# Trump’s golden Oval Office and El Salvador’s contested gold mining ban highlight environmental and political tensions



In a stark display of contrasting symbolism and political posturing, Donald Trump’s return to the White House has been marked both by a high-profile meeting with El Salvador’s President Nayib Bukele and an extravagant redecoration of the Oval Office in gold. The meeting, held on Monday, drew attention for its tense content and the personal styles of the two leaders, who have both referred to themselves as dictators despite leading countries with democratic institutions.

During the Oval Office meeting, attention was drawn to the case of Kilmar Ábrego García, a 29-year-old Salvadoran father of three who was wrongfully deported to El Salvador’s Cecot prison—a massive and notorious detention centre. Despite media inquiries into Ábrego García’s case, both Trump and Bukele deflected responsibility. The pair not only refused to engage seriously with the issue but also made light of further deportations and levied casual slanders against Ábrego García. It is notable that Ábrego García was not, and has never been alleged to be, a terrorist, which further accentuated the controversy surrounding his deportation.

Simultaneously, Trump’s personal aesthetic at the White House has become a story in its own right. Since returning to power, he has adorned the Oval Office with extensive gilt décor, transforming the traditionally stately room into something reflecting his signature flamboyance. The room is reportedly laden with golden knickknacks, gold-framed paintings, ornate gold mouldings, and even gold cherubic figures imported from his Mar-a-Lago estate. The golden embellishments extend to the furniture, with gold filigree decorations on walls and the fireplace and a gold seal on the Diet Coke summoning button on Trump’s desk. These decorations were crafted by John Icart, a cabinetmaker based in South Florida, although replicas of similar pieces can be found at relatively low prices online.

Critics have weighed in on this decorative overhaul. Robin Givhan, critic-at-large for The Washington Post, described the redecorated Oval Office as evoking "insecurity and petulance," suggesting that beneath the ostentation there lies a deeper and potentially troubling symbolism. Of particular concern is the use of ormolu—a historical gilding technique involving mercury to affix gold leaf to objects. Its use in decoration is not just a matter of style but carries a toxic legacy: ormolu was banned in France in 1830 due to mercury’s severe health risks, which historically shortened the lives of artisans who employed it. The environmental consequences of gold mining remain serious today, with estimates that the industry contributes 38% of global human-induced mercury emissions, alongside other harmful chemicals like cyanide and arsenic. These pollutants affect millions worldwide, leading to chronic mercury poisoning and environmental degradation.

El Salvador, under Bukele’s leadership, stands at a crossroads concerning gold mining. The country was the first to ban metal mining in 2017, a move backed by years of environmental and Indigenous activism aimed at curtailing the destructive operations of international mining corporations. The prohibition was a significant victory for those opposing the exploitation and environmental harm caused by mining industries that have historically enriched foreign interests at the expense of local communities.

However, this stance appears to be shifting. Bukele, who assumed office in 2019 with promises focused on advancing cryptocurrency rather than traditional resource extraction, has recently voiced opposition to the mining ban. In late 2024, he declared that El Salvador sits on gold reserves potentially worth $3 trillion and, with congressional support, overturned the historic ban. Bukele claims any future mining will be conducted sustainably and without mercury contamination, although environmental groups remain poised to contest these assurances to protect El Salvador’s waterways from pollution.

Scientific perspectives provide a sobering counterpoint to Bukele’s optimism. Stephen Lezak, a researcher from the University of Oxford and author of "The Case Against Gold Mining," highlights the immense environmental cost of gold extraction, noting that open-pit mining produces over four metric tonnes of waste for every gram of gold recovered. Lezak argues that when assessed holistically, the environmental and health costs render gold mining unjustifiable, likening its ecological devastation to that caused by coal mining. Unlike fossil fuels, however, gold does not serve critical practical needs such as energy production; only a small fraction is used in technology or medicine, while most is dedicated to jewellery and wealth storage.

Lezak further contextualises gold as a symbol of human fascination with shiny objects throughout history, often linked to conquest, exploitation, and suffering. "You can tell the story of a lot of human history as a story of men in power wanting shiny objects, whether it’s the Spanish looking for silver in the Andes or European Americans looking for gold in California and Alaska," he explained. "History does not look back favorably on those leaders. I wish the president had a little more perspective," Lezak added, directly addressing Trump’s ostentatious display of gold.

The Guardian’s account underscores how the intertwined themes of political leadership, environmental policy, historical legacy, and personal symbolism converge in this moment—both in the literal gold of the Oval Office and the figurative gold of El Salvador’s contested natural resources. The story reflects broader global tensions around the extraction of wealth and its impact on populations and environments, as well as the use of power and imagery by contemporary leaders.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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2. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2025/04/14/remarks-by-president-trump-and-president-bukele-of-el-salvador-in-a-joint-press-availability/> - This official White House transcript confirms the meeting between Trump and Bukele, including their mutual praise and the political tone of the meeting, aligning with the description of their personal styles and political posture.
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