

Trump Did Not Flip on TikTok—Yet

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The TikTok logo is displayed outside TikTok social media app company offices in Culver City, Calif., on March 16, 2023. (Patrick T. Fallon/AFP via Getty Images)

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Commentary

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Former President Donald Trump shocked the nation on March 7—if all one reads is the [mainstream media](#).

He's good at that and seems to thrive on triggering his opponents. It keeps America paying attention and on its toes—or rocking back on its heels. As they say in show biz, all publicity is good publicity.

The latest Trump shocker is on TikTok.

“If you get rid of TikTok, Facebook and Zuckerschmuck will double their business,” he wrote on Truth Social, his social media company. “I don’t want Facebook, who cheated in the last Election, doing better. They are a true Enemy of the People!” His March 7 [post](#) got 42,400 likes.

President Trump famously [banned](#) TikTok by executive order in 2020. A judge barred the ban within a month. President Trump went further than the House bill at the time, saying he would not support the alternative of Microsoft, a U.S. company, buying TikTok.

President [Joe Biden](#) dropped President Trump’s ban in 2021. However, President Biden said he would sign the new bill if the Senate passed it.

Four days after his Truth Social post, CNBC asked President Trump if TikTok is a “[national security threat](#).” He replied, “I do believe it, and we have to very much admit we are protecting American people’s privacy and data rights.” That complicates the view that President Trump flipped on TikTok.

The former president justified his “flip” by saying a lot of young people like the app. He said he should have let Congress decide the issue, given TikTok’s popularity. That’s exactly what Congress is doing now, including with support from President Trump’s likely running-mate, Rep. [Elise Stefanik](#) (R-N.Y.), and other Trump Republicans. So either they didn’t get the memo, there’s a revolt in the ranks, or President Trump is not really against a ban. The latter seems most likely, given the evidence.

President Trump could be trying to appeal to young voters, get donations, promote his own social media company, further differentiate himself from President Biden, or any combination of the above. It’s hard to know this early in the game. However, the

conclusion that President Trump entirely flipped on TikTok is premature.

First, and despite his occasional flattery of Chinese leader Xi Jinping, President Trump is usually tougher on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) than Democratic presidents, most importantly through his institution of high tariffs on Chinese goods, which carried over into the Biden administration and is now explored as an option in Europe as well.

On March 14, Reuters broke news of a CIA influence [campaign](#) authorized by President Trump to keep China's top leaders "chasing ghosts." Such psychological warfare is rare for the United States after its frequent use during the Cold War against the Soviet Union. President Trump also authorized unprecedented offensive cyber ops against Beijing—for the first time, fighting fire with fire rather than relying solely on weaker defensive measures authorized by former President Barack Obama. Unlike President Biden, who [opened](#) a TikTok account during the Superbowl on Feb. 11, President Trump and his campaign still refuse to post there.

A careful read of what President Trump said about the TikTok bill is not an explicit, much less strong, stand against it. He simply used the issue to bash Facebook. The mainstream media, which loves to hate President Trump, made a TikTok mountain out of a Facebook molehill.

The bipartisan bill overwhelmingly passed by the House of Representatives on [March 13](#) is not an actual ban, though TikTok, the CCP, and others portray it this way. The bill requires the divestiture of TikTok from ownership by any company controlled by an adversary nation. Bytedance owns TikTok, and the CCP ultimately controls Bytedance. So to keep operating in the United States, the bill requires that ByteDance sell TikTok to an entity not controlled by a U.S. adversary.

In the case of TikTok, the country's fastest-growing social media app, allowing it to continue under the control of an adversary as powerful as the CCP is obviously an unprecedented and existential risk to the United States. Elected representatives would have to respond to rosy views of the CCP when the next generation of tweens finally starts voting after years of seeing the world through a biased [lens](#).

Already, [170 million](#) U.S. citizens use the app, which is 51 percent of the U.S. population. TikTokers, if allowed to grow in number, cannot be ignored by any aspirant to elected office. Eventually, they will be so powerful as to make a TikTok ban impossible. At that point, it is not hyperbole to say that TikTok would be able to increasingly influence American democracy, which would, therefore, be on an ineluctable slide toward the end of its existence.

This is why Beijing is so resistant to the sale of TikTok to an American company. The value to Beijing of TikTok's U.S. influence and the prospect of not only negating the U.S. threat to the CCP but leveraging U.S. power globally for the CCP's own ends is exponentially higher than the \$100 billion valuation of TikTok's U.S. operations. TikTok is not just America's fastest-growing social media company. It is no less than the key to the CCP's goal of [global hegemony](#).

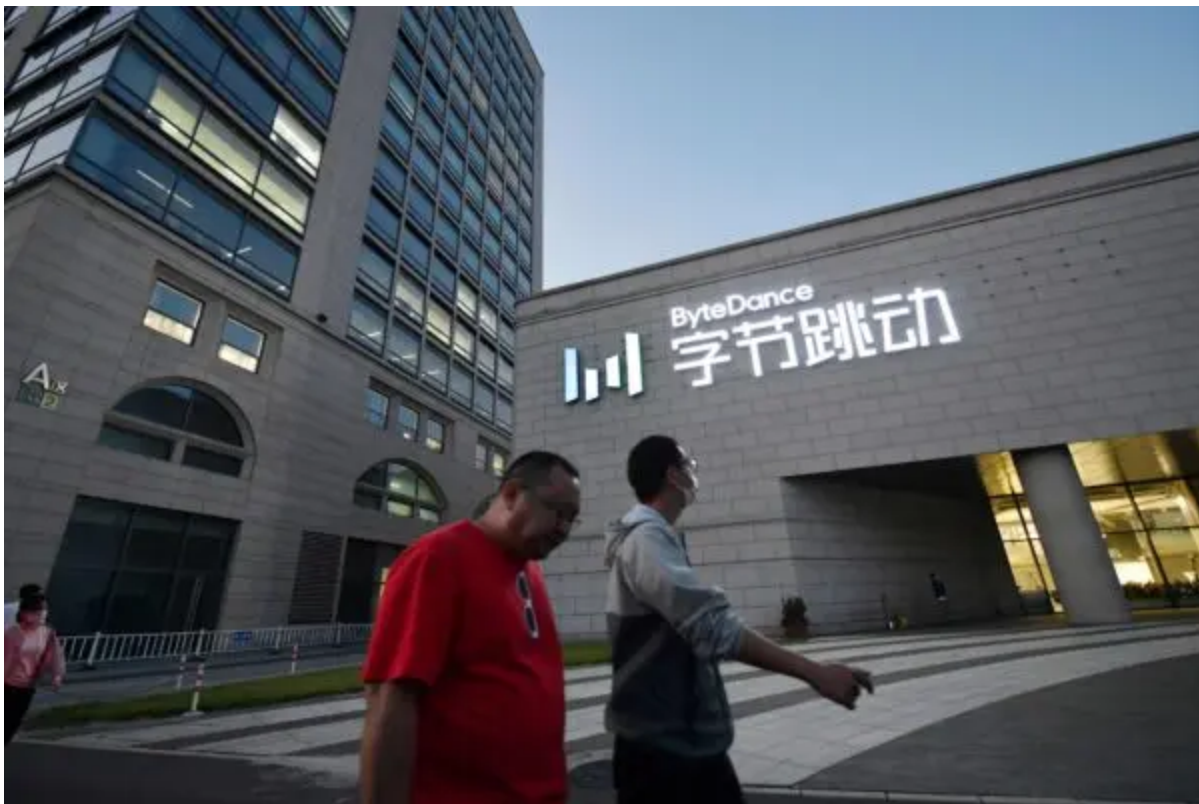
On March 7, TikTok sent a [push notification](#) to users on its app to call their congresspersons and oppose the bill. The notification asked for the user's five-digit zip code and then prompted the user to push a call button connecting to his representative's office in Washington. At least initially, there was no obvious way for the user to remove the notification without making the call, which resulted in thousands of children, teens, and parents calling Congress. Many hung up when put through, and a few threatened violence or suicide if TikTok was banned.

Congressional sponsors of the bill rightly said that TikTok's push notification proved their point: The CCP-controlled app had too much political influence in the United States. TikTok ignored this and sent another notification on [March 12](#).

Given the obvious and existential threat from TikTok to American democracy, two key questions arise from President Trump's "flip."

First, why did he do it? Some suspect that billionaire campaign donor [Jeff Yass](#), whom President Trump [met](#) six days before the "flip," influenced him. Mr. Yass reportedly owns [7 percent](#) of ByteDance, which is \$15 billion of Mr. Yass's \$41.8 billion fortune. Mr. Yass is 2024's biggest campaign donor at \$46.4 million and counting. He is a possible pick for Treasury secretary. Last year, Mr. Yass said, "Giving the government the power to ban apps and pick and choose between

competing apps is a huge restriction on phone freedom.” But he has not much objected to China’s bans on Western social media.



People walk past the headquarters of ByteDance, the parent company of video sharing app TikTok, in Beijing on Sept. 16, 2020. (Greg Baker/AFP via Getty Images)

Mr. Yass is a major donor to the Club for Growth, which hired [Kellyanne Conway](#), President Trump’s former counselor. She also publicly opposes banning the app. Ms. Conway [wrote](#) to Politico in a statement published on March 9 that banning the app would alienate its 170 million users, which is “draconian” and “ill-advised.” She added, “If you want to hold China accountable, why are you starting with TikTok, and not the origins of the COVID crisis, the fentanyl crisis, the persecution of Uyghurs, and the vulnerability of Taiwan.”

These are all important issues, but arguably secondary for Americans compared to TikTok’s political influence. Without elected officials fully independent of the CCP’s influence, we cannot effectively address these issues through the rule of law. The laws we pass on China will forever be ineffective if Beijing’s malign influence is not removed. This principle also applies to Mr. Yass’s influence on President Trump, if Mr. Yass represents the interests of Bytedance, controlled by the CCP.

Perhaps to that end, on March 14, the [House Oversight Committee](#) launched an investigation into “China’s ongoing efforts to infiltrate and influence the United States.” Godspeed.

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