

POLITICAL MEMO

Trump, Vowing 'Retribution,' Foretells a Second Term of Spite

In a speech before his supporters, the former president charged forward in an uncharted direction, talking openly about leveraging the power of the presidency for political reprisals.



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Donald J. Trump has for decades trafficked in the language of vengeance, from his days as a New York developer vowing “an eye for an eye” in the real estate business to ticking through an enemies ledger in 2022 as he sought to oust every last Republican who voted for his impeachment. “Four down and six to go,” he cheered in a statement as one went down to defeat.

But even though payback has long been part of his public persona, Mr. Trump’s speech on Saturday at the Conservative Political Action Conference was striking for how explicitly he signaled that any return trip to the White House would amount to a term of spite.

“In 2016, I declared, ‘I am your voice,’” Mr. Trump told the crowd in National Harbor, Md. “Today, I add: I am your warrior. I am your justice. And for those who have been wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution.”

He repeated the phrase for emphasis: “I am your retribution.”

Framing the 2024 election as a dire moment in an us-versus-them struggle — “the final battle,” as he put it — Mr. Trump charged forward in an uncharted direction for American politics, talking openly about leveraging the power of the presidency for political reprisals.

His menacing declaration landed differently in the wake of the pro-Trump mob’s assault on the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, in a last-ditch effort to keep him in power. The notion that Mr. Trump’s supporters could be spurred to violence is no longer hypothetical, as it was in 2016 when he urged a rally audience to “knock the crap out of” hecklers. The attack on the Capitol underscored that his most fanatical followers took his falsehoods and claims of victimhood seriously — and were willing to act on them.