

NEWS ANALYSIS

Trump Remakes America as Leader of the Brand

In attaching his name to buildings and programs while still president, Donald Trump is walking a path paved by conquerors and autocrats.



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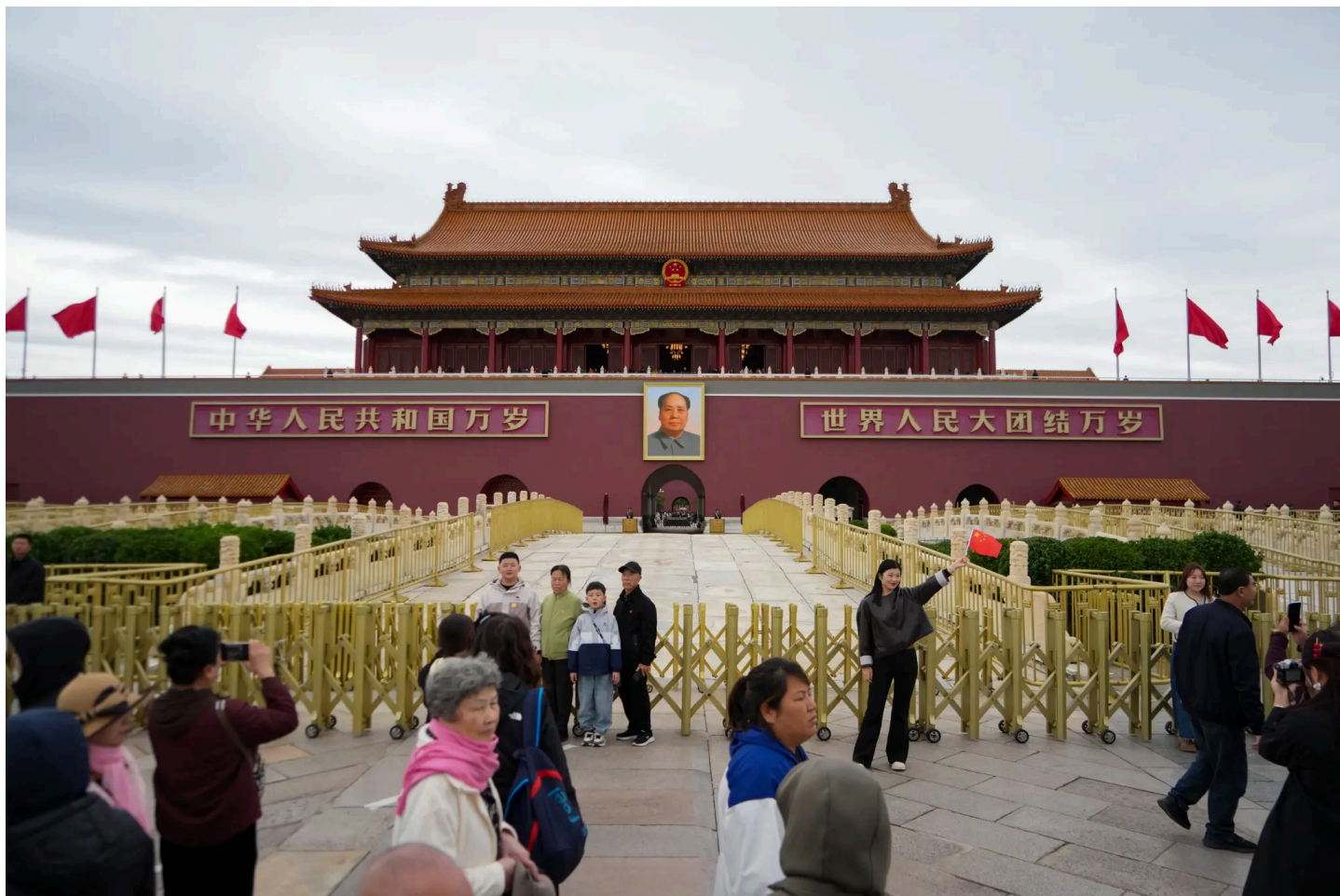
“What’s in a name?” William Shakespeare asked. Donald Trump’s answer: “ME!”

President Trump’s long love affair with his own name and likeness is peaking in his second term. There’s now the Donald J. Trump United States Institute of Peace and the Trump Kennedy Center, the performing arts venue. There are Trump Accounts for newborn babies and Trump Gold Cards for wealthy U.S. residency-seekers. Giant Trump portraits have been hung from select federal buildings and smaller ones will appear on national park passes. Coming soon: a so-called Trump class of battleships for the Navy and a Trump commemorative coin to celebrate the nation’s 250th anniversary.

This, of course, is the second chapter of Mr. Trump as eponymous self-promoter. In the first, he put his name on the projects he built as a developer. And in the 2000s, largely based on his fame as host of “The Apprentice,” he turned his name alone into a lucrative product, attaching it to steaks and wine and get-rich seminars and resorts and on and on. Not all ventures left satisfied customers behind — Trump University paid settlements to students claiming fraud — but he reaped millions by staying true to advice he posted on Twitter in 2013: “Remember, if you don’t promote yourself, then no one else will!”

That marketing strategy endures as he now pursues the golden legacy he believes he deserves. But as Mr. Trump normalizes norm-shattering, this self-aggrandizement, unheard-of in the history of the presidency, puts him in the company of conquerors and dictators.

Alexander the Great did it, naming around 70 cities after himself in the empire he assembled in the 4th century B.C. through military might and massacres. So did Stalin, the Soviet leader who renamed Tsaritsyn as Stalingrad while also naming other cities across his domain for himself. Napoleon rechristened the Louvre as the Musée Napoléon when he was in power. Plazas named Adolf-Hitler-Platz proliferated in Germany and territories occupied by the Nazis. Mao Zedong’s cult of personality was all-inclusive, including his giant portrait overlooking Tiananmen Square and his “Little Red Book” of sayings that was required reading (and memorization) across China.



A giant portrait of Mao Zedong hangs in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

The common move for leaders inclined to such self-aggrandizement is to name spaces and structures after themselves. The former ruler of Turkmenistan went an audacious step further, once naming a chunk of time — an entire month — after himself.

Saparmurat Niyazov, the dictator who led the former Soviet republic from 1991 to 2006, first gave himself the title Turkmenbashi, meaning the father of the Turkmen, and then applied it to January, too. (Mr. Nyazov also renamed April for his mother and October for one of his books.)

Of course, all leaders want lasting recognition. In the United States, past presidents have raised money for elaborate presidential libraries documenting their administrations.

“It’s about fame, and fame is immortality,” said Maoz Azaryahu, an emeritus professor of cultural geography at the University of Haifa who has studied the political and historical significance of naming streets and other public spaces.

But there is a clear line between leaders memorialized after death or departure from office, and those who impose their names while in power (or get loyalists to do it). “In the 20th century, it’s associated with totalitarian rulers,” he said. “It seems to me that such efforts at self-aggrandizing through self-commemoration offend notions of good taste in democratic-liberal societies.”



A statue of Saparmurat Niyazov, the dictator who led Turkmenistan from 1991 to 2006. Mr. Niyazov once named a month after himself. Natalia Kolesnikova/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

This does not seem to concern Mr. Trump, whose hunger for public displays of adoration is well known. Consider, for example, the ritualized slathering of praise during cabinet meetings.

What might be a concern, though, is the reckoning that often happens when mortality catches up with the search for immortality. The Musée Napoléon returned to just the Louvre. Stalingrad is now Volgograd. Hitler's plazas died with the man. After all, just a couple of keystrokes of history separate famous from infamous.

A happier ending to the desperate search for fame can be found in the 1954 movie "It Should Happen To You."

A young out-of-work model named Gladys Glover, played by Judy Holliday, comes to Manhattan "to try and make a name for myself." She rents a large billboard displaying only her name on Columbus Circle, across from where the Trump International Hotel & Tower now stands. Eventually her name graces multiple city billboards and people notice. They clamor for her autograph. Television covers her. An agent soon has her pitching soap, cigarettes and weight-loss drinks.

When the agent gets the military to put her name, not on a class of warships but on an airplane, she awakens to the hollowness of fame. She realizes she doesn't deserve her name on a military plane. The troops, not Gladys Glover, are the heroes.

Life, she tells her agent, "isn't just making a name; it's making a name stand for something even on one block, instead of for nothing all over the world." It's a line her frustrated suitor, played by Jack Lemmon, delivers early in the movie. Now they reconnect as she chooses the true love of one person over the adoration of the crowd.



The actress Judy Holliday playing Gladys Glover in the 1954 film "It Should Happen To You," in which Gladys discovers the hollowness of fame. Columbia/Kobal Collection, via Film Society Lincoln Center

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