more advanced. (And if they win, the Trumpists will cry foul, which could have much the same effect.)

The mid-term elections in November 2022 will be a more important weather-vane. They will represent the first opportunity for Trump Republicans to air their election conspiracies to the electorate at large. The leading role that Mr Trump will take in their campaign will encourage them to do so. The big question, then, is whether enough centre-right voters will find this sufficiently off-putting to make it a losing strategy.

It would be a heavy blow to Mr Trump's prospects of recapturing the presidency if they did. But there appears to be little reason to hope for that. Remarkably few of the nearly 75m voters who chose Mr Trump in 2020 appear to have been repelled by his election denialism or the violence on Capitol Hill. If they do not share his authoritarian instincts, they appear not to take them terribly seriously. America may come to rue that.

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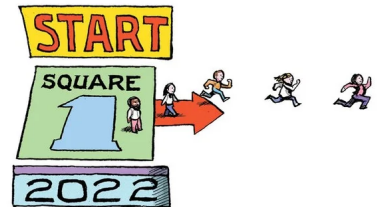
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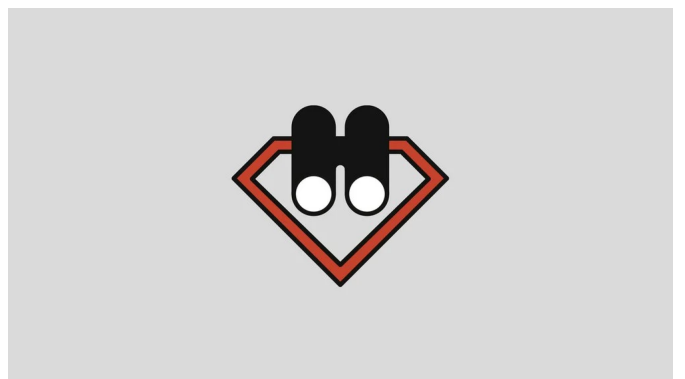
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