

Jan 18, 2026 interview with Jane Kirtley, Silha Center Director and Silha Professor of Media Ethics and Law and the Danish publication *Politiken*.

Trump is raking in money with a shamelessness that is shaking experts.

Donald Trump has, in his first year as president, used the power of the office and the institutions of the state to enrich himself, his family, and his political allies. Experts call it a historic breach of norms without precedent in American history.

Donald Trump is exploiting the world's most powerful office to enrich himself in a wide range of ways never seen before — but according to experts, one case reaches a particularly absurd level:

The president of the United States is demanding that the Department of Justice pay him nearly 1.5 billion kroner in damages for harm he claims to have suffered as a result of the Department's various investigations into him.

That demand involves layer upon layer of runaway conflicts of interest, notes Noah Bookbinder, who has handled public corruption cases for the Department of Justice and served as chief counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee. Today, he is president of the NGO Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington.

First, he points out, the investigations into Trump's possible criminal conduct were based on facts and the law. Second, as president, Trump has deliberately undermined the Justice Department's traditional independence, so that it is now his own hyper-loyalists who are expected to rule on their boss's claim.

“This is truly alarming and legally absurd. There is effectively no precedent for this kind of thing,” says Noah Bookbinder.

David Super, a law professor at Georgetown University, also points out that the compensation claim is far larger than what is traditionally paid when citizens have actually been harassed by the authorities.

“This situation has no parallel in American history. There are many people whose lives have been destroyed by federal investigations who have never

received a single dollar, even when they were exonerated. Mr. Trump was, of course, not exonerated. He managed to drag the cases out until he became president and thus actively immune,” says David Super.

Donald Trump himself has, somewhat atypically, acknowledged his dual role and has on this occasion appeared almost concerned.

“I’m the one who makes the decision, and that decision will have to come across my desk, and it’s really strange to make a decision where I’m paying myself,” he has said, according to *The New York Times*.

But evidently not so strange that he has withdrawn the claim.

Seventeenfold increase in income

In his first year as president, Donald Trump has used the enormous power of the White House to enrich himself, his family, and many of his extremely wealthy friends and political allies on a scale that far exceeds anything the United States has experienced before, a number of experts tell *Politiken*.

“The feverish focus on personal profit — that is, using the presidency for financial gain — is, in my assessment, without precedent,” says Jane Kirtley, professor and director of a center for media law and ethics at the University of Minnesota.

In his first six months as president, the Trump family’s income increased seventeenfold to 5.5 billion kroner from 330 million kroner the year before, Reuters has calculated.

“The only consistent policy outcome we have seen from Trump in the first year is enrichment of himself and those closely connected to or related to him. Almost every single week we see new examples of pardons, contract signings, abuses of power, and a range of other clearly financially motivated decisions that all line the pockets of the Trump family and their business empire — and help many of his largest political donors build their own wealth on the back of American political power,” says David Szakonyi, associate professor of political science at George Washington University and co-founder of the Anti-Corruption Data Collective.

There have been no direct findings of ‘one-to-one’ payments for specific political services in Trump’s White House, but it has become routine for wealthy individuals, companies, and foreign governments that want something from the U.S. government — or simply want to avoid being punished — to send money in Donald Trump’s direction or make business decisions that benefit him. And there are numerous examples of those same individuals, companies, and governments obtaining political advantages from the Trump administration. It is a system often referred to as ‘pay-to-play’: it costs money to participate.

“Things happen”

Much of the money flows in from countries whose autocratic leaders the Trump administration is simultaneously helping politically.

In Saudi Arabia, the Trump family is building golf courses and luxury hotels, while Trump has approved the sale of advanced fighter jets to the country. When he received Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman at the White House in November, he dismissed — without evidence — the conclusion of U.S. intelligence agencies that the crown prince ordered the brutal murder of the critical journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.

“Things happen,” the president said, as if the journalist had been dismembered at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul by accident.

In Vietnam, the government has forcibly relocated farmers to make room for a 54-hole VIP golf course and luxury housing outside Hanoi. Trump has halved U.S. punitive tariffs against the country. The White House has maintained that the two things had nothing to do with each other. According to The Guardian, the local farmers who are forced to relocate are compensated with rice and as little as 12 dollars per square meter to make way for the golf courses, which experts cited by the newspaper say were approved in violation of Vietnamese law.

In Serbia, the right-wing nationalist government, amid large public protests, granted extraordinary permission to demolish a historic monument — the former headquarters of the Yugoslav army, which was bombed by NATO in 1999 — to make room for Trump Tower Belgrade, a luxury hotel and apartment complex costing more than 3 billion kroner. Serbia’s embattled leader,

Aleksandar Vučić, needed allies and found them in Russia's president Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump.

Trump's use of his office for private gain closely resembles that of Putin and Hungary's right-wing nationalist prime minister Viktor Orbán, assesses David Szakonyi. But the American president stands out for his shamelessness, he says.

“Putin and Orbán made very similar decisions, especially in their early years, but they did their best to cover it up or at least cloak it in a veneer of governance or redistribution. Trump makes no effort in that direction and appears completely comfortable — almost convinced — that the American state is designed to benefit the politicians who happen to hold power,” he says.

The deal in Serbia was finalized after Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner visited Belgrade.

“What people call conflicts of interest (...) I call experience and trusted relationships that we have around the world,” Jared Kushner said recently.

Politiken presented the criticism to the White House. We also asked why Trump believes he is entitled to compensation from the Department of Justice. The White House did not respond. In an email to *Politiken* signed by spokesperson Karoline Leavitt, it states:

“The media's continued attempts to fabricate conflicts of interest are irresponsible and fuel the public's distrust of what they read. Neither the president nor his family have ever placed themselves in conflicts of interest and never will.”

Crypto billions

The most astronomical sums have not been earned by the Trump family in the physical world through their old-school real-estate development and branding, but in the digital world.

“This is where the most blatant abuse appears to be taking place,” David Szakonyi believes.

Donald Trump has appointed his longtime golf partner Steve Witkoff as his special foreign-policy envoy, and together the Trump and Witkoff families have launched a crypto company that earns billions, among other things from the very countries where the fathers are shaping policy.

In the spring, the United Arab Emirates deposited nearly 13 billion kroner into the Trump and Witkoff families' World Liberty Financial in connection with the purchase of the crypto exchange Binance.

Two weeks later, the White House approved the Emirates' access to some of the world's most coveted and advanced computer chips.

In the fall, President Trump pardoned Binance co-founder and multibillionaire Changpeng Zhao, who had been convicted in the United States of "causing significant harm to U.S. national security" by allowing Russians and the terrorist network al-Qaeda to use Binance for illicit money transfers.

On October 23, Zhao thanked the president on X:

"Deeply grateful for today's pardon and to President Trump for upholding America's respect for fairness, innovation, and justice."

Trump claimed that he "had no idea" who Changpeng Zhao was, but pardoned him on the advice of "many good people."

There is an unusually large number of crypto and tech investors among Trump's major donors. Among them is David Sachs, who has been given a lucrative dual role as Trump's so-called czar for artificial intelligence — a sector in which he himself is a major investor. Sachs has helped deregulate U.S. AI rules in ways that in some cases run counter to national-security recommendations but benefit his portfolio, *The New York Times* wrote in November, tallying at least 449 Sachs investments related to artificial intelligence.

Steve Bannon, a former Trump adviser, has described David Sachs as the embodiment of the ethical conflicts in a government where "the tech bros are out of control."

“They are leading the White House toward ruin with the emerging technocratic oligarchy,” Steve Bannon told *The New York Times*.

‘The state is me’

Jonathan Rauch, a scholar of governance at the large, politically independent think tank Brookings Institution, says that the scale and depth of corruption in Trump’s second presidential term have surprised him.

Politiken spoke with him in the spring, when Trump had been in office for 100 days. Rauch had attracted global attention with an analysis describing Trump as a patrimonialist — a classic sociological term for a leader who treats the state as his personal property and governs on the basis of loyalty and kinship — whose greatest weaknesses are overt corruption and incompetence.

Today he says: “I underestimated the magnitude, scope, and penetration of the corruption.”

As president, Trump often makes political decisions based on what benefits himself and his family, but classic personal enrichment is not even the most alarming aspect, Jonathan Rauch believes. The most alarming thing is that Trump has taken corruption to a new level by fundamentally viewing the American state as his personal property.

As examples, he mentions that Donald Trump — legally — pressured the tech giant Intel to transfer 10 percent of its value to the American state. Or that the president has threatened universities and law firms with financial ruin and compelled them to donate money to his favorite projects. This is not money directly into his own pocket, but it is the abuse of a powerful state apparatus for personal ends, he notes.

“We are used to thinking of corruption in narrowly defined terms such as criminal theft of money, but it goes far, far beyond that. It is the wholesale takeover of the machinery of government,” says Jonathan Rauch.

Trump is raising money for his personal prestige projects such as his inauguration committee, his planned presidential library, the ballroom he wants to build in the White House and name after himself, and the overflowing

campaign war chests he continues to raise funds for even though the Constitution forbids him from running again in 2028. These are projects in which Trump's vanity and his ideological and political interests are blended together and redefined as America's interests.

The "donations" have exploded. Recently, The Atlantic wrote that Trump, as president, has already raised nearly 13 billion kroner — far more than everything he raised in the two years leading up to the 2024 presidential election.

The money comes, among other places, from large American corporations that often hope to obtain important permits or lucrative contracts from the U.S. government. Or perhaps they fear being arbitrarily punished by Trump if they do not pay.

Donald Trump has, for example, sued a number of American media outlets for exorbitant sums over their coverage of him — in the same way he sued the Department of Justice. Lawsuits that most experts view as unfounded or entirely baseless.

"Part of me can hardly believe that we're even having this conversation!" says Jane Kirtley.

"Over the years, presidents have of course often clashed with the press, but President Trump has elevated extortion to an entirely new level. Because that's what it is: extortion. President Trump uses his power to extract promises and money from countless institutions — not only the media, but also law firms and universities," she continues, like many others finding the most fitting parallel in the world of organized crime:

"I'm talking about paying Trump what in practice amounts to protection money."

Jane Kirtley criticizes major American media companies such as Paramount, which, as the owner of CBS News, settled and paid Trump more than 100 million kroner in a lawsuit that experts said they would have won.

"In my view, all media — print as well as broadcast — should operate independently of the government and put their audiences first. But far too often

it seems they choose the path of least resistance: settling with Trump. In the long run, that invites further abuse of power,” she says.

Not all abuses of power are illegal, but Trump’s undermining of American media’s — and the public’s — free-speech rights is, the professor assesses:

“Threatening the media for failing to support an administration is the exact opposite of what the First Amendment is meant to protect: sharp and free reporting on the government.”

Not all companies are willing to pay to play. Jamie Dimon, CEO of investment bank JPMorgan Chase, recently explained that his bank has not donated to Trump’s ballroom because he fears being accused of corruption after an election.

Democrats have warned Trump’s “donors” that they are exposing themselves to legal risk, Jonathan Rauch notes. But the United States has a fundamental problem: there are no laws against much of what Trump is doing, he says — because no president has ever done it before:

“It would be perfectly legal for him to say to the Department of Justice tomorrow, ‘There’s this crazy journalist from Denmark’ — let’s say for the sake of argument that it’s you — ‘find something to charge him with!’ And they would do it.”