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Today’s *New Republic* is wrestling with the same fundamental questions: how to build a more inclusive and democratic civil society, and how to fight for a fairer political economy in an age of rampaging inequality. We also face challenges that belong entirely to this age, from the climate crisis to Republicans hell-bent on subverting democratic governance.

We’re determined to continue building on our founding mission.”

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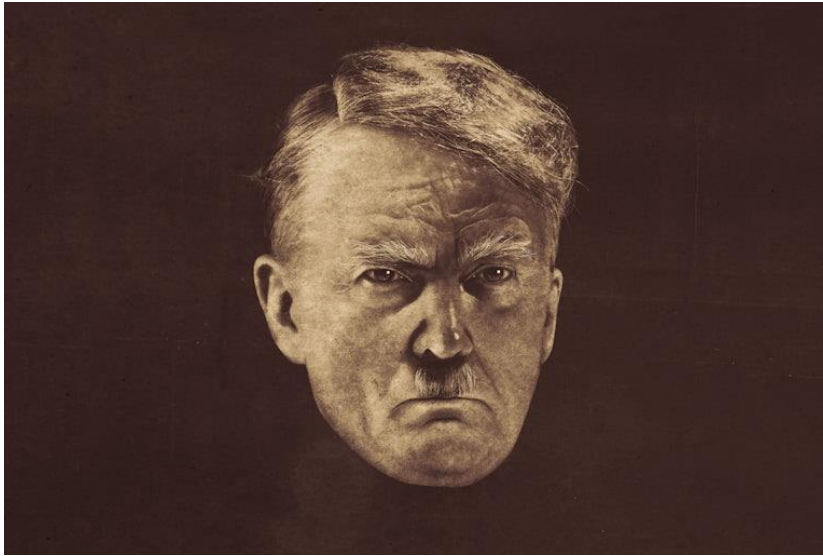
[consistency of their content.](#) They are the best of the best...the journalists of record. Over the past decade, these journalists have maintained global coverage of key issues relevant to Colorado and Douglas County- Trumpism, militant ideological politicians, radical evangelicals and the influence of dark money, among others. **Essentially, JSNE counts on their stubborn focus in uncovering and tying right-wing corruption and ideologues.**

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THE NEW REPUBLIC

Ideas. Influence. Impact.



What American Fascism Would Look Like

It can happen here. And if it does, here is what might become of the country.

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[Michael Tomasky/](#)

May 16, 2024

IT CAN HAPPEN

Yes, That's Right: American Fascism by Michael Tomasky

Why waste time debating the extent of Trump's fascism when we ought to be fighting it instead?

"No, no," some admonish: "Don't get carried away. Sure, Donald Trump is dangerous, perhaps uniquely so.

But ... fascist? The need to label him a fascist says more about the labeler than about Trump." This argument has sprung from certain quarters of the right, which was to be expected, but it has also sprouted from the left, where a point of view has arisen that the "hysterical" invocation of the f-word is as much a danger as Trump.

We have trouble seeing the hysteria. We chose the cover image, based on a well-known 1932 Hitler campaign poster, for a precise reason: that anyone transported back to 1932 Germany could very, very easily have explained away Herr Hitler's excesses and been persuaded that his critics were going overboard. After all, he spent 1932 campaigning, negotiating, doing interviews—being a mostly normal politician. But he and his people vowed all along that they would use the tools of democracy to destroy it, and it was only after he was given power that Germany saw his movement's full face.

Today, we at *The New Republic* think we can spend this election year in one of two ways. We can spend it debating whether Trump meets the nine or 17 points that define fascism. Or we can spend it saying, "He's damn close enough, and we'd better fight."

We unreservedly choose the latter course. And so we have assembled herein some of our leading intellectual historians of fascism; a member of the fourth estate who learned firsthand what the Trump lash feels like; a leading expert on civil-military relations; a great Guatemalan American novelist with a deep understanding of immigrants' lives; one of our most incisive cultural critics; and a man with all-too-

real experience in living under a notorious authoritarian regime. The scenarios they describe are certainly grim. We dare you to say, after reading these pieces, that they are impossible.



[Kian Tajbakhsh/](#)

Kian Tajbakhsh, a presidential fellow at Columbia University's Committee on Global Thought and adjunct professor at its School of International and Public Affairs, teaches international relations and has written *Creating Local Democracy in Iran: State Building and the Politics of Decentralization*.

May 16, 2024

BLOCK BY BLOCK

A Cowed Normality by Kian Tajbakhsh

On daily life in a fascist America

“Would you describe the Iranian regime as ‘Islamofascist’?”

I hesitated before responding. The term [was a favorite](#) of the neoconservatives at the time, which was a year after Operation Iraqi Freedom began. It was a way of ginning up a possible new U.S. military adventure in Iran. But the question was from my former professor, a man I liked and respected, Ira Katznelson. Not a neocon. I had dropped by while visiting New York after living for a few years in Iran, and I knew he wanted my honest opinion.

I quickly ran a fascism checklist. Political power concentrated in a single (clerical) supreme leader—check. A single universalist and imperialistic political ideology brooking no heterodoxy or dissent—check. A police state using paramilitaries and vigilante groups to enforce a moral and social order—check. The forced integration of societal institutions into the state—courts, parties, media, professional associations, etc., reminiscent of Nazi Gleichschaltung. And most important of all, the self-righteous use of violence and coercion against opponents and dissidents—check. The leading scholar of Islamic Iran, Saïd Arjomand, had compared the Islamic Republic of Iran to religious versions of fascism in Romania or Brazil. Arguably, Iran is more like Mussolini's small-f fascism than the genocidal big-F Germany variety.

So, I told Ira, yes, it's a plausible descriptor. But if it was a warning, I didn't heed it. I could have remained in New York, where I had lived two decades of my adult life. Instead, I returned to Iran, country of my birth, which I had left as a child. I believed fervently I might help make Iran less fascist, and as I worked toward that goal, I built a life, with a wife and a daughter. Then I was [imprisoned](#) as a dissident in 2009. I was one of the Iranian American hostages [freed](#) in a landmark diplomatic exchange as part of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. This event opened the path for my wife, daughter, and me to relocate to the United States, though it also imposed the sobering condition that I must accept permanent exile from Iran.

Returning to the United States in 2016, like Rip Van Winkle, I found myself in a country that in many ways I didn't recognize, and I found new reasons to worry about illiberal politics. On the left, the Black Lives Matter movement spoke a language that was entirely new to me; the more extreme articulations of anti-Americanism sounded uncomfortably close to the grievances of my former Islamist jailers. I had hoped to leave the world of ideologues, sometimes strident and self-righteous and making claims wildly disconnected from empirical reality, behind me in Tehran.

And on the right, oh boy. I was shocked by statements I never expected to hear in a Western democracy. I couldn't believe my ears as candidate Donald Trump's rhetoric [trashed](#) basic democratic norms. Fighting for those same norms had led to my imprisonment in Iran. And then in 2020 and 2021, Trump's actions seeking to [overturn the election](#) turned rhetoric to horrifying action.

The danger signs have only intensified. Trump's popularity debunks the "Republicans want Trumpism without Trump" explanation, showing instead a powerful cult following. Trump's [pledge](#) to pardon the January 6 "hostages" exposes his endorsement of political violence.

Seeing the continuation of many terrifying possibilities, I find myself contemplating a hard question, one I asked myself often of Islamo-fascist Iran, and that we may be forced, come next January, to ask of Trump's America: How do so many endure life under such an obviously oppressive regime?

History shows most people manage to live under such conditions. By all accounts, even in Nazi Germany, for most of the population not officially persecuted, everyday life could be quite normal, even if many knew about the concentration camps. Iranians know that their country [discriminates](#) legally against religious minorities and women as second-class citizens and rejects in principle political and ideological pluralism, and a large number would likely prefer it were different, but most do not think or talk much about it.

Of course there are exceptions, like the young women and men who protested forced veiling in Iran's first feminist [uprising](#) in 2022 and won a fragile victory, although the shift was minor and thousands of the protesters [were](#) imprisoned or killed. But many Iranians live full personal and professional and rich social lives; even many women who, if they conform to the [mandatory veil](#) in public, are free to serve as doctors, engineers, academics, managers, sports champions, business owners, and even politicians.

I believe there are many reasons for this. First, everyday life is much more important for most people on the planet than ideas or political principles or even politics. Most people would prefer to live under a system they can trust, to be free from arbitrary arrest, and to feel proud to be a member of that system. But most people also want to be left alone to focus on family and children—which is hard enough—and live in an environment that enables that. In my experience, streets and public spaces in Tehran are clean and safe and orderly—much more than, say, New York City, where I live. Comparing the two makes me cringe.

Paradoxically, the regime's traditionalistic conservatism leads it to uphold two institutions that thwart its own totalitarian reach but support a positive everyday life: the family and private property. Traditional Islamic jurisprudence includes strong private protections. Homeownership [is common](#) in Iran, and personal wealth is protected and consumed in ways that the regime finds hard to control. In these homes, there is generally refuge. The norms of the Islamic regime highly value maintaining the traditional family, so the government does not interfere in families. Certainly, patriarchal norms are far from ideal, and the government's hands-off approach no doubt exacerbates the serious problems of domestic violence, especially in poorer and less educated households. But, by the same token, the government cannot force those who reject the Islamist lifestyle to practice the norms; strong, cohesive extended families and neighborly support systems provide a private parallel universe in which the politicized ideological norms of the regime can be violated. At home, every message haranguing the populace to adhere to the regime's Islamist patriarchal and political values can be ignored. The regime's indoctrination in schools and workplaces can be neutralized in the home, and individuals can, as Vaclav Havel put it, "live in truth."

Iran also has achieved a relatively high standard of living via significant government programs and [subsidies](#) for basics, including education, health care, and fuel. There are plenty of government jobs for the secular elite and middle-class professionals that offer job security, perks, and, thanks to large revenues from oil and gas exports, low taxes. This fact probably explains most of the toleration of the quasi-totalitarian political system and discriminatory social system.

Iran [is indeed](#) a police state, in that security services operate with near impunity. But there is an absence of the pervasive sense of terror and surveillance that was present in, say, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Stalin's Russia, or East Germany with its Stasi. I am not sure how the regime achieves this, but it does. The vast majority go about their daily lives in a kind of cowed normality. There is a Persian genius of displaying grace under pressure, cultivated over the decades.

Cowed normality, to be sure, is not an appealing state. But Americans concerned about rising authoritarianism in our own country may have reason to hope that it, rather than something worse, could be the fate of many, and we are already becoming accustomed to it.

Contemplating this future, I think of my conversation with Katznelson—and a strange moment just before my release from Iran, in my last interrogation. "When do you think the United States will collapse?" my interrogator asked, completely seriously. I laughed inside at his wishful thinking even as I feared that a wrong answer might cost me my imminent freedom. I tried to give an answer that would appease him but not sound like a lie, and I suppose I must have succeeded.

I said to him, as I believed then and still do now, that American society suffers serious fractures, but it's not going to collapse anytime soon and will probably remain the preeminent superpower for at least the next century. But perhaps my interrogator would rejoice to know that, only a few years after we last spoke, I would be reading [How Democracies Die](#), Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's book about the Trump administration, and shuddering with recognition. (He would certainly also be amazed and delighted by the discord resulting from the often ugly and intolerant pro-Palestine protests on U.S. college campuses, including recent ones at Columbia, where I teach.) In the mid-1970s, the Iranian middle class could not have imagined that their modernizing, prosperous country could fall under the total control of a medieval

clerical dictatorship. And this unimaginable system is still going strong almost half a century later. Perhaps the Iranian intelligence services were following the apparent polarization and the fracturing of the United States in 2016, and perhaps they were on to something. But because I've seen and lived under a quasi-totalitarian regime, I hold a high bar in contemplating the dangers facing America. A few mob riots, dirty tricks around elections, and intemperate rhetoric are bad, but they are not the genuine article.

Still, America is the only country I have left. My heart sinks as I think of living in another authoritarian state.

For me, the question of the so-called [Muslim ban](#) is an intimate one, as Trump's policy sharply reduced the number of immigrant visas to Iranians (and to those in several other Muslim majority countries).

Trump has [said](#) he wishes to reinstitute and even expand it if reelected. It's a worry, because my extended family in Iran and in the United States includes observant Muslims. My wife and daughter traveled to Iran a number of times during the ban, and they experienced no hassles on returning into the United States, because they are dual U.S.-Iran nationals. But the family reunification application for my sister-in-law and her family to come to the United States has been in process for *almost 20 years*, with still some years to go; Trump's travel ban [exacerbated](#) an already broken and backlogged system. And the next iteration might be worse, creating an atmosphere of hostility that would certainly impact us and whole swaths of vulnerable migrants from Muslim countries wishing to apply to enter the United States either as immigrants, refugees, students, or tourists.

More broadly, it would also affect U.S. standing in the world, inflaming Muslim sentiments at home and abroad, harming the cause of Western liberalization throughout the Middle East. Trump's bluster and demagoguery, painting America as a victim of free-riding scofflaws, are often so misinformed and myopic, and so denigrating of the achievements of the post-1945 liberal international order, that I fear a return to the tensions that preceded and precipitated the horrors of World War II. Under U.S. leadership, cooperation between countries has brought an unprecedented level of peace and prosperity to the people all over the world and an ability to tackle global problems that countries will find it hard to do alone. Losing that is both devastating and dangerous.

Daily life for me and my family would be lived under the shadow of the unraveling of the achievements of global cooperation, freedom of travel, and international solidarity. We are seeing the reemergence of Cold War frontiers. If Iran joins Russia, China, and North Korea in some Eurasian bloc behind a new wall, my child's and my students' world will shrink and be a less rich place to grow. These gears are already in motion, and Trumpian foreign policy could make it worse. Even if Trump's bluster has in some cases acted as the necessary bromide to shake up rigid, inefficient systems—nudging NATO countries to increase their defense spending and the real achievement of the Abraham Accords, or bringing necessary attention to China and to the southern border—Team Trump's threats to the Western world order might very well reduce rather than increase security and prosperity of the American homeland.

Many Americans lack several of the advantages that help Iranians be more resilient in the face of their dictatorship. One is safe and calm neighborhoods where everyday life unfolds. I'm not that happy with the consequences of the progressive urban agenda in cities like New York for ordinary middle-class people like me. From my vantage, daily life is generally less affordable, less clean, less efficient, less

safe, less orderly, and altogether less pleasant in New York City than in Tehran—so much so that fully half the population [wishes](#) to leave.

But there is a frighteningly imaginable scenario of things getting even worse in America. The chasm between the world views of left and right during the first Trump administration, especially in summer 2020, has not closed. Ronald Brownstein at *The Atlantic* has [argued](#) that Trump’s promised policies toward “blue cities and states could create the greatest threat to the nation’s cohesion since the Civil War.” Trump might seek to use federal authority, including military forces such as the National Guard, to deport millions of undocumented migrants, round up homeless people, fight crime, or quell protests—in short, to [make war](#) on Blue America. There could be actual standoffs between local police and National Guardsmen.

Former Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter’s prediction of “chaos, confusion,” and “massive demonstrations” in the face of such attacks is plausible. As an urbanist, I fear the urban “doom loop” of ever faster declining and failing cities, greater crime and disorder, and loss of services for cities that are recovering. It would scar cities and American society for years to come. Daily life in struggling cities would become harder. I would leave New York, and many others would, too, and an important part of American life would atrophy.

Those with money will retreat even more into their private residences, workplaces, and cars, exacerbating social divides. Many Americans lack Iran’s advantage in a strong and large familial and community support system. A Trump protectionist economic agenda would likely slow down economic growth and opportunity, and the many losers in the economy would suffer. America’s labor market, though more flexible and efficient, offers fewer employment protections compared to Iran’s rigid and inefficient government-dominated economy. The country’s population will polarize even more into very rich and very poor.

I hate to give any theoretical pleasure to the intelligence officer who asked me when I thought the United States would collapse. But here I am contemplating unfathomable future scenarios. If the worst comes to be, and democratic liberalism begins to fray in America, daily life will always go on, as it did under the worst regimes in history. But ultimately, I fear, in daily life Americans are not going to be as resilient to fascism as Iranians are, for all the reasons I spelled out. We’re going to live through it, but it’s going to be harder on us.

Yet, in the contrast I’ve drawn lies an ironic twist: The very resilience of Iranians—or any people—living under authoritarian rule inadvertently nourishes the regime’s longevity. Conversely, the lower tolerance of Americans suggests a dual-edged fate: a quicker uprising in the face of tyranny, or, should the malevolent forces prevail, an arduous struggle to endure. This is the profound insight that Czeslaw Milosz recognized in the human condition under tyranny: It is not the keen intellect that ignites rebellion, but the visceral revulsion of those who can stomach it no more.



[Maureen Corrigan/](#)

Maureen Corrigan, who is the book critic for the NPR program *Fresh Air*, is a professor of English at Georgetown University.

May 16, 2024

EMPTY SHELVES

A Right-Wing Counter-Hegemony by Maureen Corrigan

On culture in a fascist America

To speculate on what the future of American culture might look like in a second Trump presidency, we must consider the past: the formative New York and educational years of Donald Trump himself. By a curious turn of fate, the young Donald and I share a birthplace and, generally speaking, an education at the same institutions of higher learning. I can't pretend to know the influence our common background has on his attitude toward the arts, but I can make some informed guesses by contrasting Trump's journey to my own. To understand Trump and the cues his base takes from him, we need to see him as the anti-New York New Yorker: intellectually incurious and leery of the crowded streets of the crown city of cosmopolitan difference in a nation that mythologizes rural communities of sameness.

Trump, a Protestant by birth if not interest, ecumenically [began](#) his college career in 1964 at Fordham University, a Jesuit institution in the Bronx. Nine years later, when I—a fellow Queens native, but one from a more “aspirational” working-class neighborhood than Trump's own—entered Fordham as an undergraduate, theology was still a required course along with English, philosophy, and history; in short, the traditional humanities core. The Jesuits, after all, are the intellectuals of the Roman Catholic Church. I thrilled to professors who guided me through the profound pleasures of canonical writing.

The two years that Trump spent as a student at Fordham would have been the years when he would have had to fulfill most of those required courses in the humanities and theology, yet, despite his [claim](#) that the Bible is his “favorite book,” nothing from his brief encounter with the Great Works of Western

Civilization seems to have stuck with him. His word-salad-spinner speeches are occasions where you might expect a random canonical character like Huck Finn or Hamlet (*What a loser!*) to surface, or maybe even a swaggering line from some jingoistic poem like Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade." But young Trump seems to have passed, unenriched, through the very courses we misty liberal arts types still insist can be transformative and, in my own case, were.

In my time at Fordham, I lived on campus in the upper Bronx, a long subway ride away from my parents' walk-up in Queens. Trump [lived](#) at home in Jamaica Estates while he attended Fordham, ensuring that his brush with the cultural and ethnic differences found north of Yankee Stadium would be as minimal as possible. His feet were firmly planted in the world of "getting and spending" that defined the real estate empire of his father, Fred. In 1966, Trump [left](#) Fordham behind, transferring to the purportedly higher academic altitudes of the University of Pennsylvania. An Ivy League degree promised more bang for the buck. Trump majored in economics at Wharton—the university's business school—in preparation to walk into the career in real estate his father had set up for him. Once again, I followed Trump, broadly speaking, to the same institution of higher learning. We were separated by almost a decade, as well as by class background, and by avocation—I arrived at Penn on fellowship as a graduate student in English (*What a loser!*), a career very much not set up for me by my skeptical, indeed baffled, parents.

The thing about the University of Pennsylvania in those years, though, is that it was sort of like the Queens of the Ivy League. Just as the borough of Queens is adjacent to Manhattan and gazes with wonder and resentment at its skyline and all the power and beauty it represents, Penn, back in Trump's time there and into my own, was routinely demoted to the ranks of a "mere" public university. As late as 2011, when the Joe Paterno scandal [broke](#) at Penn State, Maureen Dowd, among other commentators, [referred](#) to Penn State as "Penn." For a long time, the University of Pennsylvania bookstore sold T-shirts that read NOT PENN STATE—a kind of rueful in-joke. The school's nervousness about its Ivy League positionality won't be completely banished until "The University That Benjamin Franklin Founded" obtains [his papers](#) ... from Yale.

Trump would see nothing funny about my recollections of Penn during its period of "soft Eclipse" (Thank you, Emily Dickinson). Irony is a mainstay of English departments, not self-absorbed blowhards. He is a roiling spitball of status anxieties, an outer-borough kid who ended up at what was, at the time, the last-place Ivy. That's why he's so insistent about his own superiority. Only pursuits that turn a profit, accrue power, and fortify his anxious narcissism catch his notice. He loves the city's attention, but he hates his gullible audience. Romantic Manhattan skyline gazers like Alfred Kazin and Pete Hamill—and their fictional counterparts Francie Nolan and Nick Carraway—yearned for the soaring promise of Manhattan, including its cultural riches. Trump, however, matured into someone who sought not to admire beauty, but to assess and conquer it, staining New York City's buildings with his "Kilroy was here" mark wherever he could before leaving New York in a huff.

In the Trumpian presidential sequel, it will be his ardent fans who will be energized by his passive disdain and his nasty buffoonish-ness toward anything that seems fragile and feminized. (Read: the arts.)

As for specific policy, who knows? Trump doesn't care about culture—as opposed to celebrity. In his first term, he [couldn't be bothered](#) to attend even ceremonial nods to the arts like the annual Kennedy Center Honors event. So, he might subcontract out that area by appointing a dedicated culture warrior theorist

like the writer Christopher Rufo to a high government position. Rufo's goal is [to create](#) a right-wing counter-hegemony to dissipate the alleged entrenched power of post-'60s racial-and-gender-justice-and-equality activism within higher education. But Rufo has actual, strongly held beliefs about universities, and, as we have seen, universities do not interest Trump. Rufo might annoy him. So, Trump might not even bother to empower anybody on the Cultural Contempt beat. He might just spout off about whatever loser left-wing actor pisses him off.

But, for fun, let's try something. I read a fair amount of nineteenth-century time travel literature during my time at Penn: Edward Bellamy's [Looking Backward](#), William Morris's [News From Nowhere](#), Mark Twain's [A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court](#), and, the most haunting one of them all, H.G. Wells's [The Time Machine](#). In the Gradgrind educational theories Trump and his followers adhere to, that reading was a waste—why imagine other times when there is money to be made right now? But perhaps those tales can be put to use as models for our own brief trip into the future. Morris, a medievalist, relies on “dream vision” structure to present his tour of England, circa 2090. Let's do the same. Close your eyes, Dear Readers, and awaken in the near future of, let's say, the autumn of 2027, when President Trump, three years again in power, has made some changes:

Walking around the Imperial City ... we reach 400 Seventh Street SW, former headquarters of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The building, called Constitution Center, was once a gleaming marvel with sculptures and an interior garden, but dirt now smears the windows of ground floor tenants: a nail salon and a Hooters. (The restaurant chain was struggling before President Trump graciously patronized one in Tampa and gave a grinning thumbs-up to the, uh, wings.) In 2025, with the help of a Republican Congress, Trump's budget, zeroing out funding for the NEA, the NEH, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, finally was approved. (He'd [tried](#) to level those agencies during his first administration, but those efforts were beaten back four consecutive times.)

Around the country, the emphasis is on minimizing public funding for what old-timers sentimentally call “the life of the mind.” The plug is pulled on poetry festivals, “One Book, One City” [reading celebrations](#), artist and musician residencies. Shakespeare troupes cease [visiting high schools](#) in rural communities; jazz musicians no longer perform at community centers. Although quite a few ordinary citizens object because they enjoy this stuff, an offhanded Trumpian riff—“Who needs this bullshit? Does anybody still care about THE LATE, UNGREAT William Shakespeare? His ratings are in the toilet”—inspires even larger local budget cuts for the arts. Trump even makes a few bucks peddling WHO NEEDS THIS BULLSHIT? mugs and T-shirts, featuring a slashed picture of the Bard. National Public Radio and PBS soldier on, but without federal funding, local affiliate NPR stations can no longer afford to buy the national programs—crucially, the news programs. The larger cities are mostly spared. The big money donors, both Republican and Democratic, keep the high-end cultural monuments of urban life—opera companies, symphonies, flagship museums—afloat. (Remember whose name adorns one of the three grand facades of Lincoln Center—not Soros, but Koch.) However, given the depressed national mood and state of the economy in the wake of the 2024 election (when Trump, once again, failed to win the popular vote), listener donations to NPR are down some 35 percent. The same is true for PBS, which has fallen back on weeklong Judi Dench marathons and 24-hour loops of James Taylor in concert at Tanglewood alternating

with Simon and Garfunkel's triumphant restoration in Central Park to fill the time vacated by *PBS NewsHour*, whose reporting is too expensive to sustain.

Over the next few days, we leave downtown Washington and explore the larger DMV area to confirm a rumor we've heard: *The independent bookstores in Washington, as in other urban areas, are flourishing!* Where once there [were](#) only about 20 in the city and surrounding suburbs, in 2027 that number balloons to 67. Washingtonians are readers, and the area's independent bookstores are unionized sites of resistance in a surrounding sea of MAGA "abstainers," as those Americans are called who have taken the pledge, administered in the first year of his second administration by President Trump on Fox News, to "not read more than two books a year—one of them the 'God Bless the USA' Bible, the other *The Art of the Deal*." Some 40 percent of new literary fiction published since 2025 consists of dystopian fantasy or narratives that are in some way "oppositional" and are distributed through social media as much as by the old-line mainstream publishers. These oppositional texts and art fuel self-funded underground classes, alternative galleries, and ubiquitous reading groups—an undercurrent of insistent thinking.

University teachers do not fare well. With the ongoing adjunctification of the humanities professoriat—there are no full-time academic positions in literature, history, or philosophy—the few remaining scholars and critics are herded into liberal arts theme parks, maintained as profit-making tourist destinations by the universities. Nostalgia seekers watch academics "in costume" (i.e., badly dressed) wander around muttering odd bits of Pope or Yeats or else having staged "problematizings" of postmodern theory that, for some reason, small children find very funny, sitting enthralled listening to quotations from Judith Butler, much to the relief of their exhausted parents.

Meanwhile, in the heartland, Trump's followers, like him fearful and enraged by the urban *mélange*, control public library boards and keep a close eye on new releases, marshaling arguments at the ready to challenge them from reaching library shelves. Even before Trump's second inauguration, book challenges and bannings [skyrocketed](#) and their targets expanded. Public book bannings are now performed; thousands of Trumpists travel for miles to hold rallies, featuring tailgate parties and enormous caricatured visuals of canceled writers and their book covers. It's become standard procedure to challenge queer coming-of-age stories aimed at the YA audience, but now even "classics" like [Peter Pan](#) (Peter's pansexuality) and [Black Beauty](#) (shames white readers) are nixed.

Most book bannings and challenges continue to arise from the right; but many books are being quietly disappeared from college syllabi and libraries, as liberals and leftists, the closest to each other on the political spectrum, can't always agree that it's better to fight Trump than to hate each other. It's simply too emotionally draining to defend novels like [Lolita](#) or "monster" authors like Norman Mailer in these anxious times.

As the critic Dwight Macdonald [anticipated](#) more than 60 years ago in his classic essay "Masscult and Midcult," there is no "common culture" anymore in the United States. People gather in online chat groups composed of the like-minded; stream shows on their home screens and listen through their earbuds; read books—if they do read books—and talk about them with friends who share their tastes and opinions. These niches and subcultures in a continental-size nation permit a sense of normality—there are geographical and mental spaces in which to hide. But that is, in large part, because Trump and his more sophisticated political-media operatives prefer manufactured outrage directed at the cultural

“garbage” served to the most aggrieved activists more than they do difficult legal efforts to outright proscribe texts and artistic events. It is a private, nervous, self-monitoring country, but it’s also a nation as ridiculous as it is ominous. Trump embodies, in Philip Roth’s [famous description](#), the “indigenous American berserk,” but the children giggling at the professors arguing about Saussure keep things from descending into the deepest darkness.

We take our leave of America in 2027, with a scene under the Florida sun of the anti-urbanist, the “escape from New York” New Yorker contentedly chewing on his Big Mac before cheating at another round of golf. Myself, I’ll still take Manhattan. And Queens, too.



[Federico Finchelstein](#), [Emmanuel Guerisoli](#) /

Federico Finchelstein is a Professor of History at the New School and his new book is *The Wannabe Fascists: A Guide to Understanding the Greatest Threat to Democracy*.

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May 16, 2024

Misrule of Law by Emmanuel Guerisoli, Federico Finchelstein

The "Day One" Dictatorship

On the law in a fascist America

Last December, when asked if he would abuse power if reelected president, Donald Trump [said](#), "except for day one." In short, if we are to believe Trump's own words, the constitutional order as we know it will be subverted from the moment he takes office. Of course, there are many unknowns here, starting with the capacity of Trumpists to implement what they have already told us they plan to do. But Trump and his people have all but told us that, in a second Trump term, the United States might approach a fascist form of government under the leadership of a messianic personality.

There is no fascism without dictatorship. This form of permanent power is emblematic of the fascist worldview. The primary aim of fascism is to destroy democracy from within, in order to create a modern dictatorship from above. Fascists propose a totalitarian state in which plurality and civil society would be silenced, and there would be few distinctions between the public and the private, or between the state and its citizens. Fascist regimes shut down the independent press and destroy the rule of law. Would all these actions be part of the promised one-day dictatorship? Would an American dictatorship look like

the past experiences of Nazism and Italian fascism? History doesn't repeat itself that neatly, but one thing is certain: If Trump wins and decides to try his one-day dictatorship, the president will also become a lawgiver, replacing legality with his own charismatic will.

A second Trump presidency could represent an all-out assault on the rule of law. How might this play out? In past fascist regimes, the destruction of the rule of law has required two steps. First, its suspension, through state of emergency declarations or delegations of legislative power (a legislature transferring its lawmaking power to the executive). Second, its violent subversion, by transforming the juridical and political orders via the erosion of the principles of separation of powers and checks and balances that prevent constitutional democratic regimes from becoming authoritarian. Both Mussolini and Hitler transferred parliament's representation of the people, and therefore the power to make laws, to the executive. Il Duce and the Führer became the legal embodiments of the people. Consequently, their wills were the sole legitimate expressions of the nations' laws. The executive's prerogative, rooted in arbitrariness, discretionality, and violence, replaced the normative legal order based on the rule of law and proceduralism.

Trump will not have the similar institutional mechanisms that allowed Hitler or Mussolini to install dictatorships and personify the law. From the get-go, Hitler made use of constitutional [emergency powers](#) to suspend civil rights and [arrest members](#) of opposition parties, then forcing the Reichstag to authorize an Enabling Act [decree](#) providing the executive with full legislative powers. Similarly, Mussolini, after orchestrating a [coup attempt](#), bullied the Parliament into procuring the legislative delegation of plenary powers to reorganize the institutional and juridical orders, [gradually leading](#) to the installation of a totalitarian regime.

In U.S. constitutional law, the principle of separation of powers limits delegated legislation to acts of Congress that authorize an executive branch agency to promulgate a set of regulations. In principle, this should prevent the emergence of a Trumpist totalitarian dictatorship in the short term, because the nondelegation constitutional [doctrine](#) prohibits Congress from transferring tout court its essential legislative functions to the executive. However, a range of legal paths could be perverted to make an authoritarian government possible.

On day one, for example, Trump could make use of the discretionary powers available to the executive branch for dictatorial purposes. He could direct the FBI and the Department of Justice to [target his political rivals](#) through investigations and indictments based on vague accusations such as instigation of violence, defamation, being an agent of a foreign power, corruption, or subversive activities. Possible targets might include not just Joe Biden or members of his family but private businesses, media companies, civil society organizations, and universities. To ensure the enactment of executive orders and agency directives, Trump will have to purge the federal government of [civil servants](#) who might refuse, question, or delay them.

In short, Trump could set the stage for transforming a normative, procedural federal administration into one ruled by discretionality and personal prerogative. The repopulating of the state's bureaucracies with loyalists or parallel party structures was used in the past by Mussolini and Hitler as well as Juan Perón in Argentina and Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. Today, the tactic is employed by Viktor Orbán in Hungary and [Recep Tayyip Erdoğan](#) in Turkey.

A Trumpist regime could also pursue an expansive, autocratic, and discretionary interpretation of the executive's presidential powers. [Article 2](#) of the Constitution exclusively vests executive power in the president. Therefore, Trump could in theory place the entirety of the executive branch under [direct presidential control](#), eliminating the relative autonomy of Cabinet departments such as the Department of Justice or the Pentagon. In addition, and less obviously, there are numerous federal agencies that fall within the executive branch but enjoy some insulation from direct presidential control—the Federal Reserve, the Federal Communications Commission, the Federal Trade Commission, and many others. Imagine these and other agencies as instruments of one man's discretionary or arbitrary power.

Emergency powers are a related area of concern. In the past, emergency powers were triggered by previous fascist leaders to start dismantling the rule of law. Today in the United States, there are around [148 statutory powers](#) that can become available to the president when a national emergency is declared. Emergencies can be declared in an arbitrary way because what constitutes an emergency is not defined by law, potentially allowing Trump to invoke any reason to justify one. These provisions automatically enhance the executive's prerogative during emergencies and limit the scope of judicial review. Trump could legally use them to start subverting the rule of law in a permanent way. For example, the [Communications Act of 1934](#) would allow Trump to shut down wireless communication, including [the internet](#), in case of national emergency. Emergency powers [would allow](#) him to restrict [domestic transportation](#), freeze banking assets, and block [financial transactions](#), or even [surveil](#) political enemies. Emergency powers have been previously [abused](#) in U.S. history, most recently during the war on terror, but Trump's abuse could be the first step to subvert the rule of law, legitimize a fascist regime, and erode civil liberties.

Finally, there are two other extremist ways for a Trumpist dictatorship to happen here: the [Insurrection Act](#), and martial law. Already in 2020, Trump [entertained](#) using the Insurrection Act, a vaguely worded eighteenth-century relic, during the Black Live Matters protests, being [stopped](#) only by Secretary of Defense Mark Esper. This time—and we can probably assume that, with Trump in office, there will be no shortage of protests—Trump might not be discouraged. He could deploy the armed forces to assist local law enforcement to quell civil unrest or to use the military against any conspiracy that [opposes or obstructs](#) the execution of laws in the United States. Imagine now, just as in 2017, thousands of people are [protesting](#) at international airports against a new travel ban; Trump then triggers a national emergency and authorizes the National Guard to intervene and restore order, on the grounds that states or cities are unable or unwilling to enforce the law or public order has been lost. Or consider sanctuary cities obstructing ICE agents from carrying out mass deportations; Trump triggers the Insurrection Act, deploying the military in the streets of New York, San Francisco, or Chicago. In the [1950s](#) and ['60s](#), Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy deployed troops to desegregate schools in the South. Trump, on the other hand, could [deputize National Guards](#) in red states for the arrest of immigrants in blue states and sanctuary cities. Strikingly, the Supreme Court [ruled](#) in 1827 that the president alone determines the justification for invoking the Insurrection Act, preventing any judicial review on its determination, though the military's actions remain [under judicial oversight](#). And if the armed forces refuse his orders? Trump could follow Hitler's and Mussolini's examples and militarize several right-wing militias, particularly after he pardons January 6 “hostages.”

Lastly, Trump could try to replace civilian authorities, including the judiciary, with military ones by imposing martial law. For example, Trump could conceivably proclaim an emergency at the southern border and set up military tribunals to arrest and deport migrants. He could justify such a decision on national security grounds related to terrorism or illicit trafficking. He could designate Mexican cartels as foreign terrorist organizations and their suspected members as unlawful enemy combatants under military jurisdiction, and, in a repeat of Guantánamo, detain them indefinitely while subjecting them to torture, with a Supreme Court that might not stop him [as it did](#) Bush. It would be up to the Supreme Court [to rule that](#) the president had exceeded executive authority. Fascist history teaches us that a successful imposition of martial law or state of siege directed against citizens perceived as external enemies can later be used to deal with society at large.

All these considerations have not even taken into account the possibility of the Republican Party winning majorities this November in both chambers of Congress. That would be a worst-case scenario that could accelerate, and cement, a Trumpist dictatorship. With congressional majorities, as is the case with mini-Trump Nayib Bukele in El Salvador or Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela (a dictator, albeit not a fascist one), Trump could push for constitutional amendments that could go from allowing for indefinite reelection to limiting access to citizenship rights. We would then rely on the judiciary to prevent a fascist takeover. But many federal judges [were appointed](#) by Trump, and a new term gives him the chance to shape the judicial system to his own image by flooding it with even more far-right and hyper-conservative appointees.

If implemented, all these acts would create extralegal domains that belong to the dictatorial convictions of the MAGA movement but not U.S. society as a whole. In this context, ideology will prevail over legality. As the German Jewish legal expert Ernst Fraenkel [argued in 1941](#) regarding the Nazi assault on the legal system, the totalitarian state in Germany was twofold: both a “normative state” and a “prerogative state.” In practice, this meant that political considerations were more important than the written law. The latter only functioned normally when the Nazis did not care about the legal matter at hand. In other words, the legal theory of dictatorship aimed to make a distinction between political and nonpolitical acts. The instruments of dictatorship took precedence over the traditional judicial bodies in the case of the former, while to the latter, the old legal state still applied.

In this totalitarian context, increasingly more dimensions of society came under the regime’s discretionary power, and the rule of law was increasingly diminished. A combination of arbitrariness and efficiency in legal matters was successful in veiling the illegal “true face” of the Nazi dictatorship. Fraenkel stressed how a patina of legality promoted the legend that German fascists had accomplished a “legal revolution.” However, their dictatorship was not founded on valid laws. As Fraenkel explained, “Endowed with all the powers required by a state of siege, the National-Socialists were able to transform the constitutional and temporary dictatorship (intended to restore public order) into an unconstitutional and permanent dictatorship and to provide the framework of the National-Socialist state with unlimited powers.”

This is why declaring a temporary dictatorial government can easily lead to a more permanent one. Trump’s claim of ultra-brief dictatorial powers can easily morph into indefinite ones.

Fascist dictators were not dictatorial heads of normal states. They unleashed illegal forms of extreme repression and terror that radically turned their political systems into unlimited, irreversible dictatorships. This change was made in the name of the one who incarnated the movement and its national revolution. This is why the Nazis claimed that the highest law in Germany was not the command of the dictator but his will. The legality of the old system was in total contradiction with the new legitimacy of the fascist leader.

If Donald Trump becomes president, on January 20, 2025—the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, of all dates—the United States might have a dictator only for that day. But this might be enough to turn the democratic world upside down.

To be sure, we have presented a nightmarish scenario—one in which Trump turns the law upside down by turning legality against itself. But this does not need to happen. It can be averted by the voters. But even if Trump wins, we would expect that his authoritarian drive could be blocked by the separation of powers and the strong institutional framework of the U.S. constitutional architecture. And yet, the danger of a Trumpist dictatorship cannot be ignored. Sadly, the U.S. legal system is not foolproof against being turned into a dictatorial regime. No president has tried this radical subversion of the law before. Trump is the first wannabe fascist leader with a real chance to do so.



[Brian Stelter](#)/

Brian Stelter, a former anchor of CNN's *Reliable Sources*, is the author of three books, most recently *Network of Lies*.

May 16, 2024

SCORE-SETTLING

Revenge and Freedom From Fact by Brian Stelter

On the media in a fascist America

The crackdown could begin with a security breach at the Northwest Gate of the White House.

Imagine, on the day of Donald Trump's inauguration, a raucous protest by left-wing groups on the streets north of Lafayette Park. The blocks surrounding the White House are cordoned off with layer after layer of fencing, due to the unrest in major cities following Trump's reelection, but a few dozen very motivated activists barrel through the park, all the way across the inauguration parade route along the park's southern edge, and inside the White House perimeter. Weapons are drawn, emergency plans are activated, and Trump is rushed to a deep underground bunker. Order is restored within minutes, but not before the break-in is shown live around the world, since all the major networks have live camera positions on the North Lawn. Online sleuths notice that a few of the protesters appear to be wearing press credentials. (They're fakes, it turns out.) And in one stray live shot that gets clipped and decontextualized and shared all across pro-MAGA social media, a CBS correspondent gives a water bottle to a man screaming in agony after being pepper-sprayed. That's all it takes for a narrative to take root on the right: "The media is complicit. They're in on it. THEY are trying to assassinate OUR president." Trump feels humiliated and attacked on what is supposed to be his most triumphant day. He and his aides want what he famously promised: "Retribution." Knowing that the Northwest Gate is a [key access](#)

[point](#) for journalists, a White House aide starts a rumor that the assailants were aided by CNN and CBS News crews. Trump, who is glued to the live coverage, grunts to his chief of staff, “Get them off my lawn.” Members of his inner circle, so fed up with years of accountability journalism, and so deluded into thinking that Trump’s way is the only way, see a chance to go further and squeeze independent media off the airwaves. “Get out,” they say. “Get out of our way.”

The security breach becomes a pretext for a project that’s been on the minds of MAGA leaders for years.

After all, Steve Bannon’s 2018 [promise](#) to “flood the zone with shit” was just the beginning. Trump’s “enemy of the people” [proclamation](#) gave permission to his fans to go further—to delegitimize and dehumanize journalists and make “alternative facts” the only facts. For the coup plotters of 2020, one lesson of Trump’s loss was that Trump needed to exert more control over the media in order to prevail. He needed to own the media; ergo, Truth Social, which emerged in the aftermath of January 6. The far right’s memory-holing of the attack, minimization of the violence, and rebranding of rioters as “hostages” were successful tests of MAGA media’s reality-rewriting capabilities.

Trump’s violent rhetoric emboldened his devotees. During the Biden years, pro-Trump trolls daydreamed that, once back in power, they would imprison journalists and crush opponents, and they were [welcomed](#) to say so on Elon Musk’s X. As an ex-CNN anchor, I saw it in my mentions when MAGA diehards fantasized about having me locked up at Guantánamo Bay: “Gitmo is in your future.” “You filthy nazi traitor demokkrats belong in GITMO.” “All of you deserve to be jailed.”

Anonymous threats were accompanied by brash promises by Trump loyalists. “We will go out and find the conspirators not just in government, but in the media,” former Defense Department official Kash Patel told Bannon in 2023. “We’re going to come after you,” Patel [proclaimed](#), “whether it’s criminally or civilly.” Bannon, overjoyed, said, “We’re absolutely dead serious.”

Imagine that the new administration uses the Northwest Gate incursion as a pretext to impose severe restrictions. Most reporters are banned from entering the White House grounds, per new Secret Service rules that cite threats to the president’s life. As Truth Social fills up with memes equating journalists with “terrorists,” networks are given 24 hours to remove their equipment. Aides claim that reporters will be able to ask questions via Zoom at virtual press conferences, but Trump refused to hold daily briefings during his first term in office, and the Zoom sessions never materialize.

Media outlets file First Amendment lawsuits seeking a return to pre-Trump II norms, but the government’s claims about security threats take precedence, and the bans remain in place. Press corps norms—like traveling with the president—melt away. Trump begins to take trips without any notice to the public at all. Several reporters who resort to staking out Andrews Air Force Base and watching for Air Force One takeoffs are arrested for trespassing.

Fox and Newsmax are allowed on the White House grounds, so officials can claim that “real” news is still represented. Fox says it will provide the other networks with live video of all presidential events and remarks. While workers revert the former press briefing room to the indoor pool it was decades ago, Trump rewards Fox with interviews and promotions—at one point doubling the Murdoch family’s market cap in a matter of weeks—and even the hosts who are most tempted to dissent are kept in check by the sudden windfall. And they know that, for the MAGA faithful, Newsmax is always one remote click away; they learned that [the hard way](#) in 2020. So, they toe the line, touting specious rumors about enemies

within, about writers feeding “resistance” tips to foreign governments, about liberal editors doctoring photos of Trump to make him look even older than he really is, about treasonous reporters aiding the protesters on Inauguration Day. “*Remember when THEY tried to kill Trump?*” becomes a rallying cry on the right, even though it didn’t happen.

Fact-checks about what *did* happen only embolden Trump’s fans to fight harder for punishment of the imagined co-conspirators. CBS says the doxing of its phone and computer networks becomes so intense that the newsroom can barely function for hours at a time. One night, the evening newscast starts 10 minutes late due to server glitches. A Trump spokesman is quoted calling this a “good start,” meaning the country would be better off with no evening newscast at all. Two days later, in a “swatting” incident, a caller to 911 claims there is a violent intruder inside the home of a top CBS anchor. Police arrive en masse, and, amid the chaos, an officer accidentally shoots the anchor’s wife, seriously injuring her. The same MAGA-heads on social media downplay the violence by digging up the victim’s past tweets praising Hillary Clinton; some even parrot the Trump spokesman and call the injury “a good start.”

Inspired by Trump’s words in the bunker on Inauguration Day, “get out” becomes shorthand for a groundswell of anti-media sentiment, mirroring the Trump administration’s militarized mass deportations of migrants. “If you journalists don’t love our America,” they say, “get out.” At the federal level, Trump appointees pull the levers of government to implement the president’s wishes. IRS agents commence audits of top newsroom editors. (The editors find that it’s almost impossible to prove the audits are retaliatory.) DOJ attorneys consider [Espionage Act](#) charges against adversarial reporters. FCC commissioners open probes into the conduct of broadcast station owners who don’t follow the Trump line. Republican lawmakers, themselves intimidated by the voters who are calling reporters “terrorists,” prepare a media accreditation law that would reward outlets that maintain close ties to the government. Third-party groups flood the courts with libel lawsuits against news outlets. Judges will eventually throw out most of the suits, but each case costs time and money to fight, and the twofold intent is to make the newsrooms bleed out financially, and to frighten others from pursuing the same types of stories.

The actions at the state and local level are even more disturbing. Newsrooms in Trump strongholds notice a sharp uptick in threats and harassment. Outside a pro-Trump rally in Florida, a local TV reporter is badly beaten by a group of men wearing MAGA merch, and the police response is so sluggish that observers assume they let it happen. Near a migrant detention facility in Texas, a freelance reporter is struck and killed by a security officer in an Immigration and Customs Enforcement vehicle. Was it an accident or an attack? No one knows for sure. Trump responds to the two incidents by saying the reporters “should have told the truth.” And so, a new test is born. “*Just tell the truth!*” Some news agencies, either to appeal to pro-Trump subscribers or to fend off the goons who beat up reporters with impunity, put the word “TRUTH” in their homepage banners and marketing materials. NewsNation rebrands as “just the truth.” Breitbart claims to be “the only truth.”

This happens at the same time that Target stores install extra-large American flags (while hiding Black History Month merchandise), and Disney theme parks promote “American pride days” (while curtailing gay pride events), and Meta’s apps add a “free speech” tab (while algorithmically deemphasizing the anti-Trump protest content that has been deemed a national security threat). Some CEOs don’t fall in line, but many do, including the heads of several major media outlets. Safety is the rationale. “The

country is changing,” they say. “We need to protect you.” Some journalists feel compelled to move out of their homes. Others adopt pen names and write anonymously. Still others scramble to find new lines of work. Television shows critical of Trump are canceled. Risky assignments are nixed. Dissidents speak out on their own blogs and livestreams, but they struggle to reach a mass audience. The Committee to Protect Journalists points out that Google search results consistently rank far-right smears of independent journalists above the journalists’ actual work. Every day brings a new episode of violence or surveillance.

Outcry over the retaliatory actions is shouted down with the “fake news” smears that were popularized when Trump took office the first time. Either it’s not really happening, or, if it is, it’s justified—that’s the message on Fox. Many Americans feel that they’ve heard it all before, and they are just plain exhausted. They don’t want to have to care anymore. Trump promises they don’t have to: Trust me, he says, and don’t worry about the news or fight about politics with neighbors. “Unity” is what he purports to offer, and many take the deal. United in ignorance, they mindlessly scroll TikTok and Instagram as First Amendment rights are curtailed. They knew who they were voting for, right?

Two days after Trump’s first and so far, only inauguration, in January 2017, I was privately berated by White House press secretary Sean Spicer for questioning his crowd size lies. A couple of hours later, while hosting CNN’s *Reliable Sources*, I asked the following questions: “Do Trump’s allies want to silence skeptics in the media? Destroy the press? Or maybe support an alternative press that presents an alternative reality that’s more favorable?”

We now know the answers. We know exactly what they want. Journalists who worked in repressive regimes recognized it, in many cases, before American journalists did. I’ll never forget an interview I conducted on CNN, one week after crowd-size-gate, with Mahir Zeynalov, an analyst and journalist living in Turkey who was smeared, sued, and [deported](#) by the Turkish government in 2014 after reporting on a corruption investigation.

“Whenever I look at what President Trump and his team are doing here in the United States, I’m like, wait a second. I have seen this movie before. It’s all familiar to us,” Zeynalov [told me](#). “And I’m not talking about a country like Iran or China, where autocrats are crushing or strangulating the media. I’m talking about Turkey, a country that was somewhat democratic a decade ago, with a somewhat independent media, and is now turning into a state where at least one journalist is being put behind bars—since last summer, on average—every day.”

He continued: “And if there’s anyone who is saying that this cannot happen here in the United States, they are significantly underestimating how leaders, including in democratic countries, can undermine media freedom, and, with that, democracy.”

Hungary is the best example in Europe. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s coalition government has undermined media freedom and created “a climate of fear and intimidation,” Human Rights Watch [wrote](#) in a scathing report earlier this year. “Independent media outlets have closed, or changed ownership and turned pro-government overnight.”

So, imagine that, in 2024, a popular but financially imperiled media company is offered a carrot and stick by a Trump confidant: Take the carrot and offload the company’s news division or accept the stick of government regulation that will drive the share price down. Imagine that someone like Musk emerges as

an eager buyer. If the board doesn't give in, they're portrayed as siding with the "terrorists." What will the directors do?

Maybe you think I'm overdoing it, and maybe I am. Maybe there will be no precipitating incident, no crackdown, no threat to America's First Amendment tradition. But at a moment when the country desperately needs government oversight to stop generative AI from obliterating the media business and government support to salvage what remains of the local news economy, Trump is offering none of the above. Instead, he is vowing to investigate media outlets that challenge him. His fans have been primed for revenge and for freedom from fact. If the chill descends in 2025, no one can claim to be surprised.



[Ruth Ben-Ghiat/](#)

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HOSTILE TAKEOVER

The Permanent Counterrevolution by Ruth Ben-Ghiat

On politics and government in a fascist America

“Does fascism intend to restore state authority or subvert it? Is it order or disorder? Can you be conservatives and subversives at the same time?” Six months before the March on Rome in October 1922, when Benito Mussolini was the head of the Fascist Party and its decentralized militia movement, he isolated the contradictions at the heart of fascism that remain fundamental to authoritarianism today. During his 21 years in power, 18 of them as dictator, Il Duce framed fascism as a revolution of reaction against the left, against liberal democracy, and against any group that threatened the survival of white Christian civilization. Carrying out a violent destabilization of society in the name of a return to social order and national tradition, fascism pioneered the autocratic formula in use today of disenfranchising and repressing the many to allow the few to exploit the workforce, women’s bodies, the environment, and the economy.

Trumpism is in this tradition. It started in 2015 as a movement fueled by conservative alarm and [white rural rage](#) at a multiracial and progressive America. It continued as an authoritarian presidency [envisioned as](#) “a shock to the system” that [unleashed](#) waves of hate crimes against nonwhites and non-Christians. It [culminated](#) in the January 6 assault on the Capitol, which was a counterrevolutionary operation in the spirit of fascism. Its goal in deploying violence was not just to keep Donald Trump in office, but to prevent the representatives of social and racial progress from taking power.

PROJECT 2025 AS COUNTERREVOLUTION

The fascists believed that you have to destroy to create, and this is what a second Trump administration would do. Project 2025 is [a plan](#) for an authoritarian takeover of the United States that goes by a deceptively neutral name. It preserves Trumpism’s original radical intent in its goals to “dismantle the administrative state” and “decentralize and privatize as much as possible,” allowing the American people to “live freely.” “[T]he Trump administration, with the best of intentions, simply got a slow start,” Heritage Foundation head Kevin Roberts [told](#) *The New York Times* in January. “And Heritage and our allies in Project 2025 believe that must never be repeated.” The solution to this “slow start”—code for the restraints imposed by operating in a democracy—is counterrevolution.

The plan promises the abolition of the Department of Education and other federal agencies. The intent here is to destroy the legal and governance cultures of liberal democracy *and* create new bureaucratic structures, staffed by new politically vetted cadres, to support autocratic rule. So new agencies could appear to manage parents’ and family rights, Christian affairs, and other pillars of the new order. The Department of Health and Human Services is poised to have a central role in governance, given the priorities Trumpism places on [policing](#) sexuality, weaponizing motherhood, [persecuting](#) transgender people and LGBTQ communities, and [criminalizing](#) abortion.

During Trump’s presidency, far-right Roman Catholic attorney Roger Severino [headed](#) the Office of Civil Rights in the Department of Health and Human Services, transforming it into an office that prioritized the protection of the rights of white Christians and the “natural family.” During his tenure, the department [banned](#) the use of the words “fetus” and “transgender” in government communications and made other moves long embraced by evangelical Christians and their far-right allies in politics. In the future, this office could be elevated into an autonomous entity. Appropriating civil rights for white Christians furthers the Trumpist goal of delegitimizing the cause of racial equality while also making Christian nationalism a core value of domestic policy. Doing away with the separation of church and state [is the goal](#) of many architects of Trumpism, from Project 2025 contributor Russ Vought to far-right proselytizer Michael Flynn, who [uses](#) the idea of “spiritual war” as counterrevolutionary fuel.

Even if the Department of Education is abolished, some other entity would appear to take its place, since it is unlikely that the task of undoing liberal democratic models of pedagogy would be left entirely to individual states. Not everyone will be able to homeschool their children—the [preferred extremist option](#), since it removes children from exposure to the multifaith and multiracial environments of public schools. It is not so far-fetched to imagine the special Bible Trump [has been hawking](#), which includes the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Pledge of Allegiance, as a required text in a Christian nationalist curriculum.

Mussolini kicked off his [counterrevolutionary police state](#) in the 1920s with new “public security” laws that justified the arrest of anyone deemed a security threat—meaning anyone who opposed fascism from a liberal democratic or leftist point of view. Trump’s [assertion](#) a century later that “people within our country” pose “the greatest threat” to the United States, and [his desire](#) to “root [them] out,” could translate into counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations. These would require a recasting or expansion of existing federal and state security agencies—for example, if the National Guard is federalized or the promised mass deportations of undocumented immigrants come into being.

The counterrevolution will be televised. Given Trump's [repeated threats](#) to carry out “retribution” against his enemies, expect prompt and showy announcements of trials and investigations of the political opposition, members of the January 6 Select Committee, and anyone who sought to hold him accountable. “He’ll start throwing people in jail, and I’d be at the top of the list,” [said](#) Gen. Mark Milley, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—a man not given to hyperbole, who understands how autocrats operate.

THE LEADER CULT AND PERSONALIST RULE

Authoritarianism is a political system in which the executive branch of government is able to exercise disproportionate or total power over the legislature and the judiciary. This gives the leader the ability to minimize or abolish restrictions on his behavior and also avoid accountability for his corrupt and violent actions. Maintaining that culture of impunity is why strongmen go after the press, prosecutors, opposition politicians, and judges, all of whom can expose their crimes or send them to jail, and why their personality cults present them as victims of “witch hunts” meant to stop them from saving the nation. Project 2025 takes an openly autocratic stance in asserting an “existential need for aggressive use of the vast powers of the executive branch” in America, as though the nation would fail if the democratic system, which is built on checks to presidential authority, were to continue.

Trump has worked hard since 2015 to condition the public to see the strongman brand of leadership as the only choice for America. To that end, he has repeatedly sung the praises of authoritarians around the world. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is a muse of Trump, the GOP, and the Heritage Foundation for his success at a brand of authoritarian governance that Trump’s first administration introduced to America and his second administration would seek to consolidate: personalist rule.

Personalist leaders organize government institutions around their self-preservation. Their private interests and needs shape party politics, legislative action, and national policy, just as their relationships with foreign autocrats influence foreign affairs. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who [served](#) as the translator of Vladimir Putin’s views and desires in Europe for a decade, was able to personalize Italy’s foreign policy. He [excluded](#) Italian diplomats from meetings with Putin, allowing only his private translator-envoy, Valentino Valentini, to be present. An Italian parliamentary investigation later [revealed](#) that Berlusconi would have received a kickback from the profits of a planned Italy-and-Russia-built South Stream pipeline.

Trump holds a similarly proprietary vision of governance, which is why classified national security documents [ended up](#) in the bathroom of his private residence in Florida. Like most autocrats, Trump sees holding public office as a means of personal enrichment. That is why [he spent](#) one-third of his time between 2017 and the end of 2019 visiting Trump-branded properties. Such self-dealing would likely expand massively in a second administration, given [his boasts](#) on the campaign trail about receiving more than \$7 million from China and other foreign governments for “doing services” while he was president.

THE INNER SANCTUM AND THE PARTY

A staple of authoritarian governance is the inner sanctum: a small circle of insiders, who often include sons-in-law and other relatives, who keep the leader’s secrets, conspire in his corruption, and prevent any criticism from reaching his ears. This informal cabinet often includes people the leader has known for

years. Putin's inner circle [includes](#) people he has known since his St. Petersburg days. Berlusconi's was [helmed by](#) Marcello Dell'Utri, a senator in his party who was in charge of his advertising firm, Publitalia, and served as his liaison to Opus Dei and to the Mafia.

Trump's inner sanctum included Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner, who had offices in the White House and [earned](#) up to \$640 million in outside income during Trump's presidency. In a future administration, fewer federal agencies would mean a smaller presidential Cabinet of congressionally confirmed officials and a larger role for die-hard loyalists. Extremists whom Trump [pardoned](#) in 2020 and 2021 for their crimes on his behalf, from Flynn to Steve Bannon, could return to positions of influence, as the guides of the counterrevolution for secular and religious constituencies. Some MAGA loyalists are [already auditioning](#) for Cabinet jobs. Richard Grenell, who [is visiting](#) foreign leaders as Trump's "envoy," [has advised](#) clients in Iran and China and has close ties to pro-Orbán circles in Hungary—his PR firm worked for a Hungarian government-funded nonprofit (a fact he failed to disclose while serving as Trump's acting director of national intelligence).

For [the personalist ruler](#), the party exists to defend, avenge, and enrich him. The GOP has filled these roles in conspiring to help Trump overthrow the government, and in [elevating](#) Trump's personal legal and financial struggles to the forefront of party business. So, it should be no surprise that daughter-in-law Lara Trump has been tasked with optimizing the Republican National Committee for the ends of personalist rule. The RNC has long been a Trump tool: It [continued to pay](#) Trump's legal expenses long after he left office. Now Lara Trump has [vowed](#) that "every single penny" of RNC money will be spent on getting her father-in-law back into office. Soon the RNC could well become Trump's private bank, bereft of any political purpose, and then its transformation into an autocratic instrument will be complete.

THE CIVIL SERVICE

Every counterrevolution needs disciplined cadres. Project 2025 is readying a civilian army of bureaucrats to transform U.S. government. During Mussolini's regime, policymakers and ideologues debated how to form a new political elite inculcated with fascist values. Orbán has his Mathias Corvinus Collegium Brussels, [founded](#) in 2022 to train far-right thinkers and managers for Hungary and Europe.

Trumpism [has](#) its little-known Presidential Administration Academy, which aims to groom "Political Appointees to Be Ready on Day One"—when the cascade of counterrevolutionary executive orders will presumably commence. The academy's civil servant training is in "Conservative Governance," but the intent of vanquishing the ideal of an apolitical civil service and jump-starting the counterrevolution by firing thousands of nonloyalists hews to the history of fascism.

Trump's presidency provides precedent for the many ways to drive civil servants out. Creating [hostile workplaces](#) for critics, and hiring scores of zealots and bullies—Sean Lawler, Trump's chief of protocol, [carried](#) a horsewhip around to intimidate co-workers—Trumpism achieved a [passive purge](#) that saw over 79,000 civil servants retire or leave their jobs in his first nine months. In 2018, retired Ambassador Nancy McEldowney compared this process to a "hostile takeover and occupation." In 2024, it looks like a rehearsal for a counterrevolutionary cleanse of anyone still attached to liberal democratic ethics and norms.

Americans may believe that all this sounds fantastical. Yet the strongman's special talent is to bring the unthinkable into being. People around the world and throughout history have been caught by surprise at

their methods and the scale at which they operate. Bannon, Roberts, Stephen Miller, and other American incarnations of fascism are convinced that counterrevolution leading to autocracy is the only path to political survival for the far right, given the unpopularity of their positions (especially on abortion) and their leader's boatload of legal troubles. This is why Project 2025 declares that there is an "existential need" to make "aggressive" use of executive power. The alternative could be defeat.

Mussolini understood that situation well. In 1923, when he was still prime minister of a democracy, he [mused](#) about the problem of having one's destiny decided by the whims of an electorate. "Consent is as changeable as the sands of the seashore," he wrote, noting there was only one way to deal with "discontented people" who might vote you out: "You prevent it by means of force; by surrounding the mass with force; by employing this force without pity when it is necessary to do so." Less than two years later, Il Duce [announced](#) the start of dictatorship in Italy, ending the right of the population to express its political will.

From the noisy crowds with MAGA hats that fill Trump's rallies to the quiet fanatics in suits such as Miller and Roberts to a party leader who [announces](#) he will act as a dictator on "day one" of his administration, Trumpism is what fascism looks like in twenty-first-century America. If Trump returns to the White House, get ready for a new round of "shocks to the system." Authoritarians often tell us what they are going to do, and Trump, the GOP, and the political operators of Project 2025 are open about their plans to occupy power and carry out a counterrevolution designed to keep them there indefinitely.



[Jason Stanley/](#)

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May 16, 2024

UNCIVIL SOCIETY

The End of Civic Compassion by Jason Stanley

On education in a fascist America

Under its autocratic Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Hungary [introduced](#) in early 2020 a new National Core Curriculum. The curriculum presents Hungarian literature as the literature of ethnic Hungarian populations, even those living outside of the borders of the state of Hungary after the Treaty of Trianon created present-day Hungary in 1920, sowing national resentment similar to that in post-World War I Germany after the Treaty of Versailles led to the loss of German land and colonies. The course includes thematic studies of topics like the Treaty of Trianon in Hungarian literature.

Besides evoking nostalgia and resentful longing for a “Greater Hungary,” it pointedly excludes the work of Imre Kertész, Hungary’s only Nobel Prize [winner for literature](#), surrendering a national point of pride in order to erase the contributions of a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust. And it adds to the core curriculum Ferenc Herczeg, a minor right-wing nationalist playwright who was celebrated and praised by Miklós Horthy, the World War II Hungarian leader who [brought about](#) an alliance between Hungary and Nazi Germany. Previous revisions of the core curriculum in prior Orbán administrations had already elevated similar minor writers into the pantheon on an obvious political basis, such as József Nyírő, a member of

Parliament for the fascist Hungarian Arrow Cross Party, who harbored a passionate hatred of Jews. The new curriculum presents far-right Hungarian nationalist leaders of the past as heroes.

The revamping doesn't end there. In May 2022, Orbán [reorganized](#) his administration to place education under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior, which is responsible for maintaining order through law enforcement. A few months later—shortly after [declaring](#) that Hungary would not become a “mixed-race” country—Orbán was [featured](#) as a main speaker at the Conservative Political Action Conference, or CPAC, in Dallas, where he was [greeted](#) by American conservatives with a standing ovation. In March 2024, Orbán [visited](#) the Heritage Foundation for a private event. The next day, he was [fêted](#) by Donald Trump at Mar-a-Lago.

Viktor Orbán is a darling of today's GOP. But Americans do not need to look abroad to find their own versions of educational authoritarianism. Toni Morrison, like Imre Kertész, is a Nobel Prize winner in literature. *Beloved*, Morrison's most famous novel, concerns the horrors of slavery. It [became](#) the subject of controversy in Virginia, an infamous slave state from its Colonial days until the Civil War; parents targeted the book as obscene. In 2016, the Virginia state legislature [passed](#) what colloquially came to be called the “*Beloved* bill.” It would have allowed parents to request that any material they deemed to have sexually explicit content be replaced by other material. As in Hungary, the bill would have effectively removed the book from any required curriculum in Virginia. Virginia's governor at the time, Democrat Terry McAuliffe, [vetoed](#) the bill. But in Virginia's gubernatorial election of 2021, McAuliffe [went down](#) to defeat by Republican Glenn Youngkin, who ran on a platform of “parents' rights,” such as the right to have their children not be exposed to books that might make them uncomfortable.

Like Kertész in Hungary, Morrison in the United States is a member of a national minority whose work reminds others of that group's painful journey through the nation's history. This kind of work is uncomfortable for many readers. Those who seek to view the nation's past through rose-colored glasses, diminishing or erasing its national sins, whether for the sake of self-aggrandizement or something else, will have strong negative reactions.

Today's GOP is laser-focused on education, trying to frighten parents about supposed “Marxist indoctrination” in schools and universities (a common tactic in today's fascist international; see Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro). As a sign of the topic's importance, the GOP campaign against schools and universities was central in Trump's 2020 election bid. In a speech at an event called the White House Conference on American History, Trump [declared](#):

Students in our universities are inundated with critical race theory. This is a Marxist doctrine holding that America is a wicked and racist nation, that even young children are complicit in oppression, and that our entire society must be radically transformed. Critical race theory is being forced into our children's schools, it's being imposed into workplace trainings, and it's being deployed to rip apart friends, neighbors, and families.

The tactic of painting all of one's political opponents as Marxists and communists, and claiming that they dominate the institutions, is a hallmark of the classic European fascist regimes of the mid-twentieth century. Today, it is [employed](#) as a justification to fire teachers and professors and replace them with loyalists and ultranationalists. Even a democratic nation's greatest universities are not immune from being destroyed by this strategy, as one [can see](#) in India today. Now and in the past, schools and

universities are and have been central targets of fascism. Attacks on education, including political works deemed obscene, are, to use a cliché, canaries in the fascist coal mine.

Education in a liberal democracy introduces students to the diverse perspectives through a nation's history, in order for people to foster a kind of empathy and understanding for one another; what my father in his work called civic compassion. Democracy is a system where we let ourselves be affected by our fellow citizens' perspectives. Cutting students off from exposure to the perspectives of their neighbors therefore preempts democracy. Such erasures are more conducive to an education for authoritarianism, where an autocratic leader can more easily set groups against one another, relying on mutual estrangement and mutual misunderstanding. "Parents' rights" is an expression used [to cover](#) for an illiberal public culture. Using the language of rights and freedoms to erase oppressed groups' perspectives is a familiar vocabulary trick from America's past ("states' rights").

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, a graduate of Yale and Harvard universities, has specifically [targeted](#) schools and colleges, [denouncing](#) the supposed "indoctrination" of Florida's students. The state legislature and Department of Education have [brought in](#) Hillsdale College, an institution in Michigan, to advise on Florida's K-12 curriculum.

Hillsdale [advertises](#) itself as providing a "classical education" and a [nonideological](#) counterpart to current educational practices. In assessing this claim, it is instructive to turn to Hillsdale College's website, which lists the online courses offered by the institution. Alongside offerings like Introduction to Aristotle's Ethics: How to Lead a Good Life, The History of Classical Music: Pythagoras Through Beethoven, and Introduction to Western Philosophy, Hillsdale offers courses with titles like The American Left: From Liberalism to Despotism and American Citizenship and Its Decline, whose message is that "wokeness" is an existential threat to the United States. The message of these course offerings is clear: From the perspective of the classical tradition, progressivism is tyranny. One wonders if Hillsdale's Introduction to Western Philosophy mentions that it was Plato who recommended, well before Marx, that children be removed from their families to be raised by the state (and that homosexual relationships between teachers and their students were regarded as quite normal in the era the curriculum regards as "classical").

In 2023, Florida, Oklahoma, and Montana [approved](#) the use of videos from the conservative media group PragerU as educational material for their schools. In its video *A Short History of Slavery*, far-right commentator Candace Owens declares, "White people were the first to formally put an end to slavery," adding that "white men led the world in putting an end to the abhorrent practice [of slavery]." Owens's remarks entirely erase the history of Haiti, whose slave revolution resulted in its leader, Toussaint Louverture, ending slavery decades before Britain did, let alone the United States. Owens also returns the teaching of the Civil War to a period before W.E.B. Du Bois's magisterial 1935 work, [Black Reconstruction](#). In that era, the major contributions of Black people to the Union's victory in the Civil War (both as soldiers and as rebellious enslaved people behind enemy lines) were entirely erased, and Black Americans were represented as passive recipients of the gift of freedom.

Looking at these course offerings, one might reasonably object to the claim that Hillsdale College and PragerU are freeing schools from indoctrination.

The American Association of University Professors' [report](#) on “Political Interference and Academic Freedom in Florida’s Public Higher Education System,” published in December 2023, describes the effects of DeSantis’s targeting of universities, including the state takeover of an outstanding public liberal arts school, the New College of Florida. It begins with a quote from LeRoy Parnell, a law professor at Florida A&M, which reflects the general tenor of the extensive report and, more generally, the sense of despair under a regime of educational authoritarianism:

What we are witnessing in Florida is an intellectual reign of terror. There is a tremendous sense of dread right now, not just among faculty; it’s tangible among students and staff as well. People are intellectually and physically scared. We are being named an enemy of the State. The events at Jacksonville too, feel real, and people feel it could happen to them.

The raft of laws restricting teaching, entailing everything from disciplinary sanctions to threats of job loss, has also hit K-12 teachers incredibly hard. The laws have created significant fear around teaching topics in U.S. history, especially Black history. In general, the laws have created a climate of fear and intimidation surrounding discussion of problems with the old hegemonies of race, class, and gender.

Bringing educators under gradually more and more intrusive laws restricting their freedom creates a general climate of fear and intimidation. When such laws target anyone who challenges the greatness of a nation, or its heroes, it’s not a positive sign for democracy.

Trump has made it abundantly clear that a far-right attack on education will be central to his new administration from its beginning, [promising](#) to “sign a new executive order to cut federal funding for any school pushing critical race theory, transgender insanity, and other inappropriate racial, sexual, or political content on our children” on day one of his administration. Eliminating the Department of Education [is a goal](#) of Project 2025, along with many other changes that would dramatically reduce the federal government’s ability to intervene on potential civil rights violations. The honest teaching of Black history and protections for LGBTQ youth will be illegal in K-12 education. The American university system is the crown jewel of the world’s higher education system. As far as it is possible, a Trump-led federal government will seek to transform it radically at all levels, with Hillsdale College as its model. The intent is the burying of any civic compassion in the educational system.



[Rosa Brooks/](#)

Rosa Brooks is a law professor at Georgetown, a former senior Defense Department official, and the author of *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything*.

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COMMAND ERROR

The Liberal Fantasy Is Just That by Rosa Brooks

On the military in a fascist America

One evening in the autumn of 2019, I was seated at a banquet dinner with some of the capital city's best and brightest. It was a very Washington dinner, full of lawyers, lobbyists, and People Who Know People, chatting about politics over plates of rubbery chicken.

The 2020 presidential election was still a year away, and Nancy Pelosi, then the speaker of the House, had recently announced that she was launching an [impeachment inquiry](#) into potential abuses of power by President Donald Trump. When the dinner speeches were over and everyone at my table was nicely lubricated with second-rate wine, I tossed out a question that had been weighing on my mind: "What if Trump loses the election ... but refuses to step down?"

This was greeted with dismissive chuckles, and one of my tablemates—a well-connected lawyer with impeccable liberal credentials—assured me, to enthusiastic nods of agreement from others around the table, that this would never happen. "No way! He'd never try that. And if he did, the military would *never* let that happen."

My tablemate's cheery claim rested on multiple erroneous assumptions. For one thing, the U.S. military [has no role](#) in overseeing elections or ensuring that other institutions or actors respect their results. Even if

“the military”—a vast, sprawling, and far from homogeneous enterprise [consisting of roughly](#) 1.3 million active-duty service members and more than 750,000 reservists and National Guard troops—believed an incumbent president had lost a bid for reelection, there’s simply no legal or organizational mechanism for the military to force out a recalcitrant lame-duck president who refused to leave office.

Who would give such a command, and to whom? Although the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is the nation’s [highest-ranked](#) military leader, the chairman’s role is advisory in nature and comes with no power to issue commands to combatant forces. The other members of the joint staff—the Army chief of staff, the chief of naval operations, and so on—similarly lack that power, which resides instead in the 11 unified [combatant commands](#) (U.S. Central Command, U.S. European Command, and so on). Only the commander of U.S. Northern Command, or NORTHCOM, has the [authority to order](#) federal troops into action domestically, but, even then, combatant commanders can’t issue such orders on their own initiative; the orders must come from the secretary of defense, who would be serving at the pleasure of the president who was refusing to step down. (National Guard troops are under the authority of state governors, [unless federalized](#), but in such a case the secretary of defense would similarly be part of the chain of command.)

Despite the utter implausibility of my tablemate’s assertion, some variant of this notion has, in the years since then, become a recurring—and bizarre—liberal fantasy: the idea that the U.S. military will somehow save us from Donald Trump. It’s bizarre because, at least since Vietnam, liberals have been understandably skeptical of using U.S. military power to promote democracy—if democracy cannot be won through the ballot box, it is unlikely to be secured with bullets. But even leaving such considerations aside, it’s fantasy because the idea that the military will serve as an effective bulwark against autocracy is premised on deep misunderstandings about how the military operates.

It’s true, of course, that Trump *did* try to stay in office after losing the 2020 election, and [clear statements](#) by military leaders at the time denouncing the January 6 insurrection and reminding U.S. troops of their constitutional duties likely played some role in ensuring Trump’s eventual sulky departure. And no question, American democracy will likely be in need of rescue if Trump is reelected. If he makes his way back to the White House, Trump will do his best to turn the United States into a corrupt, kleptocratic autocracy.

During his first term, Trump appointed relatively institutionally minded figures to senior roles in his administration. Rex Tillerson, John Kelly, Jim Mattis, Mark Esper, Dan Coats, and the like were hardly starry-eyed liberals, but they shared a broad commitment to traditional norms of democratic governance and the rule of law, and they reined in some of Trump’s most egregious excesses. Thwarted, Trump soon [replaced them](#) with less experienced but more compliant officials—but his capacity to turn federal power to his own ends was limited both by his new inner circle’s lack of experience and by his own chaotic personality.

Things will almost certainly be different in a second Trump administration. Trump himself is no less chaotic—if anything, the numerous pending [criminal investigations](#) against him have amped up his narcissistic rage. But he’s no fool, and he has learned from his early mistakes. If he gets a second bite at the apple, Trump will come into office with a cadre of seasoned political operatives, handpicked for their [personal fealty](#), and a [detailed plan](#). He has made no secret of his [autocratic intentions](#).

Trump's plans with respect to the civilian executive branch have received much coverage. He has openly declared his desire [to purge](#) the career [civil service](#)—and society more broadly—of those he views as ideologically suspect (“the communists, Marxists, fascists, and the radical left thugs that [live like vermin](#) within the confines of our country”). He has similarly declared his intent to use the tools of executive power to [seek retribution](#) against those he views as his enemies—a vast and ever-expanding group that now includes everyone from [journalists](#) and [elected officials](#) to prominent first-term Trump officials such as retired [Gen. Mark Milley](#).

His plans for uniformed personnel have received far less scrutiny, but controlling the military is a major part of Trump's vision for his second term. While he has expressed only contempt for military personnel naïve enough to believe in selfless service, referring to those who had lost their lives as “[losers](#)” and “[suckers](#),” Trump is fond of military [pomp and circumstance](#), and fonder still of power. He has signaled his desire to [use the U.S. military](#) to [suppress domestic protest](#) and aid in [mass roundups](#), detentions, and deportations of undocumented immigrants, whom he views as “[animals](#).” He reportedly hopes to use missiles and military troops against cartels [inside Mexico](#) and has, at times, [openly flirted](#) with the idea of using nuclear weapons against [North Korea](#) and Iran.

While few of these ideas are likely to garner support from military leaders, no one should count on the military to “save” us from Trump's efforts to refashion the United States in his own dark, chaotic image. Trump is keenly aware of the unique regard in which Americans continue to hold the military. This makes the military both a tempting tool and a frequent target of his ire. Disappointed during his first term by the failure of those he called “[my generals](#)” to offer him blind obedience and adulation, Trump has vowed to make the military knuckle under in a second term.

For the most part, he will have the legal tools to do so. He can [request the retirement](#) of flag and general officers who show signs of independence, for instance, and [dismiss](#) those who don't take the hint. And he can make fealty to his agenda a condition of advancement for senior officers. This is already a core plank in the Heritage Foundation's [blueprint](#) for a second Trump presidency, which is [widely viewed](#) as having Trump's stamp of approval. It promises the White House will “rigorously review all general and flag officer promotions” to ensure that those with ideologically unacceptable views on “climate change, critical race theory, manufactured extremism, and other polarizing policies” will not be selected for leadership positions. Weeding out those with concerns about “manufactured extremism” is code for purging the military of officers who have spoken out against white nationalist organizations or condemned the January 6 insurrectionists.

Sensible military personnel will read the writing on the wall: Unless you want your career to come to an abrupt end, compliance is best. The U.S. military is, by design, a compliant institution, deeply acculturated to abide by principles of civilian control. While military personnel [take an oath](#) to support and defend the Constitution of the United States, they also have a legal obligation to follow orders, at risk of [court martial](#).

This is, generally speaking, a good thing: No one who cares about democracy should wish for a military that's prone to ignoring lawful orders from their elected commander in chief. True, military personnel also have a duty *not* to obey unlawful orders, but this should not give us much comfort; manifestly unlawful orders are vanishingly rare. If a president ordered troops to open fire on an unarmed civilian, in

so many words, the military response would be a robust “No, sir!” But even the most dubious and morally bankrupt presidential directives tend to come cloaked in the [language of legality](#). (Instead of “shoot that unarmed civilian,” imagine a different command: “Based on classified intelligence, I have determined that this individual is engaged in direct hostilities against the United States, poses an imminent threat, and is therefore a lawful target, and I order you to neutralize that threat.”)

Think back to the presidency of George W. Bush. Although the legal prohibition against torture was [crystal clear](#), and techniques such as waterboarding have long been considered a form of torture by U.S. courts, Bush administration [lawyers argued](#) that if waterboarding was employed solely as a means of gaining information, without a primary intention to cause severe pain, it didn’t count as torture. Several senior military lawyers [raised objections](#) when the Bush administration directed that such “enhanced interrogation” be used against detained terror suspects, but the military rebellion, such as it was, was limited to a few strongly worded memos. No senior officers resigned, and the military did what it is designed to do: It [defaulted to obedience](#), despite widespread misgivings among senior officer. Even without the specter of a president bent on retribution, the vast majority of military personnel will err on the side of obedience if there is even the slightest uncertainty about whether a particular presidential directive is unlawful. And if the senior officers most inclined to object have already been demoted or dismissed, it is implausible that Trump’s orders will face widespread military resistance.

No one should kid themselves about the degree of legal latitude President Trump would enjoy. Bush administration lawyers had to turn themselves into pretzels to argue that torture wasn’t really torture. But most of Trump’s stated plans won’t even require lawyerly contortions. Historically, there’s been a strong norm against domestic use of the military to suppress protest or engage in law enforcement activities, and some [legal safeguards](#) exist. But under the [Insurrection Act](#), the president can employ the military [domestically](#) in response to rebellion or insurrection, [or when](#) “any part or class of [a state’s] people is deprived of a right, privilege, immunity, or protection named in the Constitution,” or when an act of rebellion or violence “opposes or obstructs the execution” of the law.

The Supreme Court has historically interpreted this as giving the president complete discretion to decide what kind of activity justifies domestic use of the military. “The authority to decide whether the exigency has arisen belongs exclusively to the President,” opined the court in [Martin v. Mott](#) in 1827. If Trump [invokes](#) the Insurrection Act and deploys military personnel domestically to quell protests or round up immigrants, there will be plenty of unhappy military personnel—but they are unlikely to have any basis on which to claim such deployments are unlawful.

And when it comes to military action outside the United States, the news is worse. Notwithstanding Congress’s constitutional powers and legislation such as the [War Powers Act](#), successive presidents have enjoyed a [virtually unconstrained](#) ability to use military force beyond our borders. There would be plenty of military unhappiness if Trump directed attacks on Mexican soil or the use of tactical nuclear weapons, but it’s unlikely military leaders would have any lawful basis to object.

Military leaders who dislike the orders they receive sometimes engage in the time-honored Pentagon tradition of stonewalling and slow-rolling, looking for ways to quietly thwart the objectives of their civilian masters while maintaining a facade of compliance. But if President Trump uses his power to fire or

demote insufficiently loyal general officers, as he says he will, even this dubious avenue of military resistance will likely be closed off.

This leaves the last and most desperate of liberal fantasies: some sort of straight-out, organized military resistance against an autocratic President Trump. It's a wildly unlikely prospect, given deeply internalized norms of civilian control, and it's also organizationally almost unimaginable, given the dispersed nature of U.S. military power and the military's complex command structure. More to the point, it's a terrible idea. Anyone who finds such a prospect appealing should be careful what they wish for: Studies of military coups suggest that even coups carried out against brutal regimes to restore democracy [rarely have happy results](#) and often end up increasing, rather than decreasing, the level of state violence. In other words: If a society finds itself relying on the military to "save" democracy, there's probably little left to save.



[Francisco Goldman/](#)

Francisco Goldman's most recent novel is *Monkey Boy*, a Pulitzer Prize finalist.

May 16, 2024

EN MASSE

From Texas to Massachusetts by Francisco Goldman

On the border in a fascist America

“Welcome to the nightmare in my brain,” said Heather Axford, director of Central American Legal

Assistance, when I asked to interview her about a possible second Trump administration’s impact on immigration issues. CALA was founded in 1986, in response to [the wave of refugees](#) fleeing the Salvadoran civil war, by Anne Pilsbury—she retired as director in 2023, but remains as senior attorney—and Sister Peggy Walsh, a nun, and operates from the basement and a small office of the Transfiguration Church in an ungentrified pocket of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, at the edge of a Hasidic neighborhood. I first met Axford in 2009, when she was a recent graduate of University of Virginia Law School and had been at CALA for one year. She had a radiant, energetic presence then and still does.

Stephen Miller, Trump’s key immigration adviser, has vowed that Trump is [planning](#) such an enormously ambitious and “spectacular immigration crackdown” should he return to power that “the immigration legal activists won’t know what’s happening.”

But Axford knows what is coming if Trump is reelected. She won’t be surprised by any of it. But that’s what fills her with apprehension and sorrow. Axford’s immigration attorney work has overlapped with four presidencies, from George W. Bush to Joe Biden. “The shift from Obama to Trump was the most dramatic,” she said. Axford, who also teaches a class in refugee and asylum law at New York Law School, recalled how, starting in January 2017, every class began with a recounting of the previous week’s changes to immigration laws and norms. “Things that you took for granted,” she said, “that you didn’t realize were just norms. For example, prosecutorial discretion. In immigration court, the prosecutors, like all prosecutors, are supposed to have prosecutorial discretion. That means you don’t go to the mat on every single case just because. Your job isn’t to deport everyone in front of you, it’s to enforce the law as the law stands. If you look at someone, and they are clearly eligible for a form of relief, you don’t have to

fight that. The first thing that happened in January '17 is that that ended. There was no more room to negotiate. The marching orders were to fight every case, to oppose every granting of asylum.”

The new immigration policies, and changes, put forward during the last Trump administration, policies that—even though many were subsequently blocked or tied up in the courts—Trump and Miller have promised to [bring back and expand](#) in a second Trump term, include the following, and it’s a grim list: the travel ban that targeted even [potential tourists](#) from seven countries, most of which were [majority Muslim](#); the [termination](#) of DACA, the popular Dream Act, offering protections and rights to young people brought to the United States as children; [the ending of](#) Temporary Protected Status, for migrants from unsafe countries such as El Salvador, Honduras, and Haiti, many of whom have been residing in the United States, working, starting families and businesses, paying taxes, for at least 20 years now; the [“Remain in Mexico”](#) policy, which denied people who have passed credible fear interviews the right to await the processing of their asylum claims here; the Covid-era closing of the border to asylum claims, the reinstating of which a new Trump administration would supposedly justify [by arguing](#) that migrants bring other infectious diseases; the denial of Fourth Amendment rights to undocumented migrants, encouraging Immigration and Customs Enforcement and other agencies to make warrantless arrests in private homes and carry out workplace raids; and the infamous [child separation policies](#), which Trump has refused to disavow.

Let’s start with the border. The press has especially focused on Trump’s promise to round up undocumented immigrants in the United States, 10 million or more, and to place them in vast, [militarized detention camps](#) near the border, most likely in Texas, to await, without any due process, their deportations. Such an assault on normative human and legal rights is bound, of course, to be contested in the courts. But the Supreme and lower courts are expected to be far more favorable to Trump this time around.

Much of the U.S. side of the border, then, would become a militarized landscape with bleakly sanitized detention camps warehousing and hiding from outside view the suffering of millions of adults and children removed from their homes to be sent back to countries many no longer know at all. Families will be divided, with U.S.-born children often left behind. Just as during the last Trump administration, some deportees will meet violent deaths at the hands of the same organized, criminal forces they or their parents originally fled. “Remain in Mexico” having been ruled illegal by Mexican courts, it’s harder to exactly foresee what awaits there. But, as before, migrants may mass in border cities with conditions like those of refugee camps. Denied access to asylum, the desperate families and children will seek out ever more dangerous crossings. Already, record numbers of dead migrants are being found in remote parts of West Texas and [New Mexico](#). As president, Trump spoke admiringly of Israel’s separation walls and proposed that U.S. troops shoot migrants in the legs “to slow them down.” Perhaps now courts will bow to his wishes.

“It took them a while to figure things out,” said Axford of that first Trump term. “It won’t take them a while the next time around.” The Trump administration’s legal entanglements did little to blunt its assault on the right to asylum. U.S. asylum law is narrowly defined: It is limited to those with legitimate fears of violence resulting from persecution based on race, religion, nationality, social group, or political stance or opinion. Yet those laws undergird the perception of the United States as a country of refuge for those in flight from such potentially lethal persecutions, and as an upholder of our national obligations under

international human rights law. In the landmark *INS v. Cardoza-Fonseca* case of 1987, the Supreme Court ruled that even “a 10 percent chance of being shot, tortured, or otherwise persecuted” should be enough to be granted asylum. Under Trump, asylum law began to undergo something like a macabre heart transplant: the replacing of a still beating heart with a cadaverous one.

“By 2020, we had completely shut down access to the U.S. asylum system,” Stephen Miller boasted during a November 14, 2023, [interview on *The Charlie Kirk Show*](#). “Everybody was being expelled, without any ability to apply for asylum in the United States. We were able to build that architecture under President Trump’s leadership.”

The specifics of how asylum laws came to be swiftly undone outside of legislative acts or the jurisdiction of higher federal courts, as Axford explained it, were a surprise to me. She cited cases of domestic violence as an example. “Case law in this country allowed for grants of asylum to those who have survived severe domestic violence and who could show that there is no place in their country where they can be safe, and that they can’t rely on their own government,” said Axford. “It’s hard to prove, but domestic violence in these circumstances can be a basis for asylum, which with women from Central America is very important, because they are often bringing exactly that.” Before Trump, the U.S. Board of Immigration Appeals [had recognized](#) severe domestic violence as a basis for asylum. But U.S. attorneys general have broad unilateral powers in this area, and in June 2018, Attorney General Jefferson Sessions used this power in a case involving a Salvadoran woman [to end this practice](#). The change extended to victims of gang and cartel violence, sexual abuse, child abuse, and LGBTQ cases. “Overnight, a case I had that was a straightforward grantable claim suddenly was not,” Axford said. In 2021, Attorney General Merrick Garland restored the old law. In 2022, said Axford, her client was granted asylum, and, in court, the government deferred.

“If you stand to be killed simply because of who your family members are, because your dad pissed off the wrong people, that’s the basis for asylum. It’s hard to imagine a more obvious social group than the family,” said Axford. It was a known practice of gangs to eliminate the families of their enemies. But in 2019, Attorney General William Barr decided that the law only applied to “famous families ... only being from a family well-known or important in the country could be the basis for asylum.”

Decisions by attorneys general can be easily overturned by their successors. But if those decisions can be codified and published as new regulations, overturning them becomes a lot harder. The Trump Justice Department, Axford said, “began publishing the new regulations that immigration attorneys called ‘The Death to Asylum Regulations.’” Organizations sued, those regulations were enjoined, and the laws couldn’t be enforced until the lawsuits concluded. “Biden came in, and they walked away from those regulations. But they’ve been written. They’re just sitting there. I think about those all the time.” In a second Trump administration, “the courts won’t necessarily save us from that.”

For the last 20 years, I’ve been visiting New Bedford, Massachusetts, to research the novel that I am now writing. New Bedford is the country’s number one fishing port in terms of profits. It is now mostly Central Americans, especially Mayas from Guatemala, [who staff the port’s](#) fish processing houses. Many first fled to New Bedford as refugees from the wars of Central America, wars in which many, many more civilians were slain than combatants, and in which most of those civilians were murdered by U.S.-backed militaries. Many young women I’ve interviewed and gotten to know in New Bedford first worked in the so-

called fish houses at ages [as young as](#) 14, and some, working night shifts, still managed to go to high school. A few even went on to college; some already have daughters and sons in college. Working in fish houses is [the classic job](#) that nobody but immigrants, having no other choice, are willing to take, yet the health of New Bedford's commercial fishing-driven economy partly depends on them. Many of those women, I've learned over the years, fled sexual abuse from gangs or aberrant family members; many, so rightly, were granted asylum. At the [Community Economic Development Center](#), or CEDC, co-founded by Corinn Williams, which has been providing support of all kinds to New Bedford immigrants for over 20 years, springtime is when the offices are swamped every day, even Saturdays, by immigrants needing help filing their tax returns. On one wall, photographs have been displayed of new immigrant homeowners and the houses they've purchased. Across the street, the [Centro Comunitario de Trabajadores](#), a worker center led by Adrian Ventura, a Guatemalan Maya who was a war refugee, has organized fish plant employees, among others, on behalf of workers' rights regardless of immigration status. Most recently, the center won protections against deportation and got work permits for fish plant workers who'd been subjected to workplace abuses, a development Corinn Williams told me she's seeing reflected this year in immigrants' tax filings.

In New Bedford, the best-paid employment by far, especially for young men, is on the fishing boats. "The finest kind," as commercial fishermen are known there, until recently were made up mainly of Portuguese fishermen, immigrants, sons, grandsons, and those from other immigrant groups. Heroin, opioids, and now [fentanyl addictions](#) among fishermen have had a devastating and demoralizing effect on the fleet over the last two decades. So have the decline in fish stocks, other ecologically caused problems, the burdensome regulations these have occasioned, and perceptions of a threatened future for New England commercial fishing in general. I've heard many stories about fish captains who, at first reluctantly, hired young Guatemalans—many from remote mountain communities and who'd never even seen the ocean—to work on their boats, only to find themselves impressed by how quickly and adeptly those young men adapted to the brutally hard and dangerous work. Now Mexicans and Central Americans comprise an ever-growing part of the fishing fleet. They are paid the same as white crewmates. One fishing boat captain told me about how terrible it was, back in the times of Trump and ICE's earlier [Operation Return to Sender](#), when agents sometimes lurked on the docks, waiting for fishing boats to come in.

I thought of New Bedford's Central American community amid the spate of recent stories about a Congressional Budget Office assessment that recent immigrants are the cause of the current economy's relatively robust state. The CBO even estimates that the surge in immigration will help bolster the U.S. economy [by \\$7 trillion](#) over the next decade.

But Stephen Miller [claims](#): "Mass deportation will be a labor-market disruption celebrated by American workers, who will now be offered higher wages with better benefits to fill these jobs." Who are these workers he foresees flooding into fish processing houses, clamoring to work 12-hour shifts some weeks—other weeks, there might be no work at all—and standing on their feet in those cold, wet, icy, malodorous workplaces, cutting fish, weighing and packing scallops, prying open clams, holding crab legs one at a time up to suction machines? And how well will they work, and for what wages? How will that affect seafood prices?

When I hear Trump rousing his followers at his rallies with his anti-immigrant slurs, talking about immigrants “poisoning” the country’s blood, calling them animals, and so on, my blood boils, too, but with something like the opposite of the xenophobic and racist euphoria so many of his followers exult in. The exact opposite of euphoria is also a violent feeling. But I do give thanks that my Mexican wife and I are raising our two daughters in Mexico and not in the United States. I don’t know how I would be able to control myself, were my daughters to hear a U.S. president referring to them as animals, and worse. I think of the young children in New Bedford who are regularly exposed to such hatred, and my heart literally contracts and aches.

As I [listened to](#) Stephen Miller on *The Charlie Kirk Show*, his voice reminded me of a tense little finch skittering forward while plucking at a very long line of tiny seeds. Describing Trump’s plans to implement “the largest deportation operation since Eisenhower” and his Operation Wetback, Miller said, “Just imagine the logistics involved in getting illegal aliens back to Pakistan, Cambodia, and, yes, Mexico, the Northern Triangle, Brazil, South America, Panama, China, all throughout the Middle East, and so on and so forth, all throughout the continent of Africa. It is an undertaking every bit as significant, and every bit as daring and ambitious, for example, as building the Panama Canal. It is a great undertaking.”

His insipid little seed-plucking finch voice—“Pakistan, Cambodia, and, yes, Mexico...”—only grew excited when he snarled, “Fake stories, fake families, fake asylum claims! That all stops now!”

Miller has promised a surge of ICE [workplace raids](#) such as the one that occurred in New Bedford in 2007 at a sweatshop-type factory. That led to about 150 mostly Guatemalan women being deported, separating over 100 children from at least one parent, mostly mothers, some who were breastfeeding. New Bedford’s community rebounded from that initial trauma. “Guatemalans are made of iron,” said Ventura. “They survived the war; they will survive Trump. He’s not a Putin. We’ll defend our rights.”



[Eric Alterman/](#)

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May 17, 2024

DÉJÀ VU

How Can This Country Possibly Be Electing Trump Again? by Eric Alterman

How the media has failed, and what the Democrats need to do

With democracy itself on the line, the 2024 election will almost certainly be the nation's most consequential since 1860. It will also be the weirdest. There are two fundamental facts about this campaign that do not appear to be making much of an impact on what, at least today, seems to be close to a majority of the electorate. The first and more obvious one is that few people in history have ever been less qualified to hold a position of any responsibility, much less the most powerful position in the world, than Donald Trump. If elected, he will certainly deploy that power to destroy virtually everything Americans have historically held dear about the nation's democratic traditions.

The second, less obvious, but no less objective fact is that Joe Biden has been a remarkably good president. Not everything has worked out, and one can certainly disagree with many of his decisions.

His [embrace](#) of Bibi Netanyahu has clearly had disastrous consequences for Israel, Gaza, the United States, and likely for his own [reelection prospects](#). But in terms of the way presidents are traditionally measured, Biden has been a smash. The U.S. economy [is](#) the envy of the world. Yes, inflation is higher than one would like, but jobs [are plentiful](#), and so are raises for the people in them; wages [are rising](#) faster than inflation, as it happens. Violent crime [is way down](#). Infrastructure investments [are way up](#) since 2020. Student loans are [being forgiven](#). The labor movement [is rebounding](#). We are [leading](#) the

world in defending democracy in Ukraine. And yet, the danger of a Trump takeover [remains](#) as high as ever.

Consider just a few of Trump’s qualities that quite recently would have disqualified him in the eyes of all responsible voices in the discourse. I have no room to do justice to even a fraction, so I’ll have to stick to just keywords: [insurrectionist](#); [election denier](#); pathological [liar](#); [corrupt](#); [racist](#); [antisemite](#); (digital) [rapist](#); serial [adulterer](#); [Islamophobe](#); [con man](#); tax [cheat](#); [patsy to dictator](#); [wannabe dictator](#); [isolationist](#); [bully](#); psychopathically [narcissist](#); [sociopath](#); almost certainly medically [demented](#). We all know I could go on. (I haven’t even mentioned the Democrats’ single best issue: Trump’s proud [boast](#) that he was able to “kill *Roe v. Wade*.”)

So, what gives? Have roughly [half](#) of Americans of voting age lost their minds? Is Joe Biden really this bad a candidate? How is all this possible?

Multiple phenomena are at work, but the two most important are these: First is the fact that members of the mainstream media whose job it is to both inform and contextualize the nation’s politics have lost their nerve. Terrified of [accusations](#) of being “out of touch” at best and “liberally biased” at worst, they have abdicated any responsibility to render even the most fundamental judgments of what is and isn’t true when it comes to Trump. His lies and those of his representatives are repeated verbatim without challenge, much less correction. “Fact-check” columns after the fact do little to undo the damage of the original lies, threats, and plainly absurd statements Trump makes literally [by the minute](#). What’s more, they routinely clean up his statements for him, making him appear far more rational and reasonable than he is, ignoring his consistently mangled syntax and nonsensical assertions (as well as his frequent [confusion](#) about who is president and who he is running against).

This mainstream media fear is the product of nearly a half-century of Republicans “[working the refs](#),” complaining that liberal elites cannot understand or give fair coverage to the millions of Americans holding conservative views. Ben Bradlee by and large [endorsed](#) this view back when Ronald Reagan won his 1980 landslide, and it [became](#) part and parcel of mainstream journalistic practice with Trump’s surprise 2016 victory.

As William Greider, then a top editor at *The Washington Post*, noted, Reagan’s electoral success had been “quite traumatic for the press, editors, and reporters ... because it seemed to confirm the message of the critics that the press was out of touch with the rest of the country.” He added, “It was a sense of ‘My God, they’ve elected this guy who nine months ago we thought was a hopeless clown.... [T]here’s something going on here, and we don’t understand, and we don’t want to get in the way.’” Bradlee, Greider’s boss, later observed a post-Watergate “return to deference” in the media, attributing this to “a subconscious feeling ... that we were dealing with someone this time who really, really, really disapproved of us, disliked us, distrusted us, and that we ought not give him any opportunities to see he was right.”

Second in importance is the Democrats’ combination of an embarrassment of riches in terms of issues and inability to focus on the few—say, three of them—that would convince those famous swing voters that the choice between Trump and Biden is really no choice at all. Biden is a highly skilled politician with mainstream views who makes mistakes and has lost a step or two to age, yes, but who has proved himself extremely competent in office. He leads a party that is, yes, [divided](#) over Israel and Gaza

but [united](#) in support of the rule of law, the norms of democracy, and the value of consensus. Trump and many of his followers are the kinds of people one routinely meets in a prison psych ward. What Biden and company must find a way to do is to herd those Democratic cats into repeating a single set of mantras that force the mainstream media to focus on the fundamental sorts of future each man offers: the imperfect versus the apocalyptic. Three issues, tops: abortion and two more. Hammer them home and save the country.



[Talía Jane/](#)

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Samuel Alito Can't Even Lie Properly About That Upside-Down Flag by Talia Jane

The Supreme Court justice tried to explain away reports of a "Stop the Steal" symbol outside his home. That only made things worse.

After a *New York Times* story [revealed](#) an inverted flag was flown outside the home of Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito in January 2021—for which Alito [blamed his wife](#), Martha-Ann—a Fox News host stepped up to help the Alito's [further embarrass](#) themselves.

"I spoke directly with Justice Alito about the flag story in the *New York Times*," Shannon Bream [posted](#) on X (formerly Twitter) Friday morning. "He told me a neighbor on their street had a 'F— Trump' sign that was within 50 feet of where children await the school bus in January 21."

Twitter user Aaron Fritschner—[deploying](#) basic fact-checking that would make a Fox News host's head spin—looked into the claim and found it doubtful. [Multiple](#) news articles from 2021 show schools in Alexandria, Virginia, where the Alitos reside, were [operating remotely](#) from [winter 2020](#) well

into [February](#) of 2021—a month after the Alito’s inverted flag was first documented. As the Alitos may recall, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down school bus operations.

Bream ran even more cover for the Alitos, claiming [they told her](#) a neighbor put up a sign “personally addressing Mrs. Alito and blaming her for the January 6th attacks,” a questionable claim that smacks more of a hilariously passive-aggressive troll than a serious accusation. Bream also claimed the Alitos [told her](#) of an incident where the conservative couple were walking through the neighborhood when Martha-Ann Alito engaged in a dispute with “a male at the home with the sign” who “engaged in vulgar language, ‘including the c-word.’” In response to that dispute, Bream says, Martha-Ann opted to raise a symbol popular with [anti-government extremists](#), a reaction which makes little to no sense. According to Bream, the Alitos [claim](#) the inverted flag was only up “for a short time.” According to messages sent from a neighbor at the time reviewed by [The New York Times](#), the flag was up for “several days.” The inverted American flag is a symbol popular with far-right and anti-government protests, and it was raised at the Alito household at some point between the January 6 Capitol riot and Biden’s 2021 inauguration. Regardless of why, its presence outside the home of a Supreme Court justice raises concerns of bias with judicial experts.

In May 2022, this reporter [covered](#) a pro-abortion demonstration outside the Alitos’ Alexandria home. At the time, their flagpole bore a [correctly-oriented](#) American flag, and no neighbors reported any flag or sign-related conflicts. In lieu of any volatile outbursts or expletive-laden signs, their neighbors set up a charming fire pit and offered this reporter [wine, cheese](#), and [key lime pie](#).