



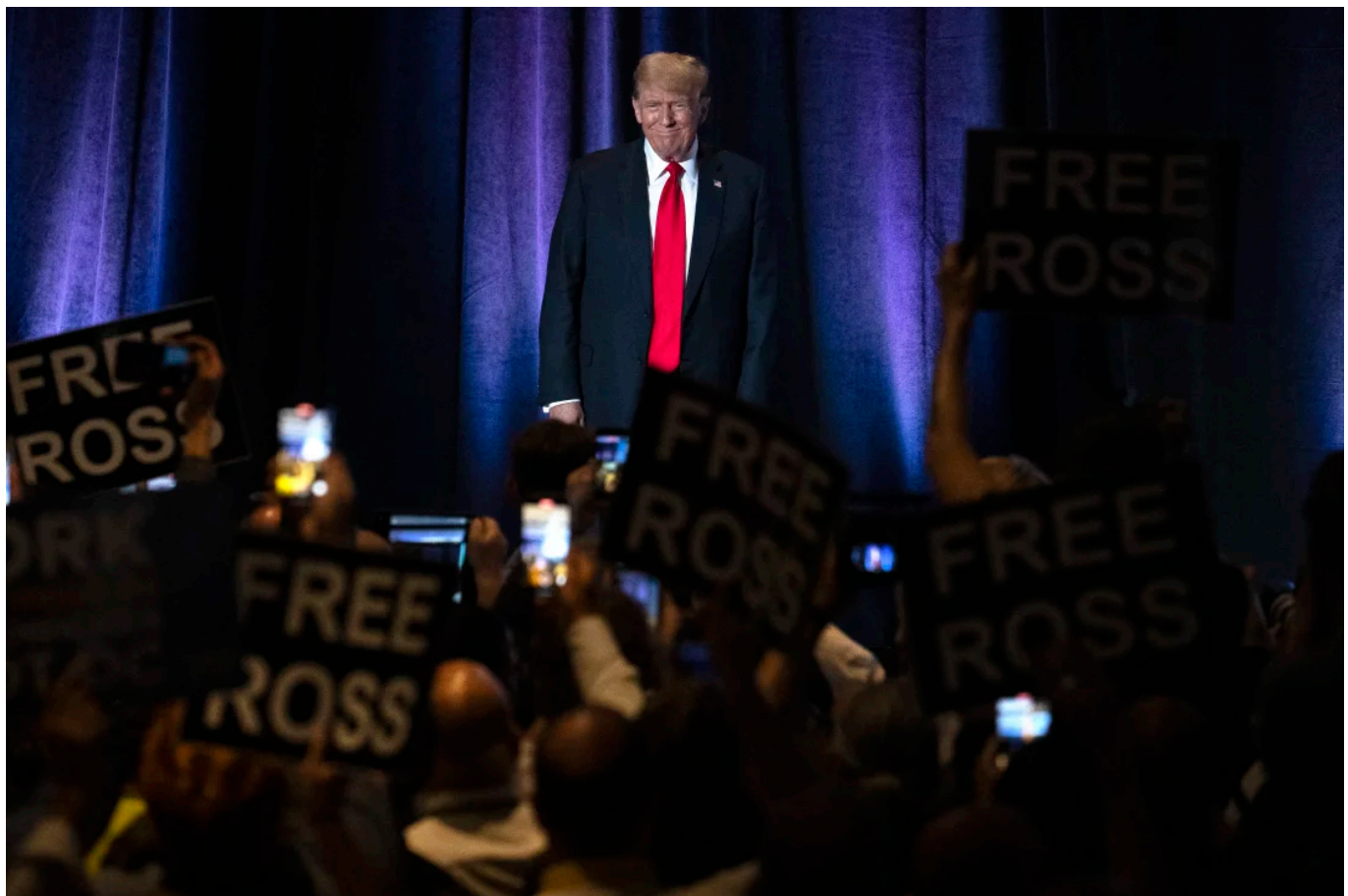
POLITICS

Trump pardons dark web marketplace creator Ross Ulbricht

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Jenna McLaughlin



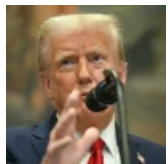
People hold up signs reading "Free Ross" as Donald Trump arrives to address the Libertarian National Convention in Washington, D.C., on May 25, 2024. Ross Ulbricht, the founder of the online marketplace Silk Road, was sentenced to life in prison in 2015.

Jim Watson/AFP via Getty Images

President Trump fulfilled a campaign promise to Libertarian supporters on his second day back in office by pardoning the former creator and owner of an underground e-commerce website known for drug trafficking.

Ross Ulbricht, also known as "Dread Pirate Roberts," operated the anonymous digital marketplace known as Silk Road between 2011 and 2013, when law enforcement shut the site down and arrested him at a California public library.

"I just called the mother of Ross William Ulbricht to let her know that in honor of her and the Libertarian Movement, which supported me so strongly, it was my pleasure to have just signed a full and unconditional pardon of her son, Ross," Trump posted to his Truth Social site on Tuesday. "The scum that worked to convict him were some of the same lunatics who were involved in the modern day weaponization of government against me. He was given two life sentences, plus 40 years. Ridiculous!"



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Trump defends his decision to pardon January 6 rioters

At the time of his sentencing in San Francisco in 2015, Ulbricht was 31 years old. He was convicted of distributing narcotics, engaging in a continuing criminal enterprise, conspiring to commit computer hacking, and conspiring to create fake identities and launder money. He was sentenced to life in prison.

Meanwhile, the Justice Department pursued charges against Ulbricht's compatriots who claimed to have committed five murders on his behalf, though the government could never prove those murders actually took place.

In an indictment, U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara described Silk Road as a meeting place for criminals hoping to "buy and sell illegal drugs and other illicit goods and services anonymously and outside the reach of law enforcement."



LAW

Trump offers long-promised pardons to some 1,500 January 6 rioters

He also described it as "the most sophisticated and extensive criminal marketplace on the internet" at the time. He alleged Ulbricht made tens of millions of dollars through the site. Law enforcement went to great lengths to investigate and apprehend Ulbricht and his supporters, including by infiltrating the site and seizing a server in Iceland.

Ulbricht's early writings on the ideas behind Silk Road emphasized his desire to create a free and anonymous marketplace, to "use economic theory as a means to abolish the use of coercion and aggression amongst mankind," according to a public LinkedIn post. In order to access the site, users had to use anonymity software called Tor and pay with Bitcoin, a cryptocurrency whose transactions are all recorded online.

Those principles are aligned with the Libertarian political philosophy, which generally advocates for the protection of individual liberties.



POLITICS

4 takeaways from Trump's second inaugural address

Libertarian activists have supported Ulbricht's release for years, organizing around the banner "Free Ross" and painting Ulbricht as a young, "peace-loving" former Eagle Scout who made mistakes, rather than "a dangerous kingpin," according to his supporters' webpage. They argue his life sentence is an example of government overreach.

President Trump has been amenable to Libertarian concerns. He promised to commute Ulbricht's sentence during the Libertarian National Convention in Washington in May of 2024, and has gotten close to so-called "techno libertarians," like Tesla CEO Elon Musk. Trump has also publicly promised to make the United States the "crypto capital of the planet," propping up prominent Bitcoin users and supporters.

Ulbricht, for his part, took to social media to celebrate Trump's election victory and remind him of his promise. One week after the election, he wrote on X that he "can finally see the light of freedom at the end of the tunnel."