



# Robert Reich: Like a Tyrant, Trump Is Deploying Seven Techniques to Control the Media

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## TOPICS

Donald Trump

## GUESTS

Robert Reich

*former labor secretary under President Bill Clinton. Reich now teaches at UC Berkeley. His recent piece is titled "Trump's Seven Techniques to Control the Media."*

Today marks the 146th day since Donald Trump last held a news conference. As the Electoral College backs Trump, we speak to former Labor Secretary Robert Reich, now a professor at the University of California, Berkeley. "Democracy depends on a free and independent press, which is why all tyrants try to squelch it," Reich recently wrote. "They use seven techniques that, worryingly, President-elect Donald Trump already employs." We speak to Reich, who discusses how Trump uses seven techniques to control the media.

## LINKS

"Trump's Seven Techniques to Control the Media"

"The First 100 Day Resistance Agenda"

## TRANSCRIPT

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**AMY GOODMAN:** This is *Democracy Now!*, [democracynow.org](http://democracynow.org), *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman. In the United States, protests broke out around the country Monday as the 538 electors of the Electoral College met in their respective state capitals and decisively voted to make Donald Trump the 45th president of the United States. Trump received 304 votes, well over the threshold of 270 necessary for him to become the next president. His Democratic challenger, Hillary Clinton, won 227 votes. Trump is scheduled to be sworn in as president one month from today, on January 20th.

We spend the rest of the hour with Robert Reich, who served as labor secretary under President Bill Clinton. Reich, who now teaches at University of California, Berkeley, has emerged as one of Donald Trump's most vocal critics. He recently wrote a [piece](#) headlined "Trump's Seven Techniques to Control the Media." I interviewed him yesterday and began by asking him what he thinks Donald Trump represents.

**ROBERT REICH:** Well, Donald Trump, besides, in my view, not being qualified to be president and, actually, on the campaign trail and even after the campaign was over advocating, legitimizing and enabling people to be quite hateful in America, if they were already leaning in that direction, Donald Trump also does not have any understanding of a democracy. And if anything, his leanings are toward tyranny. And by "tyranny," I simply mean someone who absorbs the trappings of power but doesn't understand that he, in a democracy, is a public servant. He is working for us; we are not working for him. And in many ways, Donald Trump seems to be indifferent, at best, to the democratic process. He, for example, treats the press—and we need a free and independent press. Every democracy requires a

free and independent press to report on what the powerful are doing. Trump continues to denigrate the press and to bypass it whenever he has any opportunity.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So, specifically get into this issue of the press. You wrote a fascinating [piece](#) saying, as you've said now, "Democracy depends on an independent press, which is why all tyrants try to squelch it. They use seven techniques that, worryingly, President-elect Donald Trump already employs." Go in detail into these seven techniques, beginning with berating the media.

**ROBERT REICH:** Donald Trump has, almost from the beginning of his campaign, and certainly in the—and he's continued it—in the post-election period, to denigrate and berate the media. He holds rallies, and he talks about the dishonest media. He uses adjectives like "scum" and "scoundrel" to describe the media. He picks out individual members of the press who have criticized him, and talks about them in very critical terms or mocks them. This is not the habit of a democratic—democratically elected president. We've had presidents who have been upset by particular reports. Harry Truman, for example, was very upset when his—when the media reported—a particular reporter criticized his daughter's singing, and he had some quite stern words about that reporter. But we've never before had a president or president-elect who has taken the media on so directly and so negatively and tried to plant in the public's mind—and I think this is the real danger, Amy—trying to plant in the public's mind the notion that the press is the enemy itself. If the public doesn't believe in a free and independent press, then we're in a kind of fact-free universe, because—and also a president is immune from criticism. And I think that's, consciously or not, what Donald Trump is seeking.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Your number two point of techniques that Trump has used to control the media, "Blacklist critical media." During the campaign, he blacklisted news outlets, like pulling *The Washington Post's* credentials. I was surprised at the time that other reporters on the campaign trail covering Trump didn't jointly say, "If they are not allowed in, we will not report on you. We will not go in, either."

**ROBERT REICH:** I was surprised, as well. And what the media certainly needs to do is stand up for itself and stand up for other members of the media. Now, I understand media—you know, the situation today is very competitive, and there are a lot of media outlets that are worried about losing readership and so forth. But it is very important for the media to stand for a free and independent media. He's announced, for example, that his White House press room, when and if he ever has a news conference, will be—no longer be assigned. The media will no longer be assigned of seats. They will be—they will actually be assigned—those seats will be assigned by the White House press room, not by the media who cover the White House. This may seem like a small detail.

**AMY GOODMAN:** You're saying by Trump's people. No, it's not a small detail at all, but you're saying by Trump's detail—

**ROBERT REICH:** Yes.

**AMY GOODMAN:** —and not the White House Press Association.

**ROBERT REICH:** Exactly. Instead the White House Press Association, Trump's own office, his own detail, will be assigning those seats. And there, again, is a dangerous precedent, in terms of undermining the freedom and the independence of the press. Donald Trump looks at the press the same way he looks at everything else, "the art of the deal." If he can strike a deal that will give the press something, or a particular member of the press or particular newspaper or news outlet an advantage, then he expects something in return, in terms of favorable coverage. But that's not the way it's supposed to work in the United States or in any democracy. That's why we have a strict demarcation between the press and those in power.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Number three in your list of seven techniques to control the media, "Turning the public against the media." I want to go to a clip of Donald Trump.

**DONALD TRUMP:** You know my opinion of the media. It's very low. ... The press are liars. They're terrible people. ... And the media—look at all those people back there: scavengers. They're like scavengers. ... Show 'em the crowd, press. Show 'em the crowd. Show 'em the crowd. Look, they're not turning the cameras. They don't even turn the cameras. They don't even turn the cameras, because, you know what, they're very dishonest people. ... Disgusting reporters, horrible people. Sure, some are nice. ... They're scum, absolute scum. Remember that. Scum.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So you have Trump referring to the media as "lying," "dishonest," "disgusting," "scum." And then you point out, for example, questioning the press's motives, like talking about *The Washington Post's* publisher, Jeff Bezos, head of Amazon. Talk about that.

**ROBERT REICH:** Again, this is unprecedented. We have a president-elect of the United States who comes up with ulterior motives for why a major news outlet, like *The Washington Post*, might be critical of him. He says Jeff Bezos, who is the publisher of *The Washington Post*, also from Amazon, is somehow worried about an antitrust action and therefore doesn't want Trump to be president or didn't want Trump to be president, is worried about Trump. This finding of ulterior motives, of assigning particular strange and irrelevant reasons why an outpost of the press might actually be criticizing Donald Trump is an effort, it seems to me, to undermine the credibility of the press, to cause the public to doubt what they are reading.

And Donald Trump, remember, lives in a fact-free universe. This is somebody who, even after the election, has said that, for example, he won by a landslide, when we know that he won—he didn't win by a landslide; in fact, Hillary Clinton came out with almost 3 million more votes, popular votes, than Donald Trump. He says there was massive voter fraud. We know there—there was no evidence of massive voter fraud. He says that the homicide rate is up 45 percent. We know that the homicide rate is actually down 50 percent. But if in a fact-free world, unless the free press, unless we have a media that is capable of correcting the record, then we have a president who can say almost anything to justify whatever he wants to do. That, again, is a very, very dangerous situation in a democracy.

**AMY GOODMAN:** As you point out, you said that Jeffrey Bezos, the publisher of *The Washington Post*, the founder of Amazon—Donald Trump said *The Washington Post* wrote negative things about him because Bezos, quote, "thinks I would go after him for antitrust."

**ROBERT REICH:** When Donald Trump goes after Jeffrey Bezos, the publisher of *The Washington Post*, because of some—some notion that Amazon and Bezos are worried about a possible antitrust action that Trump might inspire, that is designed to undermine the credibility, in the public's mind, of anything that *The Washington Post* might publish. It is an absurd allegation. There is no reason to believe that the *Post's* reporting turns upon Jeff Bezos's concern about Amazon and any antitrust issues. But, you see, by creating this kind of conspiracy theory or this kind of paranoid notion about the press and planting it in the public's mind, the public, or at least a portion of the public, is led to think that anything that *The Washington Post*, or another paper whose credibility the president-elect tries to undermine, says is [not] justified or is [not] true. And again, that is terribly dangerous in a democracy.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Or he might be threatening the reverse. By saying that, he's saying, "I could go after him on issues of antitrust."

**ROBERT REICH:** Absolutely. He's signaling to the press that he also has the power, whether it's antitrust or it is the IRS or the FBI or whatever, whatever he is going to be directly or indirectly in command of, he is also signaling to the press that he has that kind of power.

**AMY GOODMAN:** I wanted to [read](#) to you something from *Politico*. It says, "Donald Trump's campaign struck a deal with Sinclair Broadcast Group during the campaign to try and secure better media coverage, his son-in-law Jared Kushner told business executives Friday in Manhattan. Kushner said the agreement with Sinclair, which owns television stations across the country in many swing states and often packages news for their affiliates to run, gave them more access to Trump and the campaign, according to six people who heard his remarks. In exchange, Sinclair would broadcast their Trump interviews across the country without commentary, Kushner said." Your concerns about this, Robert Reich?

**ROBERT REICH:** Well, every president in every press room in every White House does make tacit—has tacit understandings with the press. You know, you get this interview with the president if—and it will be an exclusive interview, but—and we're not going to allow anybody else to have that interview, but you've got to—you've got to give him that time to say his piece. That's not unusual. What's very unusual, though, is when a White House strikes a deal with a news outlet not to comment on what the president might be saying at a rally or any other event. That basically is a gag order. I mean, that is an agreement by the press not to have an opinion, not to express itself, not to point out to the public anything, not to even provide any facts to the public that might be important in terms of understanding the context of a presidential event or what a president says. That, again, is terribly dangerous in a democracy. It actually creates—it undermines the independence and the freedom of the press.

**AMY GOODMAN:** In number four of "Trump's Seven Techniques to Control the Media," you talk about condemning satirical or critical comments. I wanted to go to a clip of *Saturday Night Live*.

**DONALD TRUMP:** [played by Alec Baldwin] Kellyanne, I just retweeted the best tweet. I mean, wow, what a great, smart tweet.

**SECURITY ADVISER 1:** [played by Kenan Thompson] Mr. Trump, we're in a security briefing.

**DONALD TRUMP:** I know, but this could not wait. It was from a young man named Seth. He's 16. He's in high school, and I really did retweet him. Seriously, this is real.

**KELLYANNE CONWAY:** [played by Kate McKinnon] He really did do this.

**SECURITY ADVISER 1:** Well, sir, you're the president-elect, so I guess you can do whatever you want, but we'd really like to fill you in on Syria.

**DONALD TRUMP:** God, Seth seems so cool. His Twitter bio says he wants to make America great again.

**SECURITY ADVISER 2:** [played by Alex Moffat] That is cool, sir.

**DONALD TRUMP:** It also says he loves the Anaheim Ducks.

**KELLYANNE CONWAY:** OK, see, there is a reason, actually, that Donald tweets so much. He does it to distract the media from his business conflicts and all the very scary people in his Cabinet.

**SECURITY ADVISER 1:** Oh, that does make sense.

**SECURITY ADVISER 2:** Very clever, sir.

**DONALD TRUMP:** Actually, that's not why I do it. I do it because my brain is bad.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That, of course, Alec Baldwin playing Donald Trump, as he continues to do now after the election, as he did before. There are many who felt if this had started earlier on, that Trump never would have made it to this point, or perhaps if Jon Stewart was still doing *The Daily Show* or Stephen Colbert still on Comedy Central. But this issue of satire and Donald Trump tweeting, after that—after the scene we just played, Trump tweeting, "It is a totally one-sided, biased show—nothing funny at all. Equal time for us?" How serious this is, Robert Reich.

**ROBERT REICH:** Well, on one level, it simply reveals a very thin-skinned and vindictive person on the part of Donald Trump, who doesn't have any sense of humor. But on a deeper level, there are some real dangers here, because a president, an administration, particularly when the administration and Congress are of the same party, does have some power, in terms of the Federal Communications Commission and other agencies, that could make it difficult for a particular broadcaster to function. And by saying "equal time for our side," that's a kind of ironic comment, because the equal time rule by the FCC is gone. Donald Trump really dominated all of the news coverage during the campaign, was given free time by the media.

Satire also is probably one of the most effective means of criticizing any—any person in power, whether that person is elected or is a—just takes power. Traditionally, through time, satire has been incredibly useful and important. To criticize people who are using satire, again, in a very, very fundamental way, turns the public—potentially turns the public against these individuals. Donald Trump has tweeted against Alec Baldwin specifically and personally. And those personal tweets could potentially have some damage. I do know that people who have criticized Donald Trump in various ways, and then Donald Trump has tweeted against them, have, in turn, received threats, including death threats, from some of Trump's followers. We don't want to have in this country that kind of chilling effect on free speech or on satire or any form of free speech.

**AMY GOODMAN:** We'll be back with UC Berkeley professor Robert Reich, former labor secretary under President Clinton, in a minute.

[break]

**AMY GOODMAN:** "Natural Blue" by Julie Byrne, here on *Democracy Now!*, [democracynow.org](http://democracynow.org), *The War and Peace Report*. We are speaking to former Labor Secretary Robert Reich, who recently wrote a [piece](#) headlined "Trump's Seven Techniques to Control the Media." I asked him about Donald Trump's response to what happened when Vice President-elect Mike Pence attended the Broadway hit *Hamilton* shortly after the election. At the end of the show, actor Brandon Victor Dixon, who plays Aaron Burr, read a message for Pence from the stage.

**BRANDON VICTOR DIXON:** Vice President-elect Pence, we welcome you, and we truly thank you for joining us here at *Hamilton: An American Musical*. We really do. We, sir, we, are of the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents, or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights, sir. But we truly hope that this show has inspired you to uphold our American values and to work on behalf of all of us. All of us.



**AMY GOODMAN:** Donald Trump responded to the *Hamilton* message by tweeting, "The cast of Hamilton was very rude last night to a very good man, Mike Pence. Apologize!" I asked former Labor Secretary Robert Reich to respond.

**ROBERT REICH:** There was nothing about that note, as I read about it and read the content of that note, that was harassing. In fact, it was very dignified, very modest. It simply expressed the cast's hope, because the cast of that Broadway show is very diverse, multiracial, multiethnic, their hope that the Trump administration would be sensitive to their concerns about not being hateful and not promoting racism. And for Donald Trump to jump on that cast and to say that they owe Michael Pence an apology and that this was in some way inappropriate also has a potential to chill freedom of speech.

If any other set of performers want to say something that is slightly critical, or at least signal their discontent in some way with the Trump administration, are they going to be faced with a deluge of similar tweets or similar criticisms? And what is the consequence of those tweets and criticisms not only in terms of audiences in the future—I don't think there's any problem of *Hamilton* getting a very, very large audience, but what about playwrights and casts and producers that are struggling to attract audiences or are worried about—even about threats that may come back to them because of Donald Trump's outrage? You see how delicate this all is, Amy.

Our freedom of the press depends on a lot of tacit norms and understandings between people in power—the president, a president-elect—and the public at large and the press itself. The press is called the fourth estate. It's called the fourth estate because it has almost governmental functions, in terms of being outside the government but being able to criticize what is happening in the government, so the public is aware of potential problems. Without that freedom of the press, as the framers of the Constitution understood, we cannot have a fully functioning democracy.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Your number five in "Trump's Seven Techniques to Control the Media" is threatening the media directly, threatening to sue. For example, what *The New York Times* wrote about him when it came to his tax returns and when it came, as well, to accusations that women made of him directly assaulting them.

**ROBERT REICH:** Donald Trump's mentor for many years, when he was a younger man, was a fellow named Roy Cohn, a lawyer in New York who was also an assistant—had been an assistant to Senator Joe McCarthy during the—McCarthy's witch hunts, communist witch hunts, in the 1950s. What Roy Cohn did always, over and over again, was sue people, issued lawsuits, libelous lawsuits often, when there was anything in the paper that was critical of Roy Cohn or his clients. Donald Trump apparently internalized it and has a history of mounting lawsuits.

But when you are a president-elect or when you're a candidate, and certainly when you're president, you cannot go around trying to intimidate the press and issuing lawsuits or threatening lawsuits because they say something that you don't like about them. And this is what Trump did during the campaign. He also has threatened to expand the libel laws, making it easier, he says, for somebody like him to sue the media. And you, again—presumably, that lawsuit would be based upon something that the media reported that he did not like to be reported, didn't want to be reported. Again, a very, very dangerous threat.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Number six is limiting media access. You point out Trump hasn't had a news conference since July, when he famously called on Russia to hack Hillary Clinton's email. Let's take a listen.

**DONALD TRUMP:** Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing. I think you will probably be rewarded mightily by our press.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So that's Donald Trump at his last news conference, and he hasn't held one since. He's also said that, as president, he won't necessarily be having daily press briefings—you know, his press secretary. But you talk out—about how he's blocked the media from traveling with him. You talk about his first conversation with Putin, where it actually first was reported. It wasn't in the United States.

**ROBERT REICH:** Yes, it's interesting and indicative that that first conversation with Putin, which took place right after he was elected, was reported by the Kremlin first, not by any United States media. Donald Trump doesn't like the media. He doesn't want to be confronted by the media. He doesn't want to have news conferences. Three days after he was elected, Barack Obama had his first news conference. Three days after he was elected and the Supreme Court decided that election, George W. Bush had his first news conference. Donald Trump has not had a news conference since July. He hasn't had any news conference since he was elected.

You see, what he wants to avoid here is being ganged up on. He is desperately afraid that there might be a variety of questions coming from various news organizations about the same set of issues, and that would make him look and feel less powerful. And so, like many—and I use this word advisedly—many dictators or tyrants in history, who don't want to have news conferences, they don't want to be bombarded with questions from the press, Donald Trump is avoiding the possibility that he will have many different news outlets asking him and pummeling him with questions. He doesn't want that possibility.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And finally, you talk about bypassing the media and communicating with the public directly, as he does with tweets, as he does with his rallies, which he seems to be continuing—in fact, just this past weekend, another victory rally. I wanted to play a clip.

**PRESIDENT-ELECT DONALD TRUMP:** Michelle Obama said yesterday that there's no hope. But I assume she was talking about the past, not the future, because, I'm telling you, we have tremendous hope.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That was Donald Trump this weekend at yet another victory rally, which he used to attack Michelle Obama, the first lady. Robert Reich?

**ROBERT REICH:** Donald Trump's *modus operandi* seems to be to communicate directly with followers and with the public through tweets and through rallies. And he's signaled that he wants to continue to use rallies even after January 20th, when he becomes president. The problem for the free press is that the more you have a president who is communicating directly through tweets and rallies, the less able are the press or is the media to be able to intermedicate. I mean, the word "media" comes from the term "intermediation," which is speaking truth to power. It's actually intermediating between the powerful and the public, so that the powerful can be held accountable, so that they can be asked questions on behalf of the public, so that there can be criticism voiced, where individual members of the public don't have the power to do that. They are just sort of a very, very large group of individuals who—none of whom has the power to talk back. That's why the intermediaries, the media, are so important.

But if you have a president who is communicating absolutely directly with the public, bypassing all of those intermediaries, then you have potentially a situation in which what that president says cannot be questioned. The truth cannot get out. And the fear is that that's ultimately what Donald Trump wants, to be able to continue to state things that are simply not true, you know, that—doubting climate change, for example, or saying that the CIA report on Russian hacking was not true—and have a larger and larger number of his followers, and, indirectly, their friends and their associates and families, believe

him and not believe science and not believe the media, not believe policy analysts and not believe people who are investigative reporters and not believe the actual facts out there, believe this counter-universe that is of Donald Trump's creation.

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