

HUNT: This is Scandalized. A podcast of political impropriety. I'm Charlie Hunt.

KETTLER: And I'm Jackie Kettler. Until now, we've tried to avoid covering Donald Trump's scandalous political behavior directly, but as we close in on the end of the first year of his second term, we can't ignore the elephant in the Oval Office anymore, particularly since his second term is shaping up to be a master class in political corruption.

HUNT: Today on the show, we'll cover just a few of the biggest scandals of Donald Trump's second term as president that make first term Trump look like a Boy Scout, including the blatant personal benefits that Trump and his family are getting from the office. He was elected to the most controversial set of presidential pardons in modern history. And some thoughts on Trump's entanglement with the Epstein files as the case continues to unfold. Let's get into it.

KETTLER: A few things we're going to lay out before we get going. The scandals we're covering today are distinct from controversial policies like the immigration raids or tariffs. Military and urban areas, the variety of executive branch firings that we've seen debated this year. We want to point out that there's a whole host of ways in which Trump has pushed executive power to its limits and seemingly embraced authoritarianism. There are big moral questions around the administration's policy actions, and these are important for people to talk about. But we're going to limit our focus here.

HUNT: Yeah. Instead, we're going to be talking about some of the more straightforward corruption and scandalous behavior that doesn't have much or anything to do with sort of left versus right ideology or executive versus legislative power. This is a kind of whole government approach to bending the power of the state to Donald Trump's personal whims in ways we've seen that appear to go far beyond previous administrations, and it's shown up in a couple of different and really important ways. Jackie, do you want to kick us off?

KETTLER: In the previous episode, we discussed a congressional proposal to ban federal official stock trading that would exempt President Trump. This isn't a minor exemption given the scope of the Trump family investments. Charlie, we've discussed concerns about members of Congress and their private investments in the past. What about presidents? Why is there also a great deal of focus on the financial activities of presidents, their families and their associates?

HUNT: Well, in a lot of ways, the concerns are very similar to the ones we talked about with stock trading in Congress, which is this idea of having a conflict of interest. Right. If you're there in elected to a political office, your job is to represent the interests of your constituents, whoever they are, even if it seems like, you know, enriching yourself with your office isn't hurting anybody, it's still putting your interests before the interests of your constituents. We've talked before on this show about pay to play schemes, right? Or shakedowns where an officeholder receives benefits, usually financial benefits, from some actor trying to sort of get access to the government like a contract. And so those are some of the things we look at when we're thinking about presidents.

KETTLER: And these aren't new issues. Right, Charlie? How have other presidential administrations handled their finances and possible conflicts of interest?

HUNT: So generally speaking, we expect that when someone is elected president, they're setting aside their other financial obligations during their term in office. And usually this means handing things like personally owned businesses off to somebody else, or maybe putting these and other assets into a blind trust so that there can be no interference or involvement on the part of the president. My favorite example of this is Jimmy Carter, who before he became president in 1977. Put into a blind trust, his main financial asset from before he was elected, which happened to be a peanut farm that he ran in rural Georgia, where he grew up. You know, this is kind of the most quaint example, and it sort of raises questions like, what possible leverage could a peanut farm be in your presidential administration? But it's instructive in that it's an example of a president, right, erring on the side of caution, you know, wanting to similar to what we talked about with the member of Congress who out of an abundance of caution. Right. Even though it's not required by law, put those assets in a blind trust or sold off all his stocks to avoid the appearance of corruption or the appearance that he was trying to sort of profit from his office. But I get the feeling that this is not the approach that Donald Trump has taken this time around.

KETTLER: No. Not exactly. And in fact, there are major questions about how Trump handled his businesses and finances in his first term. The way he did this after the 2016 election was essentially to hand his business over to his adult kids, Eric and Don Jr.

HUNT: We mentioned a blind trust, and the idea here is that you're turning all these assets over and you're not having any input whatsoever, whether direct or indirect, in how those assets perform or what you do with your business or things like that. Whereas in this case, no one was expecting Donald Trump to not speak to his children for the for his entire first term, especially since one of his other kids, Ivanka, worked in

the white House. And so this was a pretty significant conflict of interest. And a and a number of organizations noted this. So, for example, the crew, which is the citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, calculated that there were over 3700 conflicts of interest in the first Trump administration and a lot of these involved what really appeared on the outside to be fairly corrupt practices. So, you know, we may remember, for example, the Secret Service being required to stay at Trump hotels, right? Donald Trump, of course, before he was president, owned a variety of hotels and golf courses. And these locations all got plenty of business in Trump's first term at the expense of the federal government, you can imagine. You know, especially places like Mar a Lago being sort of a ripe target for, let's say, foreign leaders maybe, who want to sort of wine and dine Trump and sort of have some kind of influence over him. And that created a bunch of really big material concerns.

KETTLER: So not great. No. But now government watchdog groups are raising the alarm, arguing that the blatant flaunting of ethics, rules and norms is even worse this time around. If we look back a little over a year ago, in mid 2024, Trump's finances were not in great shape. He was bleeding money on legal fees and in fact using campaign and party fundraising to pay a lot of these legal costs.

HUNT: Maybe a nice scandal for another day.

KETTLER: Very true. But according to reporting by the New York Times and others, Trump's finances started improving once he officially became the Republican nominee for president. And things look very different now. So Forbes estimated Trump's net worth was around \$2.3 billion in 2024, so no small sum. But at the time of our recording in October 2025, this estimated net worth has grown to over \$7.2 billion.

HUNT: Wow. That is quite a sum of money. It sort of seems like this is probably due to more than just using Trump properties for government business. Were there some other things going on here?

KETTLER: There's been a ton of reporting about the many ways that Trump and his family are financially benefiting from his return to the presidency. But it's pretty much impossible to dive into everything in just this one episode. So instead, we'll focus on a few major ones that get to the heart of some of these ethical concerns. One of the things that has received a lot of attention is the selling of Trump merchandise. We're going to start with the little game, Charlie. Which of the following items isn't a real piece of memorabilia for sale that Trump has put his name on?

HUNT: Oh, boy. So this is like a two truths and a lie situation.

KETTLER: Kind of. But I got more than two. Okay, great. All right. First option. Never surrender. Gold high top sneakers selling for \$399.

HUNT: Okay.

KETTLER: An autographed electric guitar with a bald eagle design that says Make America Great Again.

HUNT: Does he play the guitar? I guess you can't answer that.

KETTLER: Selling for \$11,500.

HUNT: God.

KETTLER: Next option. A red hat that says Trump was right about everything. Another option? A pickleball paddle with the American flag that says MAGA on it for \$180.

HUNT: Okay.

KETTLER: A shirt with his mugshot on it that says, daddy.

HUNT: Oh, God.

KETTLER: A Donald J. Trump victory silver coin with 47 on it for sale for \$200.

HUNT: Okay.

KETTLER: We've got another hat for sale that says Golf of America. Yet another Trump development for sale for \$50.

HUNT: Okay.

KETTLER: And a red sports bra for sale for \$85.

HUNT: A lot of troubling options here. A couple that I'm pretty sure I know are real. I've seen that. I feel like I've seen the Trump was right about everything hat. I feel like I've seen the coin. I mean, I mean, as troubling as the sports bra is. Uh, I'm gonna go with

the guitar. I think that's not the real one. I don't I don't know if he's cool enough to sell a guitar.

KETTLER: So the guitar is real. Oh, and there's both acoustic and electric guitars for sale.

HUNT: Oh. That's good. You can have a full band.

KETTLER: Um, and this was kind of tricky. I kind of. I kind of tricked you a little bit here, Charlie. So the red sports bra is being sold by Laura Trump, not.

HUNT: Oh, okay. That makes a little more sense.

KETTLER: And these are just a few of the different types of memorabilia or merchandise that Trump has sold or put his name on over the years. I didn't include this in the game, Charlie, since I was pretty sure you'd remember this one. But Trump, of course, sold a Trump branded God Bless the USA edition of the Bible. And most recently, this incredible commercial started airing on Newsmax and other outlets.

TRUMP: Hello everyone. It's President Donald J. Trump and it's Trump time. Check out this red beauty. It's one of my new watches. Wear it proudly on your wrist and everyone will know exactly what it's for, who it's for, who it represents. It's really going to be something special. It's for your favorite president. Get your watch today at Get Trump Watches. These make a great gift. It's Trump time.

KETTLER: So some of these seem kind of silly. But you know, many presidential candidates have sold silly merchandise over the years. Charlie, is the Trump Bible or Cologne any different from Jeb Bush selling a guacamole bowl named guacamole? Rand Paul's I stand with Rand flip flops or Hillary Clinton stitch throw pillow with the phrase A woman's place is in the white House.

HUNT: Ooh, okay, a lot to unpack here, but the first thing I feel like we should point out right away is the big issue with this, at least in my view, is that the examples you just cited with Jeb Bush and Hillary Clinton and Rand Paul, and even a lot of the merchandise that Donald Trump sold while on the campaign trail is campaign merchandise. Right? These are things that are sort of in-kind things that they're giving back to supporters in exchange for donations. And these are campaign donations, not just personal money that is being given to Donald Trump.

KETTLER: So that money is going to be used on the campaign. It's not going to their personal finances, right?

HUNT: These are supporters giving money to a campaign and supporting a cause that they believe in. Right. And the merchandise is just an extra little incentive to give. All candidates do this and have done this for a very long time. Donald Trump's problem is that he just continued doing this while he was in the white House, as if the campaign never actually ended. And this is.

KETTLER: It kind of didn't.

HUNT: Well, it kind of did. Well, I mean, especially because we have seen things like a, you know, a Trump 2028 hat being sold, even though Donald Trump is constitutionally ineligible for another term in office, which is, uh, again, a whole different scandal. Maybe for our 2029 season. I mean, there's there are a couple other like, smaller things about this first. I mean, that Trump time commercial is seared into my brain forever. And this has always been Donald Trump's brand. But like the brazen kind of tackiness of it that we have seen in the kinds of things he would hawk before he became president, like the Trump steaks and things like that.

TRUMP: When it comes to great steaks, I've just raised the stakes. Trump steaks are the world's greatest steaks, and I mean that in every sense of the word. And The Sharper Image is the only store where you can buy them. Trump steaks are by far the best tasting, most flavorful beef you've ever had. One bite and you'll know exactly what I'm talking about. And believe me, I understand steaks. It's my favorite food.

HUNT: It's just his brand, right? And so in a way, it's a continuation of that. The obsession with putting 47 on all these things. It just seems like parody at some point. And to me it does also raise questions about like, okay, he's the president of the United States, but somehow he has time to record. No pun intended, time to record these commercials for a watch. That probably doesn't work.

KETTLER: And it's not just Donald Trump. His family also seems to be finding some ways to potentially profit from his position. One recent example his 18 year old granddaughter recently launched her fashion line at the white House.

HUNT: And this included like a photo shoot of all this merchandise that happened at the white House. And I have to say, Jackie, this is all, uh, again, no pun intended, pretty rich coming from folks who I think rightly critiqued people like Hunter Biden over the past

four years during his father's administration for doing a lot of the same things, trying to in more subtle ways, but still trying to use his father's name and therefore his office as leverage for business deals and things like that. But the difference here is that Hunter Biden went to trial, that that trial was not interfered with by his father, even when his father was in office. You know, I couldn't let us get away from this topic without mentioning a lot of the Hunter Biden hypocrisy here.

KETTLER: A lot of these more glitzy merchandizing schemes, whether it's the watches, electric guitars or all those MAGA hats, actually have earned them all that much in the scheme of things. While being president and running for president has clearly helped the Trump brand in Trump's financial disclosure report released in 2025. It was reported that President Trump made over \$10 million in merchandise sales in 2024.

HUNT: Jackie, that sounds like a lot of money to me. Probably to you as well. But kind of chump change for the president and clearly not enough to cover, for example, the hundreds of millions of dollars he had owed as a result of some of the defeats he suffered in legal disputes last year.

KETTLER: That's right. By the time he was about to get elected, Trump owed about \$88 million in damages to E Jean Carroll after a federal jury found Trump liable for sexually abusing Carroll in the 1990s and for defaming her. More recently, Trump, in a series of co-defendants, were also ordered to pay over \$300 million in damages following a civil fraud trial in 2024. With interest, that number had ballooned to about \$527 million by August 2025, even though both of these penalties are still being appealed. That's quite a big sum. But luckily for Trump and his family, they've been able to facilitate a much bigger financial haul thanks to a major business pivot towards the cryptocurrency industry.

HUNT: It's funny you should mention that, Jackie. I'd certainly remember this time around, especially compared to the last two times he ran Trump. Really starting to talk up cryptocurrency on the campaign trail much more than he used to.

KETTLER: That's right. Despite saying that cryptocurrency investments are, quote, potentially a disaster waiting to happen in 2021, Trump changed his tune in 2024.

TRUMP: This afternoon, I'm laying out my plan to ensure that the United States will be the crypto capital of the planet and the Bitcoin superpower of the world. And we'll get it done.

KETTLER: Trump's connections to the cryptocurrency industry are now vast and include people like Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, JD Vance and more. All of that would require at least an entire episode to dig into. Relatedly, we should say that we understand that this is a confusing topic. We're probably the wrong people to do a big explainer on cryptocurrency, so we're not going to do that. Instead, we'll try to stick to the politics of it and what Trump is getting out of it. So in this case, we're going to focus on one component of Trump's crypto empire deeply connected to his brand. Meme coins.

HUNT: Yeah, I'm glad you said that, Jackie. I think this is a topic that probably neither of us knew much about until last year or so. And frankly, I'm guessing President Trump didn't know a whole lot about it until last year. So I really hate to ask you this, but Jackie, what on earth is a meme coin?

KETTLER: So our friend Wikipedia defines a meme coin as a cryptocurrency that originated from an internet meme, or has some other humorous characteristic. In other words, Trump has his own cryptocurrency token that you can buy. But unlike other so-called stable coin crypto or even cold hard cash. Meme coins aren't backed by stable assets. Financial times helpfully describes meme coins as quote tokens with no practical use, whose value is entirely based on speculation. So just about anybody can, if they want to participate in a meme coin's market and engage in the speculation.

HUNT: This feels appropriate, Jackie, in certain ways. I mean, it's been talked about how Trump sort of memed his way to the presidency, and certainly he has continued using memes and images and things like that as part of, frankly, as governing philosophy and the way he communicates with voters. And so now it seems like he's memeing his way out of debt on the whole, given what you just said about, you know, engaging in speculation, this kind of sounds like trouble waiting to happen that if this is the case and anybody can get in on this, this seems like a way for people to basically make large, maybe secretive donations directly to the president and not even through his campaign.

KETTLER: So the Trump meme coin launched on January 17th and quickly gained value before the inauguration. 1 billion coins were created, with 200 million initially released for public sale, according to the Financial Times. The value soared after the initial offering, with the peak trading of \$75 a token. But it then quickly lost much of its value after the inauguration. As of recording, the current price is around \$6.50, but as the men still hold that the current market cap is over \$1 billion, and similar to some of those other scandals we've been talking about, this was a family affair. First Lady Melania Trump also launched her meme coin right before President Trump's inauguration, but its

value crashed pretty quickly. Additionally, hundreds of copycat meme coins were created, likely resulting in a lot of scams.

HUNT: Yeah, I mean, Jackie, this strikes me as potentially a very risky investment in a questionable market, right? It has sort of the trappings of a kind of get rich quick scheme where the person getting rich is Donald Trump. But I am still not sure I totally understand exactly how this is making Trump money, especially if there's nothing actually behind it.

KETTLER: So the Trump Organization affiliated businesses control a large percentage of the coin supply still. So the Trump family makes more money when the value is higher. Plus, they earn money from trading fees on transactions involving the meme coin. We don't have firm reporting on his earnings from this meme coin yet, but the current estimates are that it earned over \$320 million in trading fees in the weeks following its launch.

HUNT: So that does not sound like chump change. Uh, a pretty sizable increase compared to, you know, some of the things like sneakers and watches that we were just talking about, these kind of products might be more entertaining to us with the commercials and everything, and probably a lot easier to understand how they sell. But in terms of actual money, that \$10 million was child's play. So who exactly is buying this cryptocurrency? It sort of seems to me like there might be some opportunities for trouble or scandal here.

KETTLER: This is an important question, because it turns out that many investors are foreign nationals. Now, keep in mind foreign nationals cannot make donations to candidates, right?

HUNT: But they can participate in these cryptocurrency trades.

KETTLER: That is correct. And so it came out that a lot of the investors in the Trump meme coin are foreign nationals. When Trump hosted a dinner for the top 220 of the largest meme coin investors at his golf club in Virginia in May, which he personally attended overnight.

MEDIA CLIPS: President Trump returning to the white House after a black tie gala for the biggest buyers of the Trump crypto coin. More than 200 cryptocurrency traders gathered at the president's Virginia golf course, many from overseas, after winning

access to the dinner through a contest that billed the event as the most exclusive invitation in the world.

KETTLER: Cnbc reported that attendees had spent more than \$148 million on the Trump meme coin. The top 25 buyers were invited for a private reception with Trump, 19 of which were likely based internationally, according to research by Bloomberg. They also spent huge sums of money on the Trump meme coin. For example, the top holder of the Trump meme coin is Justin's son, a Chinese born crypto businessman worth billions. While estimates vary, he held somewhere between 16 to \$22 million in Trump tokens at the time of the dinner. Son has also invested significant amounts of money in the crypto company started by the Trump family world, Liberty Financial. Oh, and by the way, Justin's son had been under investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission since 2023 for fraud related to cryptocurrency. That investigation was paused in February of this year.

HUNT: Jackie, I'm frankly offended that you would imply that this is anything other than a total coincidence. Yeah, this this entire situation is kind of new levels of corruption, both in terms of the sort of blatancy of it and in terms of the actual amount of money we're talking about. Like in the best case scenario here, people are paying a bunch of money to spend time with the president, and they're doing so at these Trump properties. In other words, it sort of seems like there's this selling of access to the president, right? We heard them use the terms. Right. The most exclusive invitation in the world. And that that's going to the president is a little bit questionable, at the very least. And, you know, other candidates for office have done similar kinds of things, like for, like raffling off a private dinner with the candidate, maybe to a random small donor as an incentive to donate to the campaign. Right. So this isn't totally unheard of, but obviously this situation doesn't have as big an issue in terms of influence peddling. Maybe the closer analogy here, Jackie, would be, I don't know if you remember, but the the scandal in the 1990s with the Clintons maybe kind of selling access to parts of the white House.

KETTLER: And this is where there are allegations that the Clinton administration was enabling access to the Lincoln Bedroom, to major donors to the Democratic Party and Clinton's reelection campaign. So basically, like selling overnight stays in the white House, right?

HUNT: Which sounds nice, but was not necessarily a good look for them at the time. One difference here is that the money, as you said in this case, was going to either the Democratic Party or to, you know, campaign donations to the Clinton reelect campaign. And so that's pretty different from it going directly to, for example, the Clintons own

personal finances. And in this case, I think there's a big concern that, you know, with this dinner that the public interest is kind of being violated if the attendees of this dinner. Right. Might also be receiving other personal benefits in exchange for basically enriching the president and his family.

KETTLER: Yeah. Tony Clark, the executive director at the government watchdog group accountable US, referred to the dinner as nakedly corrupt. I think this is one of those scandals that got a lot of attention for a brief period of time due to these blatant conflicts of interest, and then kind of faded into the background. But we think it's important to keep an eye on this type of scandal, since the federal government is responsible for regulating currency.

HUNT: Yeah, that's a super important point, Jackie. Right. Because regulating industries like these is actually a really important thing to do. It's the job of the federal government. This is obviously, as we have talked about, a really complicated policy area. And ideally in making policy here, you'd have discussions around these regulations being driven by things like expert testimony, research, market conditions, things like that. But instead you've got things like this dinner and the ongoing enrichment of the president personally from this meme coin, which it seems like they would probably muddy the waters on this whole debate and raise some serious questions about the motivations behind the administration's crypto policies.

KETTLER: Funny you bring that up. In fact, the dinner we were just discussing happened right after the Genius Act was introduced in Congress. With this act, which was eventually signed into law by President Trump in July, establishes a regulatory framework for stablecoin cryptocurrency. Charlie, before we move on, how do you feel like this fits in with some of the other enrichment scandals we've been discussing?

HUNT: So it's interesting because I feel like there there's a lot of symbolism going on here that there's this connection not just to some of the merchandizing and the other scandals we've talked about, but to other risky Trump ventures throughout his career before he was president, you know, his real estate, the whole Trump University thing, and of course, his casinos. Right. And frankly, cryptocurrency is being kind of opaque and difficult to understand, and they're not really being a lot behind it. I think it has a lot in common with these, and it seems really on the nose, since a common thing we talk about with Trump that we've been talking about for years is that in all of these instances, he's a salesman, right? Art of the deal and all that. But really, what he's selling is himself. Right. He's selling his brand. And in this case, with the meme coin, it literally

just seems like he's selling the cryptocurrency manifestation of his personal brand. So I guess what I would say is it's fitting in a kind of depressing way.

KETTLER: Well, while meme coins and crypto are clearly getting Trump the most profit from his second term in office, there's one more side hustle I can't leave this topic without talking about. Because while crypto still remains a little difficult for a lot of folks to understand, this one is about as clear cut as it gets. Soon after Trump took office this year, it was announced that the nation of Qatar was donating a Boeing 747 jet worth around \$400 million for President Trump to use his Air Force One while he's in office. Trump has said the plane will then be donated to the Trump Presidential Library after he leaves office. Little history though Boeing has a \$3.9 billion dollar contract that was signed in the first Trump administration for two new Air Force ones. However, the delivery of these customized planes keep getting delayed, so they're not yet expected to be in use for a few years. Charlie, I think this news was rather surprising to many, including us. Why? Why is the gift of a plane from a foreign nation such a big deal? And what might be some ethical concerns with the gift? Like this.

HUNT: Questions I really never thought I would have to answer. Jackie, um. There are a few big problems with this. Uh, one stems from something we call the Emoluments Clause of the Constitution. And this is something that came up in Trump's first term as well, when we were talking about the Trump hotel issue. So presidents, like all elected officials, receive a salary. And part of that is to, you know, prevent the president from receiving personal financial benefits, for example, from a foreign government. We can think of some reasons we might not want this to happen, right? Like we were talking about before, the president is supposed to represent our interests as our elected leader, and we don't want even the appearance of foreign influence, sort of, on his personal financial situation. That's very different from doing things like international diplomacy or making deals on behalf of the country. This is basically making a deal in a gray area, kind of on behalf of himself, because, you know, like you said, Jackie, this would be Air Force One. And so in a way, it would serve the presidency and not Donald Trump. But my I just I still don't understand like, why is it going to his presidential library afterwards? Why doesn't it just stay as Air Force One. And that is what brings this into a real potential ethical or legal concern and potentially even a bribe where, okay, this is just being given right out of the goodness of their hearts. What are they expecting down the road from us.

KETTLER: Write. Your concerns were widely shared by others, Charlie, including usual allies of Trump like conservative podcaster Ben Shapiro.

SHAPIRO: The arrangement itself is, shall we say, I believe, the technical term, the legal term, is skeezy. The Constitution literally says the US government cannot accept official gifts from any king, prince or foreign state. Qatar is not allegedly giving President Trump a \$400 million jet out of the goodness of their sweet little hearts. No matter what special envoy Steve Witkoff says.

KETTLER: President Trump responded to these types of concerns by arguing that the plane is a good deal for the country.

TRUMP: So I think it's a great gesture from Qatar. I appreciate it very much. Uh, I would never be one to turn down that kind of an offer. I mean, I could be a stupid person and say, no, we don't want a free, very expensive airplane.

KETTLER: The Trump administration officially accepted the plane as a gift in May. The plane was donated as is, meaning the US is responsible for the necessary refurbishments and maintenance. Plus you need to make sure it is safe and secure, which has also been a point of concern. Charlie, would you feel safe as the president flying in a plane provided by a foreign country?

HUNT: I wouldn't feel safe as a civilian flying in a plane like this. I mean, it's almost so obvious. I feel like I don't have to say why this is a big concern. Like the amount of maintenance and security that goes on around Air Force One. For very obvious reasons, that we want to protect the president and the folks in his administration and cabinet officers and the vice president, that you need these planes to be secure and not tampered with, for example, by foreign countries. It's really, really concerning, even though Qatar is technically an ally. First of all, they're not like one of our closest allies. But even if this was like the UK or France, it's like, this is the one plane you should be building in America, right?

KETTLER: And it's possible sensitive business is happening on Air Force One, right where you wouldn't want others to be able to listen in. So I assume another possible concern is you have to make sure it's clean.

HUNT: Right, right. Exactly like this. The president takes long flights on Air Force One. He sleeps on Air Force One. He has important meetings on Air Force One. It's like a mobile white House. And you wouldn't let a foreign government build a new version of the white House, and so you shouldn't. So that's why this is such a problem. If you're letting them do Air Force One like this.

KETTLER: Well, in order to address these issues, the plane is now undergoing extensive work to prepare it for use by President Trump. It has been reported that government agencies are basically stripping the aircraft completely down to then rebuild it, to add in all the necessary equipment and address these types of security concerns. This will be expensive. It's not clear how much it will cost, but estimates run from \$400 million to nearly \$1 billion.

HUNT: And this is on top of the two Air Force ones that we were already building here in America. Right?

KETTLER: That's correct.

HUNT: Awesome.

KETTLER: So Trump has said the plane will be ready to use in early 2026. However, experts are saying that they do not believe that timeline is feasible. Frank Kendall, who served as the Air Force secretary in the Biden administration, told CNN that that timeline can only be met, quote, if the president waives almost all Air Force One unique requirements and minimizes modifications to the airplane. If that happens, Kendall argues, the plane could probably only be used when flying within US borders.

HUNT: Domestic only flights I see very handy. Um, okay, so we're just waving a lot of these safety requirements. I guess we'll just, uh, hope for the best. Personally, I'm not wild about the potential of seeing the plot of the movie Air Force One actually play out in real life.

CLIP FROM AIR FORCE ONE: How the hell did this happen? How the hell did they get Air Force One? Ah! Get off my plane!

HUNT: All right, Jackie. So in addition to a lot of these flagrant violations out in the open that you just talked about, Trump is also leveraging a lot of the acknowledged powers of the presidency to make these actions stick and to basically weaken resistance to this kind of corruption. One way he's been doing this, that has gotten quite a bit of attention, understandably, is by weaponizing essentially, the Department of Justice against his political enemies or public figures who he feels have wronged him in the past or in the present. These threats have included opponents like Adam Schiff, the US senator and former member of the House who led the first impeachment inquiry against Trump in 2019. Letitia James, the New York attorney general who brought charges against Trump's businesses that resulted in huge civil penalties. And James Comey, the former

FBI director who Trump fired in 2017 after Comey refused to go along with some of Trump's law enforcement priorities from his first term. And both Comey and Attorney General James have actually been indicted in just the last couple of weeks leading up to our recording of this podcast.

KETTLER: I think it's important to note that these are breaking important norms that we have seen previous administrations, presidential administrations, really follow, because it's important for the Department of Justice to be independent from the white House. Right. Charlie, we at least want to give the appearance that the president isn't above the law, right?

HUNT: We mentioned the Hunter Biden issue earlier in this episode, and part of why that was notable is that it was Biden's Justice Department that brought those charges, and a special counsel was appointed. And you want to create this separation because the Justice Department is responsible for indicting and upholding and enforcing federal law, and you want that to be done in an impartial manner that's independent from the president.

KETTLER: Exactly. And this was actually one of the key controversies around the Richard Nixon scandals in the 1970s, that he was improperly interfering in federal investigations against him and his administration.

HUNT: Exactly. And this was what eventually led him to need to resign his office. But that doesn't seem like it's going to happen so far in Trump's administration. He has taken a number of steps here that I think are pretty notable. One is that he fired a number of what we call inspectors general. These are basically nonpartisan legal officials who are in charge of rooting out potential corruption within specific government agencies. So all these different agencies typically have an inspector general. And so employees at these agencies can and traditionally have gone to these inspectors general as kind of whistleblowers, basically to report malfeasance that they see without fear of being retaliated against. In fact, it's one of these whistleblowing instances that led to Trump's first impeachment in 2019.

KETTLER: Well, I guess in that way it makes some sense why he'd go after these inspectors general. Basically, Trump is trying to limit the ways that others can intervene on the personal benefiting of the office or any of these other scandals if it's not being identified. Right. Can't do much about it.

HUNT: Right? Then it can just sort of continue operating in the open and, you know, it won't surprise listeners, right? Trump has never been shy about targeting his opponents. Um, I'm you know, I'm thinking back to his many attacks on Hillary Clinton in 2016.

CLINTON: It's just awfully good that someone with the temperament of Donald Trump is not in charge of the law in our country.

TRUMP: Because you'd be in jail.

HUNT: He's generally framed these kinds of attacks the way we've talked about before on the show, where, you know, everybody else is part of a corrupt system, and therefore Trump is the only person who can fix it.

Speaker9: Strong words from Chicago's top leaders. Hours after President Trump posted this on Truth untruth social, calling for Chicago's mayor and Illinois governor to be in jail.

TRUMP: They spied on my campaign, launched one hoax and disinformation operation after another raided my home, Mar a Lago. The people who did this to us should go to jail.

KETTLER: Trump is pretty brazen and blustering about this stuff, and when we think about trust in government and concerns about polarization, we can see how this could contribute to issues here. Right, Charlie?

HUNT: Absolutely.

KETTLER: But how serious are these investigations? Or is it more just like posturing?

HUNT: Right. I don't think a lot of, you know, legal experts or even the targets of these investigations, like James Comey or Adam Schiff or Hillary Clinton, are particularly concerned that they're going to end up in prison. Since these investigations or the threats of investigations, legally speaking, are pretty weak sauce, they aren't things that would or will probably hold up in a court of law. But that doesn't mean that these investigations and threats of prosecutions don't matter. To me, it seems like the idea here is to use these threats, use these investigations as a form of kind of partizan harassment. Right. That the purpose is to seriously inconvenience the target in this case. Right. Trump is someone who seems to get a great deal of joy out of inconveniencing his opponents. But maybe more importantly, this sends a message to

other people, either inside or outside of his administration, who might be considering going against him or blowing the whistle on this kind of stuff, that maybe they shouldn't do that, or else they're going to end up like these other people.

KETTLER: So it has a chilling effect.

HUNT: Exactly. And this gets to the second big way that Trump is, I think we can say, abusing his presidential powers in order to get away with some of his more scandalous behavior, because he's not just trying to silence his opponents or go after them legally. He's using unique powers of the presidency to embolden and protect those close to him with the power of the presidential pardon.

KETTLER: In many ways, it's kind of easy to take this power for granted. We don't always think about it as one of the key powers of the presidency. But yet a lot of presidents use it sometimes in really strategic ways. But, Charlie, why does the president actually have the pardon power?

HUNT: There are a couple of different potential reasons. You know, one is that we typically talk about has to do with the separation of powers and checks and balances. Right. That this is essentially a check that the executive branch has, particularly on the judicial branch. Right. Sort of trying to account for the fact that the judicial system isn't perfect and sometimes makes mistakes. We know that they do. You know, presidents typically use pardons to try to right some wrong they think has happened in the justice system, at least at the federal level. So presidents, first of all, can only pardon federal offenses. They can't pardon state offenses. But they also use pardons occasionally to send a kind of a message on certain policy areas where they would like to see changes. So previous presidents have, for example, pardoned nonviolent drug offenders as a way of saying that they think these penalties stemming from things like the war on drugs maybe are too harsh. But of course, we know it can be abused. There was plenty of controversy, understandably, I would say, about President Biden's unconditional pardon of his son, Hunter, at the end of his term, who, like we talked about, had both a fairly troubled past and a number of legal controversies that followed him around for years.

KETTLER: You know, if I'm not mistaken, Trump has already had quite a few controversial pardons in his first term, including some of his political allies. Right, Charlie?

HUNT: Yeah, absolutely. A lot of first of all, his campaign operatives, you know, names you might remember from season one of the Trump administration, right? People like

Paul Manafort, Roger Stone, Michael Flynn, Steve Bannon, these folks who had been indicted on a number of different counts. He leveraged the pardon with them towards the end of his term.

KETTLER: We also know he commuted the sentences of a couple of our season one subjects, like Rod Blagojevich and Duncan Hunter. If you don't remember, he's the guy who used campaign funds to pay the airfare for his pet bunny.

HUNT: Always a classic.

KETTLER: He also issued pardons to seven Republican congressmen who had been convicted of federal crimes. So he's pretty active in this.

HUNT: He certainly was. But, Jackie, as controversial as these first term pardons and commutations were, Trump's second term pardons have raised the bar to new heights in terms of really clear abuse of the power. I'll start with just a few examples that I think paint a pretty clear picture of how Trump thinks about presidential pardons and what they're intended for. First, of course, we'll remember he pardoned former Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich, who's been extremely loyal to Trump since Trump became president. Trump also pardoned Michael Harris, aka Harry O, who is the co-founder of Death Row Records and who was convicted in 1987 for 25 years to life for crack dealing, kidnaping and attempted murder. Harris had already gotten a commutation from Trump on the last day of his first term, so he didn't have to serve the rest of his term. And then Harris endorsed Trump in the 2024 presidential election and campaigned for him. And then after getting elected, Trump gave Harris the full pardon. Trump also pardoned a loyalist Republican politician in Nevada named Michelle Fiore, who had raised \$70,000 in charitable donations to create a memorial to fallen Las Vegas police officers. But Fiore ended up spending a huge portion of that money that she raised on personal expenses that had nothing to do with the memorial. Jackie, are you curious to hear what these personal expenses were, or do you have any guesses?

KETTLER: Ooh, I'm going to guess like luxury goods, like purses or plastic surgery.

HUNT: You got it. Cosmetic surgery and her daughter's wedding.

KETTLER: Oh.

HUNT: The wedding. That's. I mean, these are expensive. I think my I think my favorite part, though I use favorite quotes here, is of a man named Scott Jenkins, the former

sheriff of Culpeper County, Virginia, between 2015 and 2023. Jenkins had taken bribes of \$110,000 from ten different people, including two undercover FBI agents. Oops. These bribes were taken in exchange for what are called auxiliary deputy sheriff's badges, which the folks bribing Jenkins had used as credentials to skip TSA lines and get preferential treatment for Covid tests during the pandemic. The badges also gave these folks enhanced firearm rights, which came in handy for one of the bribe givers who was a convicted felon otherwise prohibited from owning a gun. So that was pretty useful.

KETTLER: Wow. Just wow.

HUNT: Obviously some ridiculous details here, but the main reason I'm sharing it is what happened right after the pardon. Trump's top advisor on pardons is the US pardon attorney Ed Martin, a Trump loyalist who replaced the previous pardon attorney who Trump fired upon taking office. And following this sheriff's pardon, Ed Martin thanked President Trump in a post on X, saying, quote, no MAGA left behind, end quote.

KETTLER: Interesting. Well, there definitely feels like a common thread here. There's a political element to these pardons which seem to be supporting political allies, right? Rather than supporting the causes and administration really cares about or trying to make a broader policy point. It really is supporting people that have supported Trump and his return to office.

HUNT: Exactly. And, you know, you could look at these and maybe accuse me of cherry picking. But in reality, Trump has basically confirmed this reasoning himself for his pardon activity in March of 2025. Trump pardoned a Republican donor and car company owner named Trevor Milton, who had defrauded investors to the tune of millions of dollars. And after this, Trump made clear what his real reasoning was for letting him off the hook.

TRUMP: Again, I don't know him, but I was. They say it was very unfair. And they say the the thing that he did wrong was he was one of the first people that supported a gentleman named Donald Trump for president. He supported Trump. He liked Trump. I didn't know him, but he liked him.

HUNT: So these are all pretty sensational and ridiculous uses of the pardon power. But there's one set of pardons that, to me, stands out above all the others. I am sure most of our listeners will remember vividly the January 6th, 2021 attack on the US Capitol that came while Joe Biden's election was being certified by Congress. This harrowing

incident as a whole, which obviously followed months of repeated false claims by Trump about election fraud in the 2020 presidential election, could obviously be an entire episode or even an entire season of this podcast by itself. But I'm hopeful we all still remember what happened. Hundreds of people stormed the Capitol, many of them armed. They broke windows, beat police officers, and ransacked the offices of members of Congress. They also brought a makeshift gallows to the Capitol and called for the hanging of Trump's own vice president of the United States, Mike Pence. In the four years he was out of the presidency, Trump and his allies have made a concerted effort to rewrite the history of what happened on that day. He more and more frequently refers to the rioters who were caught and prosecuted as political prisoners or hostages. And he's significantly downplayed the violence that took place. It's this effort on behalf of the rioters that made what happen on the day Trump returned to office in 2025. Maybe not that surprising in the scheme of things, but unbelievably disheartening for our democracy. One of Trump's very first actions in his second term was a blanket pardon, covering some 1500 individuals who had been prosecuted over the previous four years for their participation in the January 6th attacks.

KETTLER: So we talked before about how pardons are often used for, say, nonviolent offenders in drug crimes. Presidents might pardon or commute the sentence of somebody who seems like they got caught up in a nonviolent crime without organizing it themselves. And then the punishment was really severe. So the president can use their power to even the playing field a little bit. Is this what Trump was going for?

HUNT: So, to be fair, some of these folks had committed much less serious crimes like trespassing. And obviously there were a lot of people here who were part of this demonstration, but just kind of got swept up in the moment. And although those people in particular don't have a ton of my sympathy, I could at least imagine a more acceptable version of this pardon that just lets the nonviolent offenders off the hook, or just goes maybe part of the way and significantly lightens their prison sentences. In fact, just before inauguration, even the vice president elect, JD Vance, appeared on Fox News Sunday and advocated for just this a more targeted clemency for nonviolent rioters.

MEDIA CLIPS: Where is the line drawn on who will and wouldn't be considered for a pardon? I think it's very simple. Look, if you protested peacefully on January the 6th, you should be pardoned. If you committed violence on that day, obviously you shouldn't be pardoned. And there's a little bit of a gray area there. But we're very much committed to seeing the equal administration of law.

HUNT: But ultimately, after he takes the oath of office on January 20th, Trump takes a different route.

TRUMP: So this is January 6th. And these are the hostages, approximately 1500 for a pardon? Yes. Full pardon. So this is a big one. We hope they come out tonight, frankly.

HUNT: He doesn't just pardon the nonviolent rioters. He frees everybody. This includes a rioter who drove to D.C. with hatchets, knives, stun batons and pepper spray. Another, who was serving 20 years in prison for stomping on police officer's heads using flagpoles and other objects to attack officers, and spraying bear spray into the gas mask of an officer. Another, who shot a Capitol Police officer named Michael Fanone with a stun gun after Fanone had been knocked down and dragged through the crowd of rioters. Fanone had a heart attack, notably, and nearly died at the scene. I could go on for a while with these, but suffice to say that the pardon included not just a couple, but dozens of rioters who had been convicted or were awaiting conviction for committing really violent acts against police officers. And as a cherry on top, Trump also goes out of his way to fully commute the sentences of dozens of members of far right militia groups like the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys, who played key roles in planning and organizing the attack.

KETTLER: You know, as you were going through this, Charlie. I was starting to wonder how it might have felt for members of Congress, their staff, everyone who was in the Capitol that day when all these folks received these, this pardon. I mean, there were a lot of Republicans that were in the Capitol at that time, too. So and that expressed concerns during the event, after the event.

HUNT: And who had explicitly blamed Donald Trump for it when it happened? I think I mean, Mitt Romney has been consistent on this, but I'm thinking about Mitch McConnell and and lots of other Republicans who got up and said that he caused this. But of course, now it's 4 or 5 years later and he's the president again. And so they're just, I guess, adjusting to a new political reality.

KETTLER: What has the reaction to these pardons been, particularly among Republican members of Congress?

HUNT: There were a few Republican members at the time that this happened who expressed some level of concern. Basically, what we were just talking about that, you know, there was a different way they could have gone about this, that more if they cared enough to do so. They could have targeted only the nonviolent offenders, but instead

they just issued this blanket pardon. A lot of the reporting around this suggested that they were sort of going back and forth between doing something more targeted and doing a blanket pardon, but eventually Donald Trump just decided to go whole hog and do this blanket pardon.

KETTLER: And now it seems to have kind of faded from discussion.

HUNT: Yeah. It's just it's just accepted as something. I mean, part of this, jacki. Right. Is that the first couple months of Trump's second term were so chaotic and included so many executive orders and, you know, Elon Musk and the Doge stuff, and probably a bunch of stuff we'll cover in some later season of scandalized. But, I mean, this has been his thing from the beginning, right? Throwing a bunch of stuff at the wall and seeing what sticks. And that distracts from some of these really scandalous actions that he takes that then kind of fly under the radar, and we just move on and accept.

KETTLER: And looking back at these scandals, I feel like we've seen some major differences between President Trump's first and second terms. In our research for this episode, I found a recent statement from Danielle Caputo, an ethics expert at the Campaign Legal Center watchdog organization that I think puts it well, Caputo said, quote, in the first Trump administration, there were ethical lapses. But with this new administration, there's not just a disregard for ethics rules. There's contempt.

HUNT: I think there are a few things that are different now than there were 4 or 5 years ago. I mean, one is the fact that by virtue of the fact that this is, you know, supposedly his second and final term, Trump clearly feels, I think, kind of politically invincible in ways that he didn't in his first term. Right. He wanted to get reelected in his first term, and so there was only so far he could really go and retain those levels of support that he enjoyed. Maybe this is in part because he since that time, he has totally consolidated power within the Republican Party, right. The 2024 presidential primaries, which already feel like ancient history, showed us that, right. Nikki Haley and Ron DeSantis did not get very far here. And so the fact that he is, at least in theory, term limited, you know, might free you up to do to to push boundaries that you wouldn't have pushed before. And usually we talk about this in terms of like, well, you know, Obama's in his second term. So he might push for policies that he might not have felt politically comfortable doing in his first term. And Trump is clearly interpreting this as I can push the boundaries of my own corruption in this way. And part of this is that he, I think, understands he's not going to get pushback from Congress. Right? It is just generally understood at this point that no matter, pretty much no matter what he does, impeachment is just understood to be off the table, right? Because of how aligned his popularity is with the Republicans in

Congress and their districts and states, he remains incredibly popular within the Republican Party among Republican voters. And so even if these members of Congress did have objections, say, to the personal benefiting or the January 6th pardons, Trump just understands, I think, correctly, that they aren't going to follow through on them. And to that experts point, it just sort of feels like they don't care anymore that that they've just thrown caution to the wind and don't seem to care that much about getting caught.

KETTLER: So we've talked about all sorts of pretty obvious ethical issues with all these second term scandals. But Charlie, do these have bigger impacts that go beyond one administration? Do they have impacts on, say, regular Americans?

HUNT: We've talked, I think, a little bit before on this show about how, Now, you know, troubling majorities of Americans seem to believe, right, that all politicians are corrupt, that politics itself is a corrupt exercise and practice, and that if you get into politics, that automatically means you're corrupt. And when you see administrations go, go and do things like this, it certainly doesn't help that image. You know, we mentioned Richard Nixon earlier. Since the Watergate scandal, there was this, you know, steep decline in trust in particularly the federal government. And that really has never. And so if Americans really on any side of the aisle see all this going on and then nothing happen after it in terms of enforcement or trying to punish people for it, then it's going to leave people with the sense that politics doesn't work and that government doesn't work, and that why should I even participate if all of this stuff is just par for the course now?

KETTLER: Before we go, there's one more major scandal that we should probably mention, because it's probably gotten more attention than any of Trump's other second term scandals combined. I'm referring, of course, to Trump's affiliation with Jeffrey Epstein and the ongoing question of whether the so-called Epstein files will be released to the public. I mean, Charlie, where are we kind of at? There's been some progress on opening things up, but not everything, right?

HUNT: Right. So this has been sort of a back and forth throughout the first nine, ten months of the Trump of the second Trump administration, where the Justice Department, you know, Pam Bondi, the attorney general, said, we're going to release the files. You know, a number of folks were appointed to high points in the administration. I'm thinking of Kash Patel, the FBI director, who had made it sort of one of their main causes to get the Epstein files released. But there's, you know, a lot of secrecy around this stuff, in part because of we should just say, this concern, this allegation that Donald Trump himself is in the Epstein files.

KETTLER: And there's been some evidence come out here and there, including a book that had been given to Epstein for his birthday that had letters and notes from a lot of famous people, including Donald Trump, it looks like. And so there's some evidence that there is a connection here. So is that does that seem to be why suddenly there's been some shifting of some of these top officials to not release it?

HUNT: Certainly the 180 that a lot of officials in the administration, including Donald Trump, have done since getting to office, have raised significant eyebrows. And part of this is because and I think, Jackie, this is one reason it has really stuck around and continued to get top billing in the news, which is that this was a cause of the right the whole Epstein saga and the island and the underage women like this all fit into this sort of QAnon adjacent conspiracy corner, where there's this cabal of elites that are engaging in human trafficking and things like that, and that, you know, the right wanted to expose that and thought, you know, it would expose a bunch of politicians on the left. And, you know, there there are there are there are plenty of possibilities there. But the fact that they got to office and then did a complete 180 has definitely raised eyebrows and has made it so that even a number of Republican, especially far right Republican, say members of Congress like Marjorie Taylor Greene, have continued to push for these files to be released.

KETTLER: Charlie, it strikes me this one, as we mentioned, it's interesting because it is sticking around a little bit more. How is this affecting dynamics within Congress?

HUNT: This is a really fascinating one because, you know, like I said, there are some far right members of Congress who want to use the authority of Congress to force, essentially force the administration to release these records because Republicans in Congress have such a razor thin majority. That means that Democrats are obviously on board with releasing these files. They have hopped right on board now that they know it is causing these problems for Donald Trump. And as of now. So we're recording this in early October of 2025. Who the heck knows will happen next week. But you know, we're currently in a government shutdown, and the Republican leadership is wary about including Speaker Johnson wary about coming back to Washington because it appears as though there are enough members willing to sign on to what's called a discharge petition that would essentially force leadership in Congress to take up this issue, put the vote on the floor to release the files, and it looks like they have enough votes to pass it. And so it's kind of in this no man's land right now. But it is it continues to sort of loom as this threat, this kind of black cloud that could sort of start pouring at any moment if this discharge petition can go through.

KETTLER: So we've talked a lot on the on these other scandals that it seems like Trump's really not facing consequences for them yet. Right. However, if we start seeing some Republicans turn on him, is that where we might start seeing more consequences or Congress pushing more?

HUNT: I think so. I mean, history tells us that this is the case. I mean, Nixon's time was up when Republicans in Congress really decided that they couldn't stand by him any longer. The turning point for a lot of these scandals, and we've seen it, you know, we saw it with Rod Blagojevich. We saw it with these other folks that their days become numbered when members of their own party who, after everything we've talked about with the political science research around partisanship and loyalty and all this stuff, when members of your own party start to turn on you, that's when you really might start to face some consequences, both political and potentially sort of institutional or legal, depending on what they're able to do with, uh, with this congressional vote.

This episode was written by me, Charlie Hunt, and my co-host Jackie Kettler. It was produced and edited by me. Our theme music is by Deer Room with incidental sound from Shutterstock music. For more sources and info on all of our episodes, head over to www.scandalizedpod.com. Join us next week for the last episode of our mini season, our very first live show from earlier this year at Treefort 2025. You won't want to miss it.