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Trump sets stage for 2020 fight with false claims and recycled attacks

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President kicked off his bid with lies, attacks on the press and claims a Democrat president would 'shut down your free speech'

Donald Trump has set the stage for the nastiest US presidential race in modern times with a [campaign rally](#) that recycled old themes and stoked resentment towards Democrats and the media.

More than 500 days before the 2020 US election, the president formally launched his campaign before a capacity 20,000 crowd in a sports stadium in Orlando in the vital swing state of [Florida](#), demonstrating that his base, at least, remains as fervent as ever.

Trump spent little effort offering a vision of the future. He and his supporters were most energised by his greatest hits: grievance politics, demonising opponents, raging against perceived injustices. There was even a reprise of attacks on Hillary Clinton, his defeated rival in 2016, complete with furious chants of "Lock her up!"

His vicious, often fabricated, attacks implied that while a referendum on his record would likely end in defeat, his campaign believes that whipping up fear of a Democrat in the White House could yet save his skin.

"Just imagine what this angry leftwing mob would do if they were in charge of this country," Trump said. "Imagine if we had a Democrat president and Democrat Congress in 2020. They

would shut down your free speech, use the power of the law to punish their opponents, which they are trying to do now anyway.”

He added, without evidence: “They would strip Americans of their constitutional rights while flooding the country with illegal immigrants in the hopes it will expand their political base.”

Trump made the comments after saying [145 judges had been appointed under his administration](#), and recalling the [bitterly disputed confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh](#) to the supreme court. Kavanaugh had been credibly accused of sexual assault when he was a teenager. On Tuesday, Trump falsely claimed these were “fraudulent charges”.

From left, Tiffany Trump, Lara Trump, Eric Trump, Jared Kushner, Ivanka Trump, Kimberly Guilfoyle and Donald Trump Jr at Donald Trump’s re-election campaign rally. Photograph: Evan Vucci/AP

Watched by his wife, Melania Trump, and other family members, during a speech lasting more than an hour, the president set out a blueprint for attacks for whoever emerges from the crowded field of potential Democratic primary contenders, who will [meet next week for their first](#)

[debates](#).

"A vote for any Democrat in 2020 is a vote for the rise of radical socialism and the destruction of the American dream," Trump said. "The Democrat party has become more radical, more dangerous and more unhinged than at any point in the history of our country."

He falsely and wildly claimed that leading Democrats favour "open borders" and oppose measures to prevent the execution of children after birth. The most divisive president for decades argued it was Democrats who want to divide Americans into factions and "shred the constitution".

Trump, wearing his signature red tie and relishing the febrile atmosphere, also worked his familiar theme of us v them, putting himself on the side of the ordinary citizens and "deplorables", an unlikely position for a millionaire businessman, TV celebrity and now, president. "Many times I said we would drain the swamp. That's exactly what we're doing. That's why the swamp is fighting back so viciously and violently."

He showed how he intends to weaponise the special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian election interference. "What did they come up with?" he asked. "No collusion and the facts that led our great attorney general to determine no obstruction." Mueller's findings did not establish a criminal conspiracy between the Trump campaign and Moscow, but it did point to 10 instance of attempted obstruction of justice, and Mueller himself has said he did not clear Trump of a crime.

"For the last two and half years we have been under siege," he said, complaining that opponents have been given a "free pass". He warned: "They are really going after you. That's what this is all about."

Just as in 2016, Trump showed his intention to go after the media. "By the way, that is a lot of fake news back there," he said. "The amount of press we have tonight reminds me of the Academy awards before they went political and their ratings went down the tubes."

On several occasions the predominantly white crowd booed and jeered, made thumbs down gestures and chanted "CNN sucks!"

It was four years to the week, Trump noted, since he [descended the escalator](#) at Trump Tower to launch his wildly improbable bid for the White House. On that occasion he railed against Mexican "criminals" and "rapists" and demanded a border wall.

Getting the sequel under way, there was a familiar refrain. Trump condemned "illegal mass migration" to fire up the crowd.

Trump admitted he has made his wall "cheaper" and asserted: "We're going to have over 400 miles of wall built by the end of next year. It's moving very rapidly." According to factcheckers, this is very unlikely, and most of the wall would be mere replacement barrier, not fresh construction.

Indeed, there was the usual litany of Trump exaggerations and lies. The man who pulled America out of the Paris climate accord and slashed environmental regulations announced: "Our air and water are the cleanest they've ever been by far."

He said of the economy: "It's soaring to incredible new heights. Perhaps the greatest economy we've had in the history of our country." In fact, growth hit higher levels in the 1980s and 1990s. Trump also falsely claimed the biggest tax cut in American history.

When he did look forward, the promises were vague and invited mockery. He suggested that a cure for cancer is within reach and declared: "We will eradicate Aids in America once and for all. We're very close."

The bare-knuckle approach to the coming election was shared by the vice-president, Mike Pence, and Trump's children. [Donald Trump](#) Jr, whose gestures and pronunciations increasingly resemble his father, described Joe Biden, currently leading the Democratic field of contenders in the polls, as usually "groping someone" – a reference to Biden's inappropriate touching of women.

The negativity was also reflected outside the venue, where street vendors sold T-shirts that said: "Trump 2020, Get on board or get run over", "Trump 2020, the sequel, make liberals cry again" and "Trump 2020: Fuck your feelings". A handwritten banner hung on a wire fence proclaimed: "Hillary for prison".

A Trump baby blimp towers over protesters near the arena where Trump held his rally in Orlando, Florida, on 18 June. Photograph: Chris O'Meara/AP

Members of the [rightwing organisation Proud Boys](#) yelled anti-Democratic chants, some displaying white power symbols on their clothing and banners. They were stopped by police before they could disrupt an anti-Trump rally.

But there was also opposition. Hundreds of anti-Trump protesters applauded and took photos when a 20ft blimp of a Trump baby in a nappy was inflated near the arena.

Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders gave an immediate rebuttal to Trump's speech, summarizing it as "lies, distortions, and total absolute nonsense". He criticized Trump for barely talking about the climate emergency, or that "half of the people in this country are working paycheck to paycheck".

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