

The Tariff Hustle: One Year After Liberation Day, Workers and Families Paid, Trump's Cronies Cashed In

President Donald Trump promised to make America affordable again on day one by bringing down inflation and lowering prices for families. He also pledged to revive American manufacturing, [saying that](#) "jobs and factories will come roaring back into our country." But one year after Trump's sweeping [Liberation Day tariffs](#), the data tells a starkly different story: fewer manufacturing jobs, shrinking investment in factory construction, and a bigger manufacturing trade deficit. At the same time, Trump's trade whiplash has created uncertainty for businesses and consumers. Companies have been forced to hit the brakes on investment and hiring, while American families foot the bill through pass-through costs and opportunistic corporate price gouging.

Trump's erratic tariff policies served as a vehicle for corporate corruption and graft, paid for by workers and families.

Trump's tariffs failed his own stated goals. President Trump promised that his tariffs would lead to a resurgence of American manufacturing, more jobs and economic growth, and lower prices, none of which have since materialized. Since "Liberation Day" on April 2, 2025:

- The United States has lost at least 89,000 American [manufacturing](#) jobs and the manufacturing trade deficit [deepened](#). Thousands of other blue-collar jobs – including nearly 124,000 in transportation and warehousing – have been [lost](#). Meanwhile, the unemployment rate remains elevated at 4.4% and is near its [highest levels](#) in four years.
- In response to Trump's erratic economic policies, spending on U.S. factory construction declined. Overall, full-year spending dropped by nearly \$260 billion compared with 2024, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau. After peaking at about \$250 billion in June 2024, manufacturing construction spending [fell](#) to \$202 billion by December 2025.
- American families, whose budgets are already squeezed too thin, have [had to pay](#) for tariff-induced price increases. While some [U.S. companies that paid tariffs](#) for imported goods [passed](#) that cost on to consumers, [other retailers](#) priced-gouged consumers under the cover of the expectation that tariffs would raise prices.

Behind those numbers lies an even more troubling story: While American families absorbed these costs, Trump was using tariff policy as a personal bargaining chip – trading tariff relief for personal gifts, favors, and political loyalty.

Trump used tariffs to reward or punish countries depending on whether they benefited him and his political allies:

- **Trump and his administration used tariffs as leverage to secure business deals that enriched him and his family:**
 - For instance, on Liberation Day, Trump imposed a 46% tariff on Vietnam, one of the highest rates for any country, which the administration said reflected the large and growing U.S. trade deficit with Vietnam. But just three months later in July, Trump reached an [agreement](#) to lower the tariffs to 20%.
 - To gain early negotiations, the Vietnamese government [agreed](#) to fast-track the permits for the construction of a highly lucrative \$1.5 billion golf complex owned by the Trump family. An approval process that would normally take years took only three months and [ignored](#) several required steps. Additionally, the Vietnamese government abruptly announced that it would [allow](#) Starlink, owned by Trump ally Elon Musk, to offer satellite internet services in the country. Lowering Vietnam's tariffs wasn't about benefiting Americans, it was about making Trump and his friends richer.
- **Corporate executives and foreign leaders lavished gifts on Trump in exchange for favorable deals:**
 - In August 2025, Apple CEO Tim Cook gave Trump a glass disc with a [24-karat gold stand](#) to commemorate a pledge to invest more in American manufacturing. Trump then announced that Apple would be exempt from semiconductor tariffs. During that event, Trump implied that companies who make large investments could also buy their way out of tariffs.
 - Later, Trump [lowered](#) Switzerland's tariffs from 39% to 15% just a few days after Swiss business leaders presented him with a personalized gold bar worth more than \$130,000 and a Rolex desk clock. One administration official [told](#) Axios, "It was tough to beat Apple, but the Swiss did it."
- **Trump used tariffs to help political allies and punish his enemies:**
 - Gifts of gold are not the only corrupt motivations driving Trump's tariff deal-making. Last July, Trump [imposed](#) a 50% tariff on Brazil, a country with which the United States has a trade surplus, just as Trump ally and former President Jair Bolsonaro was about to be arrested for an attempted coup. The White House [cited](#) the political persecution of Bolsonaro, waged by the current Brazilian Supreme Court, in the official reasoning to impose additional tariffs on Brazil. Americans paid the price for Trump's

international allies breaking the law, as coffee imported from Brazil [surged](#) up to 40% in price.

- In another move to protect allies, Trump [quadrupled](#) Argentina beef import quotas, angering his own base of farmers and ranchers, and gave the country a [\\$20 billion financial bailout](#) just days before the country's elections where Argentinian politician Javier Milei, Trump's top pick for president, was up for re-election.
- **Trump used tariff exemptions as a tool to reward or punish companies aligned with his political and business interests:**
 - **Lobbying firms [have made](#) more than \$14.6 million on tariff lobbying, nearly three times the previous record of \$5.3 million set in 2018.**
 - During the first Trump administration, even with a formal process for firms to be granted tariff exemptions, a later audit found firms with political donations to Republicans were [more likely](#) to be granted exemptions from tariffs. In his second term, exemptions are being [granted](#) based on personal connections behind closed doors to those favored by the president or able to hire lobbyists close to him. Meanwhile, small businesses that do not have the resources to bribe Trump or to buy the multi-million services of lobbyists, are [forced](#) to pass on tariff costs to consumers or even go out of business. Unsurprisingly, recent [polling](#) showed the majority of Americans do not trust or trust very little the Trump administration to prevent corruption in the tariffs exemption process.
 - **Big Tech leveraged Trump's susceptibility to donations and gifts.**
 - Big Tech's massive [donations](#) for Trump's inaugural fund were reflected by CEOs Mark Zuckerberg, Tim Cook, Jeff Bezos, and Elon Musk [prime seating](#). Big Tech CEOs have also [donated](#) to Trump's ballroom project and are often invited for White House events and dinners, where they publicly [praise](#) Trump.
 - Within weeks of Liberation Day tariffs hitting Big Tech, tariffs on smartphones, monitors and other important electronics for the industry were quickly [exempt](#). Trump even said the quiet part out loud, noting that he "[helped](#)" Apple's Tim Cook and his business. At that time, no other industry had [received](#) such a broad exemption and the White House has never provided information about why exempting this particular industry versus others would benefit Americans.

- Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick offered to [cut tariffs on steel](#) if European officials would roll back online privacy and anti-monopoly rules, offering to trade away U.S. manufacturing to help Big Tech.
 - Rather than implementing the previously-announced 100% tariffs on semiconductors, Trump ultimately [imposed](#) a much narrower 25% tariff on chips, a significant reversal of his campaign pledge to build up domestic microchip manufacturing. The exemptions Trump issued are expansive, with a big carve-out for chips that will be used in data centers and other favored industries (he also [announced](#) in August of last year that Apple would be exempt from the 100% tariff on semiconductor chips).
 - At a time when AI data centers [are increasing](#) utility bills for Americans across the country, Trump is choosing to protect the data center industry to benefit his Big Tech friends and help line the pockets of Lutnick. Lutnick's real estate company Newmark, which [was passed](#) to his son before Lutnick took office, recently announced that it had completed more than \$25 billion in data center deals. Lutnick's son will take a large cut in fees on each of these transactions.
- **Corporations are pocketing their exemptions and raising prices on consumers anyway:**
 - Pharmaceutical companies have [raised](#) prices on consumers this year despite an [exemption](#) deal to lower prices and invest in domestic manufacturing. Exemptions that arbitrarily benefit one company and industry over others can also harm competition, further raising prices for everybody. This is especially concerning for small businesses who have been [asking](#) without success for exemptions since Liberation Day.

A year after Liberation Day, it is clear Trump has used tariffs to help himself, his allies, and industries that backed him. Which companies got hit with tariffs and which got relief came down to politics – not policy. Instead of using leverage to reduce the U.S. trade deficit or boost domestic industries, Trump's tariff-relief trade agreements focused on winning favors from other governments for friendly corporations like Big Tech and Big Pharma. American families and workers – forced to foot bills for higher-priced essentials and weather uncertainty-induced job loss – are bearing the burden.