

## **The 2024 Presidential Election, Trump vs. Harris, and the Power of the Status Quo**

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POLS-C1000: American Government and Politics

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November 18, 2025

## Abstract

The 2024 United States presidential election marked a defining moment in modern American politics. President Joe Biden, facing mounting political pressure, became the first incumbent since Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968 to withdraw before Election Day, leaving Vice President Kamala Harris with only fifteen weeks to build a national campaign. Former President Donald Trump, meanwhile, sought to reclaim the presidency and become the first non-consecutive president since Grover Cleveland in 1893. Could he overcome inflammatory topics such as his perceived abuse of power in his first term, the January 6th insurrection, and the felony charges against him? Beneath this campaign drama, the election highlighted a deeper struggle over the nation's long-standing political and economic order, one shaped by entrenched corporate influence, widening polarization, and rising distrust in federal institutions. Although social debates over issues like immigration and transgender rights dominated headlines, they often overshadowed more foundational challenges such as economic inequality, political corruption, and the outsized power of wealthy elites. Financial capitalism, a plutocratic political structure, and a rigid two-party system, which are the core pillars of today's American governance, remain resistant to meaningful reform. This analysis explores whether Trump's return signaled a genuine challenge to the status quo or ultimately reinforced it.

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"Status quo, you know, is Latin for 'the mess we're in.'"- Ronald Reagan (Hennessey, 2024)

As the 2024 presidential election drew near, many Americans anticipated a rematch between President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump, with Biden seeking a second consecutive term and Trump attempting to become the second non-consecutive president in U.S. history (Richards, 2025). Both men's first terms had already provided voters with a clear understanding of their governing styles: Biden's administration aligned closely with the military-industrial establishment, illustrated by the \$128 billion in aid sent to Ukraine during the Russia-Ukraine conflict (Masters, 2025), and domestically, his policies reflected progressive priorities such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, gender identity protections, and more permissive immigration policies (Roude, 2021). In contrast, Trump once again positioned himself as a populist outsider. His 2016 victory reflected deep public frustration with the political elite, and his 2024 campaign revisited that message, promising to end foreign conflicts, tighten border security, and roll back DEI policies (Explainers, 2025). Yet, the expected rematch never materialized. On July 21, 2024, Biden withdrew from the race and endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris (Shear, 2024). With only fifteen weeks to campaign, Harris was viewed as a continuation of Biden's agenda, supported by significant corporate funding aimed at maintaining the existing political order (Saul, 2024). The 2024 Presidential contest evolved into a struggle between entrenched interests within America's two-party system and the possibility of meaningful change to the status quo.

As the Republican and Democratic parties outlined their platforms and policies for the 2024 election, significant differences emerged on social issues, including immigration and transgender rights. However, despite these distinctions, it is worth questioning how far apart the

two parties truly are on broader topics such as foreign and domestic policy, and how the status quo might change. To answer that question, it is crucial to understand the fundamental components of the status quo within the U.S. political and economic systems, as well as its foreign and domestic policies. The following material will define the current status quo of several important policies and systems within the U.S.

## **U.S. Capitalism**

Capitalism is the foundation of the U.S. economy and continues to shape much of the nation's economic status quo. However, it is more accurately described as a mixed system that combines free-market principles with elements of socialism. This structure allows individuals and businesses to make independent economic choices while the government intervenes to promote public welfare and maintain stability (Ross, 2025). Still, the U.S. economy is much more complicated than this balance might suggest. It is shaped by a network of global trade relationships, technological advancements, financial markets, and government regulations that continuously interact and evolve. Corporate interests, consumer demand, and international competition further influence economic outcomes. Altogether, these factors make the U.S. economy a system that reflects both market freedom and the broader goals of society.

Until 1971, the U.S. had been tethered to the gold standard, a monetary system in which the value of a country's currency is directly linked to gold. With the gold standard, countries agree to convert paper money into a fixed amount of gold. A country that uses the gold standard sets a price for gold, and it buys and sells gold at that price. On August 15, 1971, President Richard Nixon officially announced that the U.S. would no longer convert dollars to gold at a fixed price. While the Gold Reserve Act of 1934 had already ended domestic convertibility and private

ownership, 1971 marked the definitive end of the U.S. dollar's link to gold for international exchange, transitioning the country to a fiat money system (Lioudis, 2024).

The aftermath of President Nixon's economic policy shift, which focused on prioritizing job growth, lower inflation, and exchange rate stability in 1971, is referred to as the Nixon shock.. His policy changes led to the collapse of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates established after World War II. In large part due to Nixon Shock, central banks have more control over their nations' money and the management of variables such as interest rates, overall money supply, and velocity.

These changes had long-term effects on the U.S. economy, such as the stagflation of the 1970s, which caused instability in floating currencies, with the U.S. dollar dropping by a third. Over the past 40 years, the U.S. dollar has been anything but stable, with several periods of severe volatility. Between 1985 and 1995, the U.S. dollar value index declined by as much as 34%. After quickly recovering, it fell sharply again from 2002 to mid-2011. Also, over the past few decades, the U.S. has experienced severe recessions, including the Great Recession from December 2007 to June 2009 (Kenton, 2025).

## **U.S. Plutocracy**

Plutocratic capitalism describes a system in which the wealthiest individuals and corporations hold a disproportionate influence over the economy, politics, and society, shaping the modern status quo of the U.S. What makes plutocracy particularly concerning is that it is a self-reinforcing system. Once a group of wealthy individuals ascends to power, they can use their financial resources to influence political decisions and even reshape laws and policies to further protect and expand their wealth. This creates a feedback loop where the rich continue to

accumulate power and wealth, while the majority of people find it increasingly difficult to challenge or alter the status quo (Bacsfali, 2025).

In 2010, a decision by the Supreme Court of the United States changed the status quo of American congressional and Presidential elections. The Supreme Court's ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* is a controversial decision that reversed century-old campaign finance restrictions and enabled corporations and other outside groups to spend unlimited money on elections. While wealthy donors, corporations, and special interest groups have long spent money on campaigns, their role has ballooned as a result of *Citizens United* and subsequent decisions, resulting in a fusion of private wealth and political power unseen since the late nineteenth century. Lower courts applying the ruling extended it to invalidate almost all fundraising and spending restrictions for groups that purport to be separate from candidates, many of which are today known as "super PACs." (Weiner, 2019)

The decision of the Supreme Court legalized the "personification of corporation," and empowered corporations politically by viewing them as nothing more than groups of individuals, e.g., owners or shareholders. Because corporate people are structurally akin to actual individuals, they should enjoy basic rights to free expression, religious liberty, and so on. U.S. elections are now not only the world's most costly, but they are also directly subject to the inordinate influence of wealthy individuals and corporations (Scheuerman, 2025).

Barack Obama, who was President at the time of the ruling, along with many democrats and public interest groups, attacked the court's ruling. President Obama put out a statement saying that the court "has given a green light to a new stampede of special interest money in our politics," and vowing that he will work with congressional leaders "to develop a forceful response." He continued, "It is a major victory for big oil, Wall Street banks, health insurance companies and the

other powerful interests that marshal their power every day in Washington to drown out the voices of everyday Americans,” the president said. “This ruling gives the special interests and their lobbyists even more power in Washington—while undermining the influence of average Americans who make small contributions to support their preferred candidates.” (Vogel, 2010)

Since 2010, corporations have effectively gained control of the U.S. Government and systems: its judiciary, its political system, and its national wealth, without taking on any of the responsibilities of dominion (Monks 2012). This “corporate capture” prevents any substantial change from the status quo. For democracy to prevail over plutocracy, elected leaders must enforce stricter laws on lobbying, corporate political spending, and campaign contributions, along with establishing a cooling-off period to limit the “revolving door” between government employment and corporate lobbying. Until such reforms are made, policies will continue to favor corporations over the citizens they are meant to serve.

### **U.S. Foreign Policy**

President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned early on about the growing power of big corporations and special interests, especially what he called the military-industrial complex. In his farewell speech on January 17, 1961, he warned the people of the U.S., “In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper

together." (Eisenhower, 1961) Today, the same dynamics Eisenhower cautioned against shape U.S. priorities, showing just how difficult it is to break free from the status quo he feared.

The status quo of U.S. foreign policy has been mainly defined by the military-industrial complex, whose interests extend beyond diplomacy or defense. The military-industrial complex is made up of a tight network of defense contractors, politicians, and military leaders who play a big role in defining U.S. foreign policy. Its directive is to operate an ongoing military presence overseas and a steady focus on maintaining global influence. Because of that, U.S. actions abroad often reflect more than just national security needs; they also show the pull of a status quo that thrives on staying ready for conflict and keeping the business of war alive. This system is backed by a large percentage of the U.S. budget, which imposes an immense financial burden on the American people (Canyon, 2023).

## **U.S. Domestic Policy**

Domestic policy refers to the decisions, laws, and actions a government takes to address issues within its own borders. In the U.S., issues such as healthcare, immigration, abortion, Social Security, and Medicare often take center stage in political debates, especially during presidential elections (Longley, 2025). Although Republican and Democratic candidates frequently debate these topics, history has shown that little tends to change regardless of which party wins. The power of the status quo and the reluctance of leaders prevent any significant revision of policies.

### ***Immigration***

Immigration has been a central part of American identity from the beginning, and much of the nation's progress can be credited to the contributions of dreamers who arrived from around the world. However, determining how to manage this constant influx of people has increasingly

become a source of partisan conflict, particularly in the post-9/11 era. Because the immigration debate has become intense this election cycle, it's essential to analyze how both Republicans and Democrats have approached immigration since the 1990s and how their choices have shaped today's political landscape.

During the 1990's the Clinton administration attempted to reduce illegal immigration administratively via border operations such as Operation Hold the Line in 1993 and Operation Gatekeeper in 1994. Congress followed suit by passing the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act in 1996. These bills increased the penalties for illegal entry, created mandatory detention for many classes of noncitizens, and expedited deportation procedures for certain cases. The bills also limited judicial review of certain types of deportations and allowed secret evidence in removal proceedings for noncitizens accused of terrorist activity. By 1997, the number of Border Patrol agents along the southwest border increased to 6,315—roughly double the number who were employed in 1987.

In 2000, Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush appealed to Hispanic voters by supporting expanded legal immigration and legalization for illegal immigrants, but that changed dramatically due to the events on September 11, 2001. Congress passed the USA Patriot Act shortly after the 9/11 attacks. The Patriot Act reduced the rights of immigrants by expanding deportation powers to suspected terrorists and allowed the attorney general to detain aliens without charge or recourse to due process. During Bush's terms in office, he signed both the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002 and the Secure Fence Act of 2006, and renewed the USA Patriot Act. These laws reaffirmed the government's power to detain immigrants without trial, authorized about 850 miles of fencing along the southwest border, and expanded the size of

the Border Patrol. In total, President George W. Bush removed 1,000,643 illegal immigrants from the interior of the U.S. during his two terms in office.

President Barack Obama, 2009-2017, supported comprehensive immigration reform and the targeted deportation of illegal immigrants. In 2012, Obama announced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA), which granted a two-year work permit and a reprieve from deportation to illegal immigrants who met many of the latest DREAM Act requirements. However, Obama's administration removed more illegal immigrants than any other administration, earning him the nickname "Deporter-in-Chief." Obama removed 1,242,486 illegal immigrants from the interior of the U.S. during his full eight years, averaging 155,311 removals per year.

In 2017, upon taking office, President Donald Trump issued multiple executive orders to stop the issuance of visas to immigrants and nonimmigrants from several mostly Muslim majority countries based on the assertion that they would be detrimental to national security. The Trump administration also halted DACA and lent support to the RAISE Act in 2017, which would have cut legal immigration by half. Trump also issued his largest immigration executive actions in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing recession, drastically cutting the issuance of green cards and immigrant visas. In total, the Trump administration had only 335,660 deportations between 2017-2020 (Baxter, 2021).

President Joe Biden took office in January 2021, and the administration acted on several fronts to reverse Trump-era restrictions on immigration to the U.S.. Biden also lifted restrictions established early in the coronavirus pandemic that drastically reduced the number of green cards and visas issued to immigrants. Biden had earlier ended the Migration Protection Protocols, or "Remain in Mexico" policy, but it was reinstated in December 2021 after a record number of migrant encounters at the U.S.-Mexico border (Krogstad, 2022). Critics of the Biden

administration's stance on immigration have cited the release of nearly 5.8 million illegal aliens into the U.S. At least 1.9 million additional illegal aliens entered the country as "gotaways" by evading apprehension entirely. From January 2021 until November 2024, the Biden Administration had allowed nearly eight million illegal aliens to enter the U.S. (Committee..., 2024). Biden had a much more relaxed approach to immigration and border security than previous presidents, but as the 2024 election approached, the administration tightened up its policies and fell in line with the status quo.

The status quo of the U.S. immigration system over the past three decades has been characterized by a dramatic increase in border enforcement and deportations, and Congress has been reluctant to pass any significant reform (Bier, 2023). Republican and Democratic presidents frequently create policies that follow similar patterns. Border security and an effective immigration policy are essential parts of a sovereign nation for many reasons, including national security and economic stability. Unfortunately, some of the policies created because of immigration eroded the rights of Americans. Given the complexity of immigration, the issue will likely remain at the forefront of political debates.

### ***Healthcare***

The U.S. population is supported by one of the most complex healthcare systems in the world, formed by intertwining relationships between providers, payers, and patients receiving care. The US healthcare system is constantly evolving. The US healthcare system does not provide universal coverage and can be defined as a mixed system, where publicly financed government Medicare and Medicaid health coverage coexist with privately financed (private health insurance plans) market coverage (US Healthcare, 2025)

The U.S. healthcare system faces numerous significant challenges, including high costs, limited access, and substantial inequality. Even though the U.S. spends more on healthcare than any other developed country, it often performs worse on major health indicators like life expectancy and maternal mortality. The high price of prescription drugs, insurance premiums, and medical procedures leaves many Americans struggling to afford care. Since health insurance is often tied to employment, people can lose coverage if they lose or change jobs.

As with immigration, there is no simple solution for the U.S. healthcare system. Even Americans with insurance continue to pay higher out-of-pocket costs than those in most other developed nations. While the status quo may serve the financial interests of insurers, pharmaceutical companies, and certain healthcare providers, it is not a sustainable model in the long term (Shmerling, 2021). Meaningful reform will eventually be unavoidable, potentially moving the system toward a more socially operated framework.

### ***National Debt***

The U.S. national debt has always been a focus of voters during election season as candidates propose ways to balance the budget, but it has now become a far more serious economic concern. Its current trajectory or status quo is one of rapid accumulation and substantial interest payments. The national debt has surpassed \$34 trillion, and the interest payments alone are now so immense that it's consuming forty percent of all personal income taxes. The largest source of revenue for the federal government is increasingly being devoted to just servicing the debt. This problem is about policy, not politics. The only way out of this debt death spiral is to immediately cut government spending. Interest on the debt is becoming so large that the government will soon be forced to raise much more revenue if spending is not drastically cut. That revenue will need to come from either much higher explicit taxes or the hidden tax of inflation. Taxpayers will be

accountable for trillions of additional dollars, regardless of the collection method. If federal finances continue on their current path, we are only a few years from the entirety of income taxes being needed to finance the debt (Antoni, 2023)

The national budget has reached a critical point, and federal leaders must begin making difficult decisions and clearly communicate the consequences to the public. It is unavoidable that the American people will endure hardship while resolving the problem. The country can either impose sustained, significant spending cuts to regain control of the economy or continue on the path of increased spending. If unnecessary spending continues and revenue options are exhausted, the U.S. could eventually face the possibility of defaulting on its obligations. This scenario would severely destabilize global financial markets and undermine confidence in the U.S. dollar (Dickerson, 2024).

### ***The Two-Party System***

The Democratic and Republican agendas presented during the 2024 election cycle are actually far more similar than they appear, especially when viewed through tools like the political compass, which maps ideology beyond simple left-right labels. While the two parties try to present themselves as opposites, their core policy positions tend to overlap in many ways (Syropoulos, 2023). This is not a new phenomenon, as historical examples highlight how fluid the divide between the parties can be. Ronald Reagan spent much of his life as a Democrat before becoming the figurehead of modern conservatism as a Republican president. Similarly, Donald Trump was a Democrat for decades before shifting to the Republican Party (Cheney, 2016). These shifts suggest that the differences between the parties may be more about branding and political strategy than deeply opposed philosophies.

The two-party structure strengthens this dynamic by keeping the political arena tightly constrained. With restrictive ballot rules, limited media access, and funding disadvantages, smaller parties rarely gain the foothold needed to influence national conversations. This creates an environment where only a narrow set of priorities and policy approaches reach voters, even when many Americans hold views outside that spectrum. In turn, the major parties continue to define the boundaries of acceptable debate, leaving little opportunity for new perspectives to challenge entrenched political norms.

Since the 1970s, the country's foreign and domestic policies have increasingly reflected the priorities of financial elites and major corporations, largely through campaign contributions and other avenues of influence. At the same time, the two-party system has narrowed political options for voters, pushing people toward one side or the other and leaving little room for a middle path. This dynamic helps keep the broader system stable, as donors tend to support candidates who align with their interests and maintain the political order that benefits them.

## 2024 Presidential Candidates

Kamala Harris and Donald Trump have spent significant time as influential leaders within the U.S. government, which will help to understand how the candidates will respond to the foreign and domestic concerns. Although serving as vice president does not forecast how Harris will set her own policies as the leader of the country, her rhetoric and actions concerning Biden administration policies do offer insight into her likely approach. Trump's first four years as president went very much against the grain of the status quo, as there was constant conflict with lawmakers, world leaders, and the media, which made it difficult, if not impossible, for him to achieve his political goals.

The Biden-Harris administration's foreign policy was notably hawkish from the beginning, escalating U.S. involvement in the Russia–Ukraine conflict (Horton, 2024) and maintaining longstanding positions in the Israeli–Hamas crisis (Telhami, 2023). Immigration stands out as the Biden–Harris administration faced criticism for policies Republicans labeled as an “open border” approach, along with a “catch-and-release” policy that provided millions of illegal immigrant’s access into the U.S (Whitehouse, 2025). Furthermore, the administration showed little interest in addressing the national debt or confronting the plutocratic political and economic systems that were destroying the country's middle class (Antoni, 2024). Substantial changes in these areas would be unlikely under a Harris presidency. Her ability to stockpile \$1 billion in campaign contributions in a short period of time suggests a remarkable level of donor contributions, which would come with an expectation that she would continue many of the priorities set during the Biden–Harris administration.

Donald Trump's record as President provides a different example of how campaign promises do not translate into policy. He often boasted that no new wars began during his presidency and vowed to bring an end to what he viewed as unnecessary conflicts around the world (Trump, 2021). Many of Trump's presidential orders have been challenged in the courts, preventing action and enforcement. Although he frequently emphasized protecting the working class and ending foreign conflicts, his previous term demonstrated that many of his claims, particularly those regarding balancing the budget, were unrealistic (Croucher, 2019). Domestically, the economy was strong, with low inflation and steady growth until the breakdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Hilsenrath, 2020). Trump, being primarily a businessman, also showed no intention of taking on the corrupt central banking or corporate frameworks that underlie the U.S. economic system.

Harris and Trump greatly differ on cultural and “fringe” issues, which are often dramatically presented to the American people through the mainstream media. Media corporations are controlled by a handful of carefully selected aristocratic executives who have a direct interest in which candidate wins and create the narrative accordingly (Herman, 2008). These fringe narratives fuel intense public debate despite pertaining to a relatively small portion of the population. Many topics, such as transgender rights and LGBTQ+ policies, receive disproportionate attention in the mainstream media during election cycles. Being a democrat, Harris tends to take a strongly liberal left position on these issues, while Trump’s stance is traditional conservative (Pauly, 2024). These cultural debates fuel hate and division, drawing attention away from the policies and systems that are in dire need of reform, ultimately reinforcing a political environment where symbolic conflicts overshadow the most important policy issues.

The winning candidate ultimately faces the deeply entrenched plutocratic structure of American government. Candidates often run on bold promises meant to appeal to voters, yet once in office, they tend to align with the dominant interests that shape modern governance. Instead of empowering major reforms, the system largely protects the status quo (Hampson, 2016). Both Trump and Harris rely on networks of influential donors whose substantial contributions come with clear expectations. These wealthy individuals or corporations consistently supply a staggering amount of money into election cycles to ensure that laws and policies continue to reflect their preferences.

### **Trump is Victorious**

On November 6, 2024, Donald Trump won a decisive victory over Kamala Harris and became the forty-seventh President of the United States. With the inauguration of Trump’s second term, plutocracy is no longer confined to the realm of philosophy, as thirteen multibillionaires and

many more whose net worth exceeds \$ 100 million have been appointed or anointed into decision-making and/or governmental positions. These extremely wealthy and economically powerful actors surrounding the new administration raised many questions among the general public worldwide.

Throughout his campaign, Trump promoted his “20 core promises to Make America Great Again”. He viewed the win as a clear mandate to fulfill those commitments and moved quickly once in office. Many of the liberal cultural trends of recent years, which could be viewed as postmodern, particularly the blurring of gender definitions and the policies associated with them, have been rolled back. Issues surrounding men competing in women’s sports and certain aspects of women’s rights, which some argued had been weakened, were also returned to traditional standards. Trump also ordered the Department of Homeland Security to secure the southern border with Mexico (White House, 2025). Although every president has deported undocumented immigrants, his administration enforced a stronger policy in a way that drew criticism from mainstream media and concerned liberal groups, even though the actions themselves were not dramatically different from past administrations. (Baxter, 2021)

Trump faced familiar opposition as major media outlets, largely owned or influenced by liberal-leaning corporate interests, began shaping narratives aimed at undermining his ability to create policy (Mitchell, 2017). Reform remained out of reach as democrats leveraged the judicial branch and their influence in the media to slow or block many of Trump’s initiatives. A temporary initiative called “DOGE,” the Department of Government Efficiency, was launched to identify corruption and reduce financial waste across federal agencies. However, entrenched interests pushed back, and mainstream media outlets portrayed these efforts as extreme or misguided (Grayer, 2025). Trump introduced what he called his “big, beautiful bill,” which became a key

element in a standoff between the White House and Congress, and led to the longest government shutdown in American history (Gedeon, 2025).

Trump pushed for a quick resolution of ongoing wars, including the Russia–Ukraine conflict, but found the situation far more complex than it appeared during the campaign, considering Europe's role and the potential global impact on the U.S. dollar if the West were to accept defeat. While there is a feeling of improved stability in parts of the Middle East after the end of the recent Gaza war between the Israelis and Hammas, tensions between the U.S. and other countries of the world, such as Venezuela and China, suggest that the long-standing influence of the military industrial complex on the status quo of foreign policy is still intact (Lachter, 2025)

In a 1988 interview with Oprah Winfrey, Trump was asked if he would ever run for president. “I probably wouldn't, but I do get tired of seeing what's happening with this country, and if it got so bad, I would never want to rule it out totally... I can tell you one thing, this country would make one hell of a lot of money from those people that for 25 years have taken advantage.”, he said (Gonyea, 2017). Trump's intentions may still be in the best interest of the U.S., as he continues his version of “make America great again”. But even as the Republicans hold the trifecta of government power, issues are not being resolved. Trump's presence in national politics only polarizes liberal voters and lawmakers, making bipartisan cooperation nearly impossible. Democrat and liberal forces have used the federal courts to stop most changes he has attempted to make. This tactic only continues government gridlock and strengthens the forces of the plutocratic system. Presidential candidates in future elections will likely face the same foreign and domestic challenges because the financial institutions, bureaucratic structures, and political incentives are designed to maintain stability, therefore keeping the U.S. in the mess we're in.

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