

The march to autocracy

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The United States has never fully lived up to our nation's founding ideals, but our democracy has set us apart from rule by monarchs, despots and dictators. As we approach America's 250th anniversary, I am mindful of Abraham Lincoln's fervent hope that our "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Today, our rights and freedoms are under attack by an administration that is violating our laws and seeking limitless power. We, the people, must act.

Freedom of speech and of the press are enshrined in the First Amendment of the Constitution, but the Trump administration has ramped up attacks against both. Last week, in a rare and likely illegal move, the FBI raided the home of a Washington Post reporter, seizing her phone and computers. The reporter covers the Trump administration's reshaping of the federal government to enforce his agenda.

Federal officials are investigating two U.S. senators for their participation in a video reminding U.S. military and intelligence service members that they are obligated to refuse illegal orders from the president. Trump expressed [support](#) for imprisoning and executing the Democratic lawmakers who participated in the video, a stance that would have been unthinkable coming from any other American president.

This propensity for retaliation and suppression of rights is reshaping public discourse in America. Hundreds of Americans have been punished in the wake of Charlie Kirk's assassination, including some who simply reposted Kirk's own words. Our Texas affiliate, with the AFT, sued the Texas Education Agency for threatening and even terminating teachers for protected private speech that educators expressed outside of the classroom in the aftermath of Kirk's death. Two things are true: Kirk's assassination was abhorrent. And Americans don't lose their First Amendment rights when they become teachers.

Despite Trump's claim that his immigration enforcement efforts are targeting the "worst of the worst," most people detained by federal agents have no criminal record. Heavily armed masked agents are apprehending people while they are at work, picking up their children at school, or simply in their homes. We've crossed into authoritarian territory when

unidentifiable agents of the state violently pull people out of their cars, nab people off the street into unmarked vehicles, indiscriminately demand proof of citizenship, and aim firearms at bystanders exercising their legally protected rights to peacefully assemble and to film immigration raids. Americans, including those who voted for Trump, want leaders to make our lives better, not to undermine our constitutional rights or make us less safe.

It is part of American culture to help each other in times of need. But ICE has treated community members who bear witness with whistles, cameras and their mere presence as enemies. That was grimly underscored last week by the fatal shooting of Renee Good by an ICE officer in Minnesota. The role of government when a tragedy like this happens is to thoroughly and transparently investigate the circumstances of the event. One would hope that officials would also express empathy. But the president, the vice president and others in their administration quickly moved to control the investigation, exonerate the officer and smear Good, baselessly calling her a "de-ranged leftist," a "paid agitator" and "disrespectful," as if that is punishable by death. Lies, smears and attempts to manipulate public perception are tactics used by authoritarian regimes, not democracies.

I have been hearing from my members where large ICE operations are underway. Border Patrol officers deployed tear gas at a Minneapolis high school as students were being dismissed. A teacher in a nearby suburb told me that two students were apprehended by ICE at their after-school jobs. Teachers in Detroit are pressing for the release of students who are

being held in detention centers, including in other states. Nurses in Oregon have shared concerns about ICE presence as detainees receive medical treatment. We are calling for ICE to stay out of schools, day care centers and healthcare facilities.

People are pushing back against assaults on our freedoms.

We are at an inflection point. Trump is testing the limits of presidential power and finding that there are still checks and balances. Some Republican members of Congress broke with the president to join Democrats in voting to extend healthcare subsidies and to scuttle a bill that would allow employers to avoid paying overtime. Recent polls show Trump's approval rating as low as [35 percent](#), with the [largest drop](#) in strong support for the president among Republicans and MAGA voters. Americans are rising up. In the days after Good's death, there were more than 1,200 nonviolent gatherings across the country.

We the people are pushing back against assaults on our freedoms and on our neighbors. Whether in 1776 or 2026, protest against authoritarian tactics is patriotic. It is what the founders did, and it is what is required of us. Democracy can't defend itself.



Weingarten speaks at a protest against violent immigration enforcement tactics in Portland, Ore., on Jan. 10.

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