



## LIVING UNDER AUTHORITARIAN RULE – TAKING DONALD TRUMP AT HIS WORD

- Listen to what Donald Trump says and recall what he has done to date. Whether or not Trump fits the definition of a putative fascist leader or authoritarian leader is beside the point. The signs are unmistakable, as are the parallels to authoritarian rulers.
- I set out below what America could look like under a second Trump presidency:
  - Deployment of National Guard and active duty military across America
  - Crackdown on opposition figures
  - Weaponization of law enforcement and prosecutions
  - Further rolling-back of rights
  - Acceleration of political violence
  - Attacks and restrictions on media
  - Weakening of democratic opposition
  - Resistance

Modern history offers up plenty examples of rulers who rose to positions of absolute or near absolute power. Those examples have much in common, including the propensity of putative authoritarian rulers to telegraph what they intend to do and who benefit, in their pursuit of power, from the support of key enablers, ranging from compliant media and opportunistic politicians to business leaders convinced they can control events, as well as shock troops. All too often, too few took the putative authoritarian leader seriously ... until it was too late.

The historical examples also have one other feature in common – authoritarians ruled overseas, not in America. History does repeat itself, and here we are six months away from an election that could mark the descent into authoritarian rule in America. I hope I am wrong, but it is hard to ignore history, and the myriad warning signs.

### **Fascist? Authoritarian? Does it Matter?**

I referred above to authoritarian rulers, but allow me to digress for a moment. Among historians, political scientists, political philosophers and humanities scholars there is little consensus on definitions of dictator, totalitarian ruler, authoritarian ruler and fascist ruler, and, not surprisingly, there is also little consensus on *how* to label Donald Trump and Trumpism.

Andrew Marantz addresses the absence of consensus in his New Yorker article ([“Why We Can’t Stop Arguing About Whether Trump Is a Fascist”](#)) and concedes that “semi-fascist” might be the most appropriate description, though other qualifications may be appropriate: “proto-fascist” and “would-be authoritarian.” Citing Princeton University philosopher Jan-Werner Müller, Marantz notes that it would be a mistake to view Trump as Hitler, Mussolini, or Berlusconi or Meloni. Historical analogies he says are not apt, and so we should not be thinking about “armband insignias, tanks in the streets, and martial law,” but rather about “lawfare, sophisticated cronyism, surveillance, and counter-majoritarian restrictions on reproductive rights and voting access and academic freedom.”



We no longer have the luxury of the intellectual debate, and perhaps ascribing labels obscures what happens as these leaders rise to power. So I turned to New York University history professor and fascism scholar Ruth Ben-Ghiat (*see* her recent Salon [interview](#)), who is clear in labelling Trump a “fascist” and “authoritarian,” and draws eerie historical parallels particularly to Mussolini. She points to two core prongs of authoritarian rulers – revolution and reaction. The revolution prong glorifies violence, with citizens given permission to use violence, while the reaction prong glorifies the past – the traditional (in the present case, the 1950s) way of life, which then gives way to replacement theory. (*See also* Christopher R. Browning, writing in *The Atlantic* (“[A New Kind of Fascism](#)”).)

Ben-Ghiat posits that Trump, like Mussolini, seeks to change the perception of violence through his rallies. Violence, she [writes](#) in her Substack, *Lucid*, is now Trump’s brand. His rallies are akin to fascist spectacles. The frequently repeated promises to pardon the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrectionists, and the pardoning of the likes of Michael Flynn and Roger Stone, are intended to encourage violence, with the message that you can get away with it. Trump’s reference in his Veterans Day speech to undocumented immigrants “polluting the blood of the country” and to “vermin” not only echo statements made by Hitler, but need to be understood as part of the psychological tactic aimed at reducing aversion to violence by dehumanizing the perceived enemy.

The mocking of political opponents is also part of the autocrat’s playbook, it is cruel, and to have an autocracy you need people to be cruel. The mocking of a disabled reporter in 2016 also has parallels to fascists. The embrace of Viktor Orban (presiding over an illiberal democracy) and other autocratic leaders is also deliberate, argues Ben-Ghiat – conditioning Americans to see authoritarian rulers as positive role models. Trump’s message: this is the leadership Americans will have.

Incidentally, one cannot be a dictator “for only one day,” and once a ruler heads down that slippery slope towards autocracy, the regime needs to stay in power at all costs.

Like Mussolini and Hitler, Trump and his enablers have adopted what Ben-Ghiat calls the “upside-down world of authoritarianism.” Fascists view their ideology as “freedom” and liberal democracy as “tyranny.” Trump calls out Biden as a “threat to democracy” and far right members of the House, together with Trump, refer to the Biden administration as the “Biden regime” and to Biden and his family as the “Biden crime family.”

On Sunday, the media [reported](#) that, at a donor event at Mar-a-Lago over the weekend, after lashing out at prosecutors Jack Smith and Fani Willis, Trump accused President Biden of “running a Gestapo administration.” In his [interview with the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#) last week, Trump not only falsely claimed he won Wisconsin in 2020, but looking forward declined to say he would accept the results in 2024, and he did so by framing his response as protecting the country (“If everything’s honest, I’ll gladly accept the results. If it’s not, you have to fight for the right of the country.”) The use of the language is deliberate, and it works.

It is not particularly useful to debate how to label Trump, but connecting his language, his specific threats and his actions to consequences, with the benefit of history, is absolutely critical. It is all there for his base – the attacks on his political opponents, his critics, the



media and the judiciary, and the warnings that liberal elites and the “others” (native-born non-whites and immigrants) are taking over the country and will ruin America. His inflammatory rhetoric is driving polarization, stoking anger, weaponizing hate, fostering a climate of fear and legitimizing the use of political violence. He understands the power of words to humiliate, inflame and embolden followers to resort to violence, and has successfully tapped into a vein of resentment among white nationalists, Christian nationalists, nativists, militia groups and other extremist groups.

And, like autocrats before him, Trump has a power to reach beyond his base and turn staunch critics into supporters, desperate to offer public endorsement. One need only look to the many Republican members of Congress who experienced firsthand the trauma of January 6<sup>th</sup> and then flocked to Trump’s side, or even the latest crop of supporters providing endorsements after months of criticism (*see* Caitlin Collin’s interview with [former AG Bill Barr](#)). In some cases, it may be a deep distrust of Democrats and a disinclination to take Trump literally – tribalism on steroids, in others opportunism, and in yet others fear and self-preservation. Trump, I suspect, like other strongmen, is under no illusion about the motivations underlying that loyalty. There are countless examples of Trump turning on his loyal soldiers, seemingly on a whim, when it suits him.

And, as in other autocracies, there will be courageous souls willing to speak out, potentially at great risk to their personal safety. A minority yes, but they are [speaking](#) from direct personal experience – former Vice President Mike Pence, former National Security Adviser John Bolton, former Secretaries of Defense Jim Mattis and Mark Esper, former White House Chiefs of Staff HR McMaster and John Kelly, former Acting White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney, and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley. Other members of the Trump administration are speaking out as well and are focused on how best to leverage their voices. We ignore these voices at our peril, and for validation we should remain ever cognizant of the tremendous personal costs they face in speaking out.

### **Implications of Authoritarian Rule**

We talk of authoritarian rule, but what exactly could that mean in America? I start briefly with its antithesis.

Liberal democracy is far more than a system of elections and majority rule, and far too complex to be reduced to one word – “freedom,” for example, as liberal democracy also represents a system of governance based on checks and balances, the consent of the governed, transparency and accountability, respect for the rule of law and the peaceful transfer of power, and respect for human rights and equal treatment under the law. So too then must we see authoritarianism as more than the mere absence of democracy, but rather must be understood as an assault on the entire structure of democracy and the myriad ways it intersects with the lives of its citizens. Authoritarians and their enablers (and it is imperative to keep the enablers in mind) can pick and choose what they want to undermine, and can have greater or less success in those endeavors.

In its most extreme, authoritarian rule in America would mean the end of the protections available under the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the end of a free press, the end of free and fair elections, the end of freedom of assembly, and the end of the rule of law and the



ability to seek legal redress before the courts. In effect, we are talking about the end of “inalienable rights” of Americans (life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness), which are expressly recognized in the Declaration of Independence and are secured via the structure of government embedded in, and the limitations placed on government by, the Constitution.

To achieve those goals, an authoritarian ruler must dominate the institutions of government and ultimately what people can do, can say, can think. It means cowing, failing which eliminating, the opposition. The coups d’etat playbook historically was straight-forward: take over the radio station and exert absolute control over the narrative. Then deploy a combination of troops, police and domestic intelligence operatives to round up dissidents and other “enemies of the people.”

And to galvanize supporters and tame opposition there is always the option of creating a “Reichstag Fire” moment;<sup>1</sup> recall questions have swirled for years as to whether Vladimir Putin ordered his domestic security service, the FSB, to create their own “Reichstag moment” when in 1999, as a prelude to the second Chechen War, four apartment blocks in three Russian cities were blown up, and a fifth bombing was attempted in Ryazan, ostensibly by Chechens.

### **What Trump Has Said, and What He Had Done**

As for Donald Trump, we can look to what he did, or more importantly attempted to do (but often was constrained by institutional and individual guardrails), while he was President, we can listen to what he has said since Election Day 2020 about the role of government, the expanded powers of the presidency, political violence and abiding by election results, and we can consider his professed admiration for autocratic leaders abroad (from China, to Russia to North Korea). Line these up side-by-side with the playbook of authoritarian rulers through the ages, and one is left with a frightening roadmap to autocracy in America.

Lest we forget, Trump’s authoritarian tendencies were on display at certain defining moments during his term. At [Lafayette Square](#) on June 1, 2020, Trump demonstrated both his disdain for freedom of assembly, freedom of speech and the right to protest peacefully, and his

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<sup>11</sup> In January 1933, German President von Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Chancellor after the Nazis, together with other right wing parties, garnered 33% of the vote (short of a majority). Not long after, Hitler using his power as Chancellor appointed 50,000 stormtroopers as auxiliary police. In February, amid, in the words of a [Time report](#), “a campaign of unparalleled violence and bitterness, a fire broke out at the Reichstag (the German House of Parliament). The fire was followed the next day by a Presidential [decree](#) “suspending until further notice” most of the rights under the Weimar Constitution, including freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, a free press, and privacy, and legalized interception of correspondence.

It remains unclear if the convicted and executed perpetrator acted alone or not, and whether or not Nazis were involved. A February 2015 [article](#) in TIME reminded readers that that the origins of the fire were never definitively proven, but recalling its [reporting](#) of March 13, 1933, the “aftermath [of the fire] had already been determined by Nazi powers.” The fire, according to Nazi officials, was to have been the signal for a Communism uprising to trigger a civil war. There was no evidence of that, and yet scores of leading Communists and Socialists were jailed, and the decree was followed by the passage of the Enabling Act, the foundation of Hitler’s dictatorship, which incidentally was [justified](#) as needed to avoid another fire.



willingness to politicize the military for his own personal gratification. His actions that day are believed to have been prompted by reports that he had been moved by the Secret Service to the rarely used Presidential Emergency Operations Center (the underground White House bunker) when protests outside White House gates escalated the Friday before. He was embarrassed for looking weak after excoriating governors (on a conference call that morning) for being “weak” and not arresting protesters, and urging them to “dominate” the protesters. He asked his Secretary of Defense about shooting peaceful protesters (who incidentally in that June 1 conference call had called for “dominating the battle space” – meaning the streets of our cities).

Seven months later, on January 6<sup>th</sup>, Trump’s willingness to circumvent the law, including the Constitution, and incite violence to achieve his own political goals – overturning an election he knew he had lost, was on display for the entire world to see. If anyone needs evidence of Trump’s inclination to be an authoritarian ruler, January 6<sup>th</sup> is Exhibit A – this was brazen, an indisputable attempt to prevent the peaceful transfer of power (an attempted coup d’etat against his own government) and, perhaps, but for Mike Pence, he may have succeeded – his second term would have been a dictatorship. Not foreseeable? No, just a failure of imagination.

Lest we are not paying full attention, and need reminders, Trump’s recent interviews with Eric Cortellessa of TIME (transcripts available here), some of the initial commentary about the interviews, including Tom Nichols’ article in the Atlantic (“A failure of Imagination About Trump”) and Eugene Robinson’s commentary in the Washington Post (“Trump keeps warning us about his second term. Are you listening?,” and the context provided most recently by Robert Kagan’s op-ed in the Washington Post (“We have a radical democracy. Will Trump voters destroy it?”), capture succinctly the fate that could await us.<sup>2</sup>

*As for what Trump is now saying:*

- He has called for the termination “of all rules, regulations and articles, even those found in the Constitution.”
- He has said he would direct his Department of Justice to investigate “radical district attorneys and attorneys general” and has threatened to appoint a special prosecutor to investigate the “entire Biden crime family and all others involved with the destruction of our elections, borders & country itself.” He has threatened to “lock-up” his political opponents, including officials at the FBI and Department of Justice.
- He has threatened to deploy the National Guard units against protesters and would undertake mass roundups, detention and deportation of the estimated 10.5 million undocumented immigrants in the country. Trump has said he would also use active-duty military units. Could not happen here? His ability to declare martial law and bring under his command state National Guard units and/or active military units is

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<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, these journalists join a long line of journalists and political commentators willing to call out looming political threats, at great personal cost. I am reminded of the journalist and political commentator Dorothy Thompson, who made it her mission to warn of the threats posed by Nazis and more broadly by fascism abroad and at home, and who saw no conflict between her role as journalist and forceful voice against fascism.



firmly [embedded](#) in national law. Take a look at Title 10 and Title 32 of the United States Code. Trump has [said](#) he would seek help from local police forces and would deny funding to jurisdictions that decline to adopt his policies (“they won’t partake in the riches”).

And to put this all into perspective, according to [NBC News](#) (based on Pew Research Center data), 5.6 million of the 130 million US households (about 1 in 25) include a family member who is an undocumented immigrant. The figures for California (8%), Nevada (9%) and Texas (8%) are double the national average. Most undocumented immigrants have been in the United States on average for 16 years (in California it is 20.3 years). Pew Research Center [estimates](#) that 4.6% of US workers in 2021 were undocumented. Studies by academics and think tanks have found no evidence that undocumented immigrants commit more crime than legal immigrants and native-born US citizens. If anything, the rates of crime as well as the rates of incarceration are lower. (See “[Trump says migrants are fuelling violent crime. Here is what the research shows](#)” and “[The truth about illegal immigration and crime.](#)”)

- He [intimates](#) that he would fire US attorneys who fail to prosecute someone on his orders, a stunning departure from the tradition of independent prosecution dating back to the earliest days of the country.
- He [refuses](#) to commit to vetoing a national ban on abortion if one is passed by Congress, and he refuses to comment on whether women should have access to abortion pills. He has said that he would not seek to stop states with abortion bans from punishing women who access the procedure. He would leave it to the states to decide whether or not to monitor women’s pregnancies.
- He has [called](#) for the creation of a credentialing body to certify teachers who embrace “patriotic values.”
- As part of his attack on the “deep state,” he would reinstitute an executive order signed in the waning days of his first administration and reversed by the Biden administration. [Schedule F](#) would reclassify potentially 50,000 civil servants in “confidential, policy-determining, policy-making or policy-advocating” positions as at-will political appointees, depriving them of civil service protections in place for 141 years and allowing them to be fired.<sup>3</sup> He has said he would start with the national security and intelligence communities. Civil servants could be subject to loyalty tests, in effect replacing loyalty to the Constitution with loyalty to Trump and his administration.
- He wants to [end](#) the independence of the Federal Trade Commission, which together with the Department of Justice, has the power to block corporate acquisitions on antitrust grounds, providing him with a useful tool to keep recalcitrant business leaders in line.

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<sup>3</sup> [Regulations](#) issued by the Personnel Management Office in April 2024 are designed to make it more difficult to reinstate Schedule F, though some experts are sceptical, with one former government official [saying](#) that the regulations would “serve as a speed bump, as opposed to a barrier” to resurrecting Schedule F or similar rules. Congressional action to block reclassifications has not gained traction.



- From the earliest days of his first campaign, Trump regularly has railed against journalists and news outlets as “enemies of the people.” He has called for licenses of news networks to be [revoked](#) for not carrying his speeches and once attempted to have the press credential of a CNN White House correspondent revoked. He wants to [end](#) the independence of the Federal Communications Commission, giving him another useful tool, this one to control the flow of information by thinning the ranks of his perceived “enemies of the people.”

Let’s also not forget, Trump is not acting alone or in vacuum. The efforts by a number of elected election-deniers in Congress to overturn the results of the 2020 election, the willingness of a mob to attack the Capitol (and threaten to kill the Vice President), the steady stream of support from a right wing media ecosystem that soft pedals Trump’s more dangerous impulses and threats and labels the more concerned as alarmist, and the failure of much of his party to criticize his anti-democratic threats let alone support holding him to account, demonstrate the ease with which Trump could carry out an anti-democratic agenda.

And add to the mix the Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025 (the roadmap for the next Republican administration that calls for concentrating power in the hands of the Presidency at the expense of the courts and Congress – a trampling of Constitutional principles in the name of elevating the “unitary executive theory”), as well as the trajectory of Republican-controlled state legislatures. As [Browning notes](#), states controlled by MAGA Republicans, once hailed as laboratories of democracy, are beginning to resemble one-party regimes beholden to a minority of the population. He cites Florida and Tennessee (*see also* Anne Applebaum’s article in The Atlantic (“[Is Tennessee A Democracy?](#)”)).

Another group driving culture war battles on social issues is the Christian nationalist movement, whose adherents, as [set out](#) by Ashley Lopez of NPR, view the United States as a Christian nation and therefore believe its laws should be rooted in Christian values. While Christian nationalism, with its strong overtones of political violence, is as old as the Republic, what is new is its [embrace](#) by a former president, now candidate for president.

Trump, forever in need of validation and now motivated by a deep desire for revenge and retribution, will demand public declarations of loyalty and demonstrations of allegiance. The more he gets, the more he will want, and there will be no place to hide. Political leaders, business leaders and others seeking to curry favor will need to prove their fealty to him and his enablers.

## **Executive Powers**

At the outset, I cited the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. I could have continued with a recitation of a range of rights that we as citizens of this country enjoy. That said, the powers of the Presidency are significant. We know about many of them, including the Insurrection Act,<sup>4</sup> which would allow Trump to declare martial law. Incidentally, if martial law has been

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<sup>4</sup> As I have set out before (*see* my briefing note of [January 4, 2024](#)), it is imperative that the Insurrection Act is amended by Congress. Yesterday, the Washington Post Editorial Board made that [plea](#), making reference to its earlier [reporting](#) that Trump associates have drafted plans to invoke the Insurrection Act on January 20, 2025. The work on the Insurrection Act is led by Jeffrey Clark, presumed to be one of six unnamed co-conspirators in the federal election



declared, the *writ of habeas corpus* (protecting against unlawful and indefinite imprisonment) in theory remains operative unless Congress approves a presidential attempt to suspend it. I say “in theory” because we could find ourselves in a world where the Constitution’s protections as a practical matter give way to facts on the ground.

We must also factor in emergency powers and secret powers reportedly at the disposal of the president that can be deployed in times of national emergencies, and apparently a number of national emergency have never fully been rescinded.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most comprehensive set of emergency powers are set out in the [International Emergency Economic Powers Act](#), which gives the president unilateral powers to deploy against any “unusual and extraordinary threat, which has its source in whole or substantial part outside the United States” if he “declares a national emergency with respect to such threat.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Life Under Autocratic Rule**

So, what could all of this mean, taking Trump at his word?<sup>7</sup>

Lines quickly will be drawn between those supportive of the government and the rest of the country. If the government becomes more authoritarian (at this point, better characterized as a “regime”), more people will feel compelled (or will feel they have no choice but) to choose sides, with society splintering along multiple fault lines. Those across civil society organization, grassroots groups and simply concerned citizens will coalesce around opposition groups. We will have moved to a new split-screen American political paradigm:

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interference case against Trump and a named defendant in the Georgia election interference case. According to the federal election interference case [indictment](#), Clark responded to a deputy White House counsel on January 3, 2021, when told there would be “riots in every major city” if Trump remained in office after losing the 2020 election, “Well, ... that’s why there’s an Insurrection Act.”

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Andrew Cockburn’s article in Harper’s (“[The Enemies Briefcase: Secret powers and the presidency](#)”), Mark Medish and Joel McCleary’s article in Just Security (“[The Looming Crisis of Emergency Powers and Holding the 2020 Presidential Election](#)” and Elizebeth Goitein’s analysis for the Brennan Center (“[Trump’s Hidden Powers](#)”).

<sup>6</sup> See Gene Healy of the Cato Institute (“[Emergency Powers](#)”), who describes the IEEPA as “offer[ing] the most tantalizing possibilities to any individual bent on autocratic rule.”

[Goitein](#) set out one such possible scenario in 2018: Trump, under the IEEPA, authorizes the Treasury Department to take action against Americans in the United States “who offer material support” to asylum seekers “or for that matter, to undocumented immigrants in the United States” after determining that they pose “an unusual and extraordinary threat to national security.” She also notes that under the IEEPA, a president has the power to shut down any electronic communications in the United States or freeze the bank accounts of Americans. In 2018, the Brennan Center [identified](#) 135 statutory powers available to a president who declares a national emergency. See also, Elizabeth Goitein’s article in The Atlantic (“[THE ALARMING SCOPE OF THE PRESIDENT’S EMERGENCY POWERS: From seizing control of the internet to declaring martial law, President Trump may legally do all kinds of extraordinary things](#)”).

<sup>7</sup> I first set out a list of potential consequences in my briefing note of [December 16, 2023](#). This is an elaboration of that list.





regime-opposition, replacing majority-minority. How some of these threats play out of course will depend on which party controls the Senate and the House. Any one significant action could prompt a range of reactions and responses, leading to a spiralling of events, some initially intended, some not.

***Deployment of force across America.*** As protests break out across the nation leading up to Inauguration Day, with media sure to comment on the size of the crowds, Trump could invoke the Insurrection Act to clear peaceful protesters so as not to mar his inauguration. National Guard units and active-duty military troops are called out to “maintain order.” Can’t happen? The dress rehearsal for this was June 1, 2020 at Lafayette Square. National Guard and active-duty military troops will be faced with the prospect of having to obey unlawful orders, caught in the crossfire of a deliberate recalibration of a tradition that has long endured of avoiding the politization of the military. And let’s not forget the militia groups, whose ranks will have been replenished with pardons of January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrectionists and potentially others. We have been warned, by none other than retired military officers.

Once a network of detention camps with capacity to hold undocumented immigrants are in place, National Guard, local law enforcement and active-duty military could be directed to begin rounding up those immigrants. And how do you undertake such a round-up: checkpoints and identity checks? State and local police departments could be pressured to assist. It would be chaos, as countless lives, people with longstanding and deep ties to their communities, including Dreamers, many with families, will be upended. Consider the impact on the full tapestry of domestic life – schools, housing, businesses, communities. Can’t happen here? Remember the family separation policy with the kids put in cages. Remember the ICE raids.

Undoubtedly many more could be caught up in the round-up effort (including American citizens), with questions asked later. Democratic governors, in scenes reminiscent of the pandemic era, would resist. This could easily trigger broader deployments of National Guard ostensibly to address non-existent crime waves in major cities. In his [Time interviews](#), when confronted with statistics collected by state and local police departments that belie his claims about soaring rates of violent crime, Trump responded, “It’s a lie. It’s fake news.”

Federalizing the National Guard and active-duty military to implement regime positions ultimately could pit Blue state governors, courts and government against their Red state counterparts, and ultimately Americans against Americans.

Imagine too if a domestic terrorist act were to occur in the midst of all of this.

***Crackdown on opposition figures.*** Trump will have had four years to draw up lists of people he feels have betrayed him, have stood in his way or otherwise pose a threat to his agenda. He has threatened to prosecute his political opponents, and that process could expand quickly. Similarly, some portion of those appointed to key positions in his administration likely would have similar lists. Can’t happen here? In a sense, we have already seen examples of the weaponization of instruments of power, including the House impeachment of Secretary Mayorkas, calls to impeach President Biden, and a wave of subpoenas issued by House committees targeting civil society and academic disinformation researchers.



***Weaponization of law enforcement and prosecutions.*** The regime will have a range of legal and extra-legal weapons at its disposal. Trump, through his new Attorney General, will have moved to end the federal prosecutions of him. US attorneys across the country will have been removed unless their loyalty to the regime is clear. The senior ranks of the FBI and the Department of Justice, historically independent of the administration, will have been purged of those unwilling to pledge allegiance to the regime. Expect the IRS to be weaponized.

This will set the stage for investigations and potential prosecutions of opponents of the regime, ranging from those who served in the first Trump administration and were viewed as disloyal, to Democrats, civil society organizations, activists, members of the media and election administrators/officials.

The alacrity with which House members pursued impeachment of the President and impeached the DHS Secretary likely presage weaponization, against the opposition, of that ultimate Constitutional safeguard against the corruption of government – impeachment.

***Further rolling-back of rights.*** The anti-democratic slide would embolden conservative actors seeking to further enshrine conservative agendas in state and federal law. Voting rights could continue to be rolled back in individual states, as could the constellation of other rights that have protected women, people of color, the LGBTQ+ community and others. The Supreme Court may be powerless to push back even if it wanted to.

One area that will likely see further erosion of rights will be abortion, which could include further efforts to criminalize out-of-state travel for abortion and, in any event, will likely mean drastic increases in [digital surveillance](#) of women. Can't happen here? There are already examples of prosecutions based on [digital surveillance](#). Internet searches, websites visited, purchases made, data shared on mobile apps, location data, facial recognition, license plate recognition, text and email messages – all are potentially accessible in the world where abortion is criminalized, unless laws are passed to protect personal privacy.

***Acceleration of political violence.*** If history is any guide, political violence would continue to escalate. What is new though is that the drivers of political violence – polarization, identity politics, assaults on the rule of law and democratic norms, and massive disinformation campaigns – as succinctly summarized in the Journal of Public Policy and Marketing (“[Drivers of Political Violence in the United States](#)”), have entered the mainstream and are being exploited by politicians at scale to attract attention and viewers, raise money, and galvanize and mobilize supporters (*see* my January 2024 [briefing note](#)).

That we are, in the [words](#) of Robert Pape of the Chicago Project on Security and Threats, “a tinderbox,” primed for outbreaks of political violence, is apt. The Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), in partnership with Brookings, found last October that 75% of Americans believe the future of democracy in the country is at risk, and 23% overall (Republicans: 33%; Democrats: 13% and Independents: 22%) agree with the statement “because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country,” up from 15% in 2021. PRRI has asked this question in eight surveys since March 2021, and this is the first time support for political violence has risen above 20%. And needless to say, deepfakes and other instruments of disinformation could easily light the flames under the tinderbox.



Trump has a history of encouraging militia groups and has stoked violence at his campaign rallies. And we all recall his reactions to the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville. He has primed his supporters to believe in the righteousness of his cause, and can use the insurrectionists that he will have pardoned as well as other extremists as a security service (his own *Sturmabteilung* – colloquially known as [Brownshirts or Storm Troopers](#)), all bent on revenge and loyal only to him, with the ultimate get-out-of-jail-free card – the presidential power to pardon, at least for federal offenses.

The potential impact of even the threat of political violence was highlighted by [admissions](#) by Senator Mitt Romney and other Republican lawmakers that concerns for their physical safety and the safety of their families influenced how they voted in Congress, including on impeachment. So much for representative democracy.

***Restrictions on media.*** The autocrat’s playbook includes attempts to co-opt or crush media outlets, to revoke licenses to broadcast and to impose onerous oversight. In more extreme cases, it can mean harassment, imprisonment or assassinations of journalists. Trump’s open contempt for the press and his labelling of news media as “enemies of the people” are part of an effort to undermine the ability of journalists to hold him to account. At the very least, media that fails to tow the regime line could find it more difficult to operate or may be shut down. Harnessing the immense surveillance apparatus of the government could easily lead to domestic surveillance of journalists and campaigns to discredit their reporting.

Can’t happen here? Reporters Without Borders [ranked](#) the United States 55<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries in their World Press Freedom Index. According to [The US Press Freedom Tracker](#), in 2020, there were 146 arrests/criminal charges in the United States against journalists, and 640 assaults targeting journalists. In May 2020 alone, close to 300 journalists were targeted. Appearing on the Bannon War Room podcast, a likely member of a Trump cabinet, Kash Patel, [warned](#) that the administration would “go out and find the conspirators, not just in government but in the media. Yes, we’re going to come after the people in the media who lied about American citizens, who helped Joe Biden rig presidential elections – we’re going to come after you.” “We’re actually going to use the Constitution to prosecute [the media] for crimes they said we have always been guilty of but never have.”

***Weakening of democratic opposition.*** If the regime makes good on Trump’s threats to prosecute his political enemies, and/or there is a significant increase in political violence stoked by the regime, that could have a chilling effect on representative government across the estimated 525,000 elected positions in the country.

***Weakening of public services.*** If upwards of 50,000 federal government workers are converted to political employee status and politicized, with a premium on political connections and/or loyalty rather than expertise and dedication to public service, consider the impact on the ability of government to deliver basic services in an efficient and timely manner. Conversion of civil servants in the Office of Management and Budget alone could significantly affect how the government allocates resources, greatly facilitating abuse of government services in carrying out revenge and retribution (recall the impact on the Postal Service of the appointment of Louis DeJoy as Postmaster General).



Moreover, in echoes of the “do-I-stay-or-do-I go” internal debates that so many undertook in the first Trump administration, the calculation will likely see significant resignations across government, placing even greater pressure on critical government services.

**Resistance.** Resistance will spread far beyond elected officials – imagine too a 21<sup>st</sup> century underground railroad, and not simply for undocumented migrants, but for targets of the revenge and retribution cycle of political prosecutions. It gets worse if the country also faces a national ban on abortion, and even if the country escapes that fate, states that have banned abortion will likely continue to ramp up efforts to criminalize abortion and prosecute women for self-managed abortions.

Business will be caught in the middle, and hamstrung in responding (with employees, customers, institutional investors and other stakeholders primed to act) to a potentially worsening litany of economic conditions: protests and strikes, widespread arrests and deportations impacting workforces, particularly in the agriculture sectors, immigration crackdowns resulting in visa restrictions for the tech sector, unrestrained digital surveillance programs raising significant civil liberty concerns, sustained and massive National Guard deployments depleting workforces, and markets crashing due to widening hits to the economy and a worsening geopolitical environment.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This vision is apocalyptic. I have debated whether this vision is too alarmist. Is it too far-fetched? My growing network of former members of the Trump administration willing to speak out to warn what lies ahead are fully aligned with my concerns. For them, incidentally, what lies ahead is very personal. I am connecting dots.

Here we are six months ahead of Election Day 2024, and Trump, as recently as this past week, declined to commit to accept the results of the 2024 elections, but so too has one contender for the VP spot on the Trump ticket, Senator Tim Scott. On Sunday, Scott refused to answer multiple times on Meet the Press a “yes/no” question regarding accepting the 2024 election results. Trump, when pressed, has not ruled out the prospect of political violence in connection with the elections, and is still prominently peddling his false claims that he won the 2020 election.

The supreme irony we must face is that Trump (like other putative autocrats before him) and his enablers seek to weaponize the very instruments of a democracy to destroy democracy. There is, as I have noted before, one way – the only way – to ensure that this apocalyptic vision of America remains just that, a vision, a footnote in history, and not a reality. Perhaps the greatest manifestation of democracy is the power to vote – and vote we must, resoundingly.

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