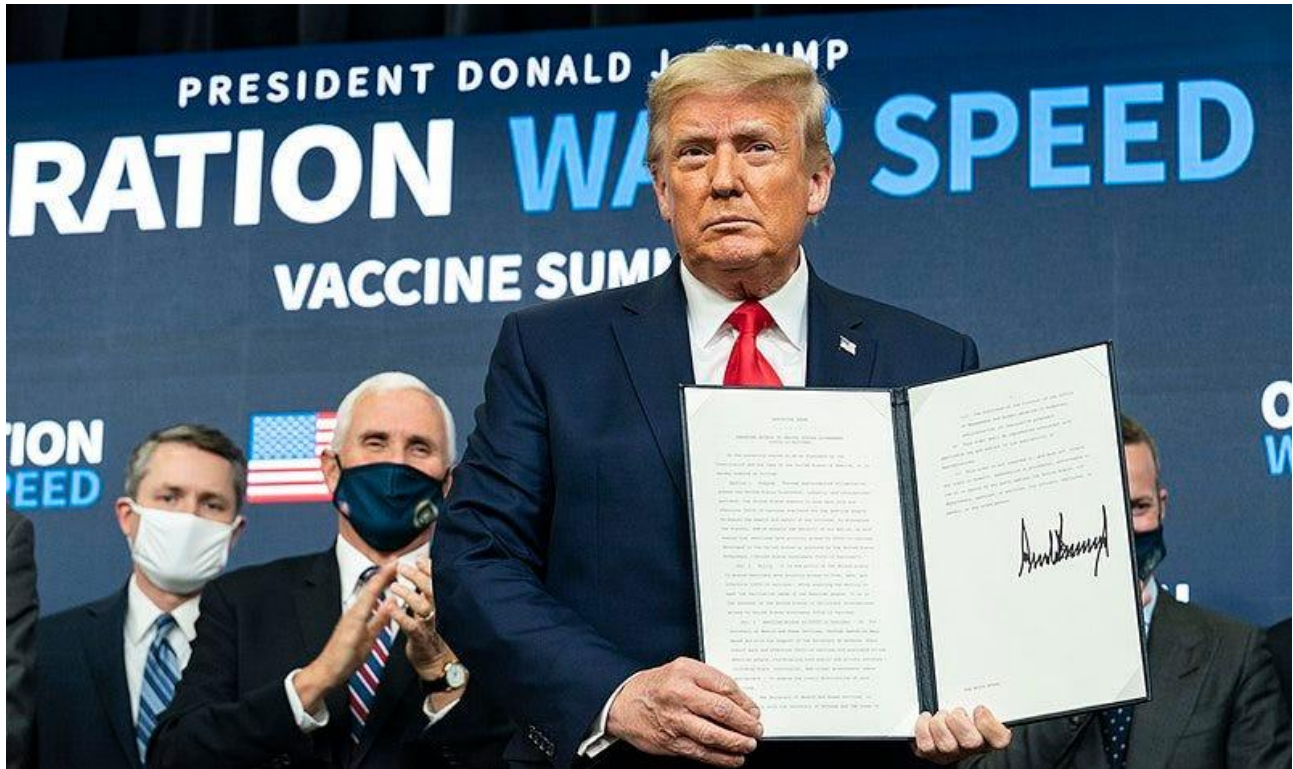


Trump Has a Chance to Recreate His Greatest Success

But I don't recommend holding your breath

[George Dillard](#)



Trump displays the OWS executive order in 2020 ([public domain](#))

Donald Trump's first term as president was, to understate the obvious, no great success. As a political newbie, he came into office making grand pledges but did not do most of what he set out to accomplish.

The [list of promises](#) that he made and failed to fulfill is lengthy. He didn't make Mexico pay for a wall, he didn't repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, he didn't renegotiate the Iran Deal, he didn't deport all undocumented immigrants, and he certainly did not eliminate the federal debt. He promised an infrastructure bill so many times that "infrastructure week" became a "[running joke](#)" during his first term.

Trump's chaotic approach to governing the world's most powerful country was generally disastrous. He [torched](#) the United States' international reputation, [lowered ethical standards](#) for public

servants, accomplished little besides an expensive tax cut that [favored the wealthy](#), and ended his term by mismanaging a deadly pandemic and inciting an insurrection. He did not make America great again.

But Trump's administration did notch one incredible achievement: Operation Warp Speed.

You've probably shoved 2020 deep down your [memory hole](#) like everybody else, and I don't blame you — those were dark days, and it's [only natural](#) for your brain to want to cordon off the memories of that time. Many of us have superimposed our post-vaccine understanding of Covid onto our recollections, allowing us to pretend that the pandemic was never that big a deal.

But, if you allow your mind to go back to the spring and summer of 2020, you'll remember that Covid was a) quite deadly and b) seemed as if it would be dangerous for a long, long time. Though public health experts understood that vaccination was the path to ending the deadliest phase of the pandemic, the path to a vaccine was assumed to be very long. As a *New York Times* [article](#) from April 2020 put it,

“The grim truth... is that a vaccine probably won't arrive any time soon. Clinical trials almost never succeed. We've never released a coronavirus vaccine for humans before. Our record for developing an entirely new vaccine is at least four years — more time than the public or the economy can tolerate social-distancing orders.”

I remember reading this article when it came out and feeling very depressed. It had a bunch of little interactive timelines to let the reader game out vaccine development. Even when you clicked on many of the options to fast-track the vaccine and rush its production, the article predicted that a vaccine was very far away — perhaps 2024 at the earliest.

Thankfully, the experts' predictions were wrong. Though the pre-pandemic record for vaccine development was 4 years, the first Covid vaccines were ready in [eight months](#). It was a near-miraculous application of scientific know-how and industrial

production. The vaccines saved somewhere between [14 million and 20 million](#) lives in the first year alone, and they allowed countries to safely end the public health restrictions that had diminished so many people's quality of life.

This success had many parents — the development of [mRNA technology](#) chief among them — but Trump administration policy does deserve credit. Operation Warp Speed accelerated the development of vaccines by removing regulatory roadblocks, investing in new technology, and using the machinery of the government to accelerate and coordinate the work of companies and government agencies. It allowed impressive new technologies to get to market much more quickly than they otherwise would have.

As Gary Hamel and Michele Zanini [wrote](#) in 2023, Operation Warp Speed

“... belongs in the pantheon of U.S. innovation triumphs, along with the Manhattan Project and the Apollo moon-landing program. It's a case study in how the U.S. government can solve complex, urgent problems, and it challenges the narrative that public institutions have lost their ability to dream big and move fast.”

It stands alone as the best thing Trump ever did.

Trump constantly talks about how inefficient and ineffective American government is, how Washington is a “swamp” where nothing ever gets done, how bureaucracy stands in the way of what the people need. Yet, in the case of vaccines, Trump's administration delivered a solution to those problems, cutting through red tape, strategically injecting investment into the private sector, and making good things happen.

Sadly, in the intervening years, Trump has decided to turn his back on his greatest accomplishment, [catering](#) to the anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists in his base. Strangely for a man who loves to self-aggrandize, Trump very rarely brags about the one truly positive development of his first term.

But what if Trump decided to embrace the spirit of the one good thing he did in those four years?

In his run for re-election and the period since, Trump has continued to hammer away at the idea that government is inefficient. He's dispatched Elon Musk and his DOGE shock troops to do this, running around Washington and shutting down departments. They've told the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to [stop](#) protecting consumers and they're [ignoring](#) judges' orders to withhold funding from anti-poverty programs and child health services. Much of what they're doing seems illegal and bad for America.

But what if, instead of slashing the government to shreds or finding ways to award themselves [government contracts](#), the boys at DOGE actually played to their strengths? What if they helped exciting new technologies to get into the hands of Americans more quickly?

What if the new Trump administration embraced the spirit of Operation Warp Speed and the Silicon Valley venture-capital ethos to actually do some good?

Operation Warp Speed wasn't all that complicated. At its core, as Hamel and Zanini [explain](#), it involved "defining a specific problem, committing to an ambitious goal, and then giving people the freedom and the wherewithal to produce breakthrough solutions." They suggest that a Warp Speed-like approach might make sense for problems like water desalination, battery technology, or building new housing. Another [recent paper](#) by several scholars suggests an Operation Warp Speed for Alzheimer's or carbon capture.

In one arena, climate change, Trump wouldn't even have to invent anything new. The Inflation Reduction Act, passed in 2022, sets up mechanisms for just this sort of thing. The [Loan Programs Office](#) of the Department of Energy, for example, was given hundreds of billions of dollars to loan out to promising clean-technology projects around the country. Thus far, the LPO has distributed only a [fraction of that money](#) — partially because the IRA is only a couple of years

old, but also because the LPO's process has been slow and bureaucratic.

Now, Donald Trump has long had a penchant for wanting to undo his Democratic predecessors' achievements, even if he doesn't even have [concepts of a plan](#) to replace them. During his first term, he tried to shred Obamacare and ditched the Iran Deal. He's already talked about [doing the same](#) with the IRA.

But what if he didn't? Much of what the Inflation Reduction Act does is stuff that Trump claims to love — boosting [American manufacturing](#), competing with China, and [creating jobs](#) for working-class people.

Of course, Trump publicly says that climate change is a [hoax](#), so he's unlikely to care very much about saving the planet. And his ego certainly wouldn't allow him to say that he was continuing the wise policies of the Biden administration.

But, as Trump has proved over the course of a lifetime, branding is more important than reality.

So, if his ego demands it, let Trump rebrand the Biden-era climate efforts. He can say he's ending the Inflation Reduction Act and starting the Donald Trump America First Anti China Energy Independence Program or whatever. He can call the EV subsidies Trump Bucks. Let him keep pretending that climate change isn't real. Heck, let Elon route some of the money to himself and his tech buddies. Even if Trump does all of this, he could still do a lot of good with a program of investment designed to jumpstart clean technology.

Trump has to know that, while decades of Republican climate denialism have soured right-wing voters on anything branded climate policy, [clean energy](#) is actually very popular among conservatives. Despite all of Trump's [weird, false rants](#) against the supposed dangers of wind and solar, the vast majority of Republicans support increasing wind energy (79%) and solar energy (87%). This is especially true in the many [red states](#) where wind and solar generation are clearly going to be an engine of

economic growth and a source of cheap energy for decades to come.

An Operation Warp Speed-style program, building on the programs that are already there, could help the United States be competitive in the clean-tech industries of the future.

Now, I'm probably letting myself indulge in impossible fantasies here. Trump has spent the last year leading chants of "[drill baby drill](#)" at his rallies, and he loves nothing more than to subvert Democrats' accomplishments and replace them with nothing. He doesn't even have the sense to embrace the one good thing that he did as president the first time around. So I won't hold my breath.

But there is a scenario in which Trump could actually do what he has always claimed he would do — [run the government like a business](#) to boost the American economy. We don't have to talk about how it will help people and the environment if Trump doesn't want to.