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The Gilded Age Redux—and a New Beginning

On January 20, 2025, an elite gathering of political insiders, corporate magnates, foreign dignitaries, and digital influencers assembled in the Capitol Rotunda for the second inaugural ceremony of President-elect Donald Trump.

Seated prominently among Trump's cabinet members were some of the wealthiest individuals on the planet. In attendance were Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg; Amazon founder Jeff Bezos; Google CEO Sundar Pichai; OpenAI CEO Sam Altman; and Tesla, SpaceX, and X CEO Elon Musk. Also present was Bernard Arnault, CEO of luxury conglomerate LVMH and a frequent fixture atop global wealth rankings.

According to sources, Arnault, a longtime friend of Trump, was there to signal support in hopes of avoiding potentially costly tariffs on French-made luxury goods.

What was behind Bezos' attendance? He had a history of being a frequent target of Trump's bile as the owner of the *Washington Post*, which was disposed to printing unvarnished views of Trump's presidency. But the

Post had begun to soften his stance—even, at times, adopting a decidedly pro-Trump editorial bent. And months earlier, Amazon had contributed \$1 million to Trump’s re-election campaign and reportedly paid Melania Trump \$40 million in exchange for the exclusive licensing rights to a forthcoming documentary, to be released on Amazon Prime—something, according to insiders, Amazon had never done before.¹

No stranger to regulatory scrutiny, Amazon had been the subject of a 2020 congressional hearing into whether it misused third-party seller data to launch its own private-label products, an allegation Bezos admitted he could not definitively refute. Renewed alignment with the Trump administration seems to have been a chess move to fend off future investigations and potential penalties resulting from those already in progress.

Altman, representing OpenAI, contributed \$1 million with hopes of persuading the administration to prevent state-level regulation of artificial intelligence. In exchange, the company offered to share its models with the federal government. OpenAI also aimed to mollify Trump into preserving a Biden-era policy of unlocking large swaths of federal land for the construction of massive AI data centers, something OpenAI desperately requires for its future expansion.

Google’s Sundar Pichai also contributed to the inaugural fund, seeking to recalibrate the company’s relationship with the returning Trump administration. During Trump’s first term, in October 2020, the Department of Justice launched a major antitrust lawsuit against Google, resulting in a guilty verdict. The penalty phase, then under the Biden DOJ, included proposals as severe as forcing the sale of the company’s Chrome browser. With that phase set for April 2025, Google’s outreach to the new administration carried a heightened sense of urgency.

Mark Zuckerberg, meanwhile, joined a cohort of high-profile Republican donors in sponsoring the inaugural ball. His company, Meta, appeared to be working overtime to repair relations after years of conflict with the Trump administration over allegations of right-wing censorship on its platforms, particularly during the 2020 pandemic and election cycle. Despite multiple independent investigations finding no evidence of political bias in content moderation, Meta announced, just prior to the 2025 inauguration, that it would discontinue its internal fact-checking program.

Instead, the company would revert to a less rigorous “community notes” system, mirroring the approach taken by X (formerly Twitter).

No attendee, however, had committed more fully—both symbolically and financially—to the Trump administration than Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla, SpaceX, and X. Not only had Musk publicly campaigned for Trump, but he had also contributed \$288 million to his campaign operation, making him the single largest donor of the entire election cycle by a wide margin. (The next closest contribution, a comparatively paltry \$5 million, came from WhatsApp co-founder Jan Koum.) Musk had plenty of reasons of his own to support the incoming administration, not the least of which were a series of ongoing investigations into his businesses under the outgoing Biden administration. From Tesla and SpaceX to Neuralink and X, Musk was the subject of at least a half dozen legitimate probes carrying potential consequences ranging from financial penalties to criminal charges.

These men, billionaires whose combined personal wealth at the time surpassed the annual GDP of Switzerland, were all-in, both figuratively and literally.

As the room fell silent, President Trump took the podium and opened with a nod to his audience: “Vice President Vance, Speaker Johnson, Senator Thune, Chief Justice Roberts, justices of the Supreme Court of the United States, President Clinton, President Bush, President Obama, President Biden, Vice President Harris, and my fellow citizens—the golden age of America begins right now.” In the 30-minute address that followed, Trump outlined a sweeping agenda to bring about this new golden age in America. His proposals included:

- Pursuing nativist and imperialist ambitions including pledges to deport millions of immigrants, to reclaim the Panama Canal, and to rename the Gulf of Mexico the Gulf of America
- Expanding extraction of domestic oil and gas
- Implementing protectionist tariffs against global trading partners
- Making significant cuts to government spending
- Reforming the education system, claiming that the current system teaches children to be ashamed of themselves and hate America
- Dismantling environmental regulations
- Ending diversity, equity, and inclusion programs

As I listened, I felt a growing sense of confusion. Trump's proposed agenda indeed seemed to echo various eras of American domestic and foreign policy, but it bore almost no resemblance to what historians widely point to as America's *Golden Age*—the roughly 30-year period between 1945 and the mid-1970s. That era, widely regarded as the zenith of American prosperity, was defined by robust economic growth, a rapidly expanding middle class, industrial innovation, significant inflow of immigration, broad access to education, progress toward universal voting rights along with major strides in medicine, science, and enshrinement of civil rights. These were the hallmarks of what is commonly understood to be the Golden Age.

What Trump was describing in his speech, however, sounded very much like another period in American history known as the Gilded Age. This era stretched from the 1870s until the early 1900s, which, to be fair, was certainly a period of great industrial growth and wealth, one fueled by breakthroughs in electrification, steel production, manufacturing, railroads, and the telegraph.

But as historian Nell Irvan Painter said, "Gilded is not golden. Gilded has the sense of a patina covering something else. It's the shiny exterior and the rot underneath."² To her point, unlike the broad-based prosperity that would be engineered nearly a century later, the Gilded Age was most notable for its extraordinary levels of income and wealth disparity and desperate poverty. It was an age when economic opportunity of any kind was largely reserved for an elite few. It was an era during which a mere 10 percent of Americans possessed three-quarters of all national wealth.³

Wrapping one's head around such a level of economic disparity can be difficult. But to borrow an analogy from former *New York Times* columnist Anand Giridharadas, imagine that you're at dinner with 100 other guests. However, when dinner is served, only 10 of the guests receive three-quarters of all the food, and the other 90 guests must fight over what's left. This was the economic reality of the Gilded Age. A tiny fraction of society feasted to financial obesity, while the masses fought over whatever scraps fell off the table.

It was a period in history dominated by wealthy industrialists like John D. Rockefeller, the founder of Standard Oil; newspaper baron William Randolph Hearst; railroad tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt; and perhaps the most connected and powerful global financier of the time, J.P. Morgan. Men

who on one hand worked tirelessly to thwart government regulation and intervention while on the other hand benefitting directly from its handouts. Among them were things like low-interest government loans and generous land grants upon which they grew their fortunes, earning them and others in their circles the colloquial title of *robber barons*, a moniker denoting a blend of both aristocracy and thievery.

As Trump carried on with his speech, I couldn't help seeing reflections between those industrial titans of the Gilded Age and their contemporary counterparts seated in the front row at the event.

As Mark Zuckerberg is to social media today, William Randolph Hearst was to printed media in the Gilded Age. His papers included the *New York Journal* and *San Francisco Examiner*, and over time he accumulated more than two dozen papers nationwide. Just as Zuckerberg and Meta have algorithmically harnessed the power of public outrage to fuel views and revenues on Facebook and Instagram, Hearst recognized that sensationalism and societal intrigue sold newspapers. And as is the case with Facebook, X, and other platforms, Hearst's papers were often adroitly manipulated by politicians and plutocrats of the day to sway public opinion and weaponize misinformation. And very much in the fashion of today's media owners like Bezos, Zuckerberg, and Musk, Hearst frequently used his newspapers to spread his political views and, eventually, to promote his own political candidacies at the state and federal levels.

As Elon Musk is to electric transportation today, Cornelius Vanderbilt, owner of the largest railroad trust in America, was to the movement of people and goods across America. If it moved on rails, chances were Vanderbilt profited from it. And just as Musk has relied on public subsidies and government grants to build both Tesla and SpaceX, Vanderbilt likely couldn't have succeeded to the extent he did without significant assistance from the government in the form of lucrative land grants with which to expand his railroad empire.

As Jeff Bezos is to the digital marketplace of the twenty-first century, Richard Warren Sears and Alvah Curtis Roebuck, and their company Sears and Roebuck, were to the innovation of catalog shopping in the nineteenth century. One hundred years before Amazon, Sears and Roebuck used their mail-order catalog business to bring a vast selection of products to American consumers and, like Amazon, were often accused of undercutting small independent businesses of the era, causing many to fold.

In the Gilded Age, these wealthy industrialists, financiers, and merchants filled a vacuum. It was a void that American society, now independent of Great Britain, lacked. A nobility class. America had, wittingly or not, replaced the tyranny of aristocracy with an oligarchy of privilege and power. The power came not through birthright but through capital. Capital that bought them immeasurable influence and political power.

Ironically, having seceded from England barely a century earlier to extricate the colonies of America from the abuses of a corrupt monarchy, by the coming of the Gilded Age the firewall between the democratic government of the United States and wealthy capitalists had become as permeable as a picket fence. Far from the nation of honest yeoman farmers and independent businesspeople Thomas Jefferson had envisaged, as he penned the Declaration of Independence, America had become a country ruled less by “We the people” and more by “They”—the wealthy industrialists. The abuses and exploitation of a monarch had simply been replaced with a new form of corruption—plutocracy.