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# The Public Eye



Trump 2.0's First 100 Days • Burning Down the House • Tech Capitalism and the Neoreactionary Movement Behind DOGE • A Deep State Affair



PRA observes in this issue that “we’ve witnessed a sweeping escalation of authoritarian attacks” during Trump 2.0’s first 100 days, ranging from efforts to gut the social state and consolidate executive power to those targeting marginalized groups and our right to dissent. And as this issue goes to press, the regime is unleashing military force on protestors to quash a popular uprising against ICE’s paramilitary raids.

At a time when our communities and social movements face intensifying repression, this Summer 2025 issue dissects Trump 2.0 and the antidemocratic reaction. Our contributors’ analyses offer strategic insights by surfacing Trump 2.0’s tensions and contradictions to inform broad-based resistance and pro-democracy organizing.

In “Trump 2.0’s First 100 Days” (p. 3), PRA’s researchers offer their assessment of the regime’s unfolding agenda in a few key areas to watch: Christian Zionism’s influence, anti-Palestinian state repression, anti-immigrant policing and deportations, and anti-gender policies attacking LGBTQ rights and reproductive justice.

Our next feature powerfully outlines the forces behind this agenda. In an essay adapted from her new book, *Money, Lies, and God: Inside the Movement to Destroy American Democracy*, investigative journalist Katherine Stewart surveys the anti-democratic reaction’s alliance of billionaire funders, pseudo-intellectuals, Christian nationalist networks, MAGA activists, and more. As Stewart writes (p. 8), “The movement is at war with itself even as it wages war on the rest of us”—and in this, she finds hope for dividing and opposing it.

In our last feature, scholar Faith Lazar traces the Far Right’s changing relationship with the FBI, revealing how MAGA’s “Deep State” narrative is the latest form of a decades-long tradition of selective anti-statism. As Lazar argues (p. 15), “The MAGA Right’s supposed rebellion is less a break than a power struggle within an antidemocratic framework that enables the security state’s continued expansion while dismantling the redistributive state.”

Ending public provision is central to efforts to expand the president’s authority, as Matthew N. Lyons maintains in this issue’s commentary on the neoreactionary movement behind DOGE (p. 12). Lyons argues that DOGE’s role in Trump’s power grab signals important changes in his political project and differences within his coalition that antifascists can exploit.

Our two Q&As are online exclusives. Neil J. Young, author of *Coming Out Republican: A History of the Gay Right*, speaks with PRA online editor J. Giesecking about how the shifting politics of gay Republicans helped lay the groundwork for Trumpism. And Quinn Slobodian talks with *Public Eye* editor Kitana Ananda about the neoliberal frontlash and return of “race science” fueling today’s Far Right, the subject of his latest book, *Hayek’s Bastards: Race, IQ, Gold, and the Capitalism of the Far Right*.

Our cover features a beautiful illustration by artist and cultural organizer Micah Bazant. In *The Art of Activism* (back cover), they speak with PRA about how they interpreted the issue’s theme and the inspiration for their work.

We’ve published several issues since *The Public Eye* relaunched after a brief hiatus and we’d love to hear from you. Scan the back cover’s QR code to go to our two-minute survey and share your feedback with us!

As always, between print issues of *The Public Eye*, visit [politicalresearch.org](https://politicalresearch.org) and [reliogndispatches.org](https://reliogndispatches.org) for more of PRA’s research and reporting on the Right.

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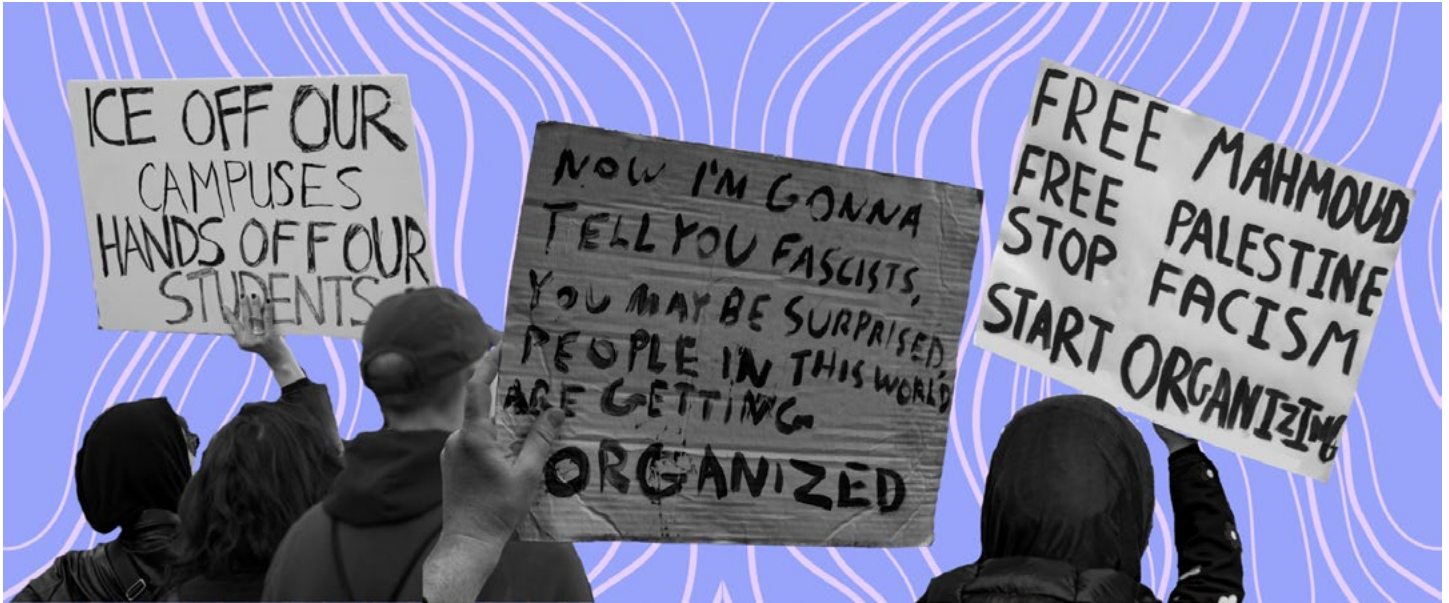
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# Trump 2.0's First 100 Days

## Authoritarian Gains and Consolidation



*Protests against the detention of Mahmoud Khalil and ICE raids in 2025 (Credit: PRA)*

In just the first 100 days of the second Trump administration, we've witnessed a sweeping escalation of authoritarian attacks. As the administration moves quickly to dismantle the administrative state by gutting the public sector, consolidating power in the executive branch to expand the president's authority, and slashing social programs—all while targeting immigrants and political dissidents, and rolling back LGBTQ rights and access to gender-affirming healthcare—the gravity of this moment is undeniable.

Many of us in movement spaces had anticipated some of these moves—signaled clearly in plans like *Project 2025*, *The America First Agenda*, and *Project Esther*—but that hasn't made the impact any less painful. From the assault on trans and immigrant rights, to attacks on racial justice, government services, and the movement for Palestinian freedom, the onslaught's speed and intensity has been staggering. Other attacks—like Elon Musk's DOGE initiative, which puts key state functions in the hands of a private entity with little accountability—have shocked even experienced organiz-

ers with their boldness and brutality.<sup>1</sup>

These forces haven't just taken the White House; they've captured the judiciary, Congress, and the majority of U.S. state legislatures.

In these analyses of the First 100 Days, we offer our clearest assessment of the authoritarian practices now taking hold in a few key areas, tracing today's threats back to decades of strategic organizing by right-wing movements and institutions, while recognizing that their power comes from their ability to exploit shifting political and economic conditions.

Our team brings decades of experience researching the forces now consolidating power: White nationalists and ethnonationalists, the Christian Right and Traditionalists, and corporate and tech oligarchs. We are also tracking newer forces gaining ground, including Silicon Valley's techno-futurists and neoreactionaries, the Hindu Right in the U.S.,<sup>2</sup> and a growing multiracial Far Right.<sup>3</sup>

In a moment when the Far Right holds substantial government power, how can we sharpen our strategies, defend communities under attack, and build a path

forward? We invite you to reflect with us, to challenge us, and to let us know how PRA's research can better serve our shared struggle for a truly multiracial, feminist, religiously plural, and democratic future.

### CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

The Trump administration has lent enthusiastic backing to Israel's ongoing genocidal bombardment of the Gaza Strip, including by supplying Israel with advanced weaponry and proposing the ethnic cleansing of Gaza's two million Palestinian inhabitants toward a permanent U.S. occupation of the enclave.<sup>4</sup> Within the MAGA coalition, the Christian Zionist movement remains a powerful bloc well-positioned to lobby for deepened support.

Christian Zionism refers to a movement of mostly Charismatic and evangelical Christians whose interpretation of the Bible mandates their political support for an expansionist version of the modern state of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Christian Zionists hold key roles in the new Trump administration. This includes Israel ambassador Mike Huckabee, who has claimed Trump will bring changes of "Biblical propor-

## **Under the pretext of combating antisemitism, Christian Zionists have also lent backing to the administration's brutal repression against the Palestine solidarity movement.**

tions" to the Middle East; Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, who has lent fervent support to Israeli hardliners; and White House Faith Office Senior Advisor Paula White-Cain, who is part of the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) movement.<sup>6</sup>

The evangelical movement's powerful networks of pastors and operatives command the most dominant and loyal bloc within the MAGA base, numbering in the tens of millions. They are well-positioned to further advance a broad Christian nationalist policy agenda, which includes support for Israel alongside relentless attacks on LGBTQ and reproductive rights and other culture war priorities.

Pro-Israel evangelical leaders have signaled their unparalleled access to the halls of power by leading worship services and praying over President Trump in the White House in recent months.<sup>7</sup> In February, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made his first visit to the U.S. under the new administration. He did not meet with American Jewish leaders, but held a 90-minute gathering with key evangelical leaders, underscoring the Christian Zionist movement's importance.<sup>8</sup>

Many of these leaders have formed a new umbrella organization, the Conference of Presidents of Christian Organizations in Support of Israel, to coordinate advocacy and mobilization across federal, state, and local levels. "God has given Israel a blank check with the election of Trump," celebrated Pastor Mario Bramnick, head of Latino Coalition for Israel and an important player in the NAR, at the Conference's Israeli launch in March.<sup>9</sup>

Another key Latino evangelical leader, Pastor Samuel Rodriguez, visited Israel on a faith delegation in February. A longtime Israel advocate, Rodriguez works closely with White-Cain's White House Faith Office and is head of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, which claims to represent over tens of thousands of evangelical churches as the "largest Hispanic Christian advocacy organization in America." Rodriguez expressed hope that the "Latino community emerges as the most pro-Israel, pro-Jewish commu-

nity on the planet."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, support for Israel may help strengthen an expanding multiracial, multiethnic MAGA coalition.

The attitude among Christian Zionist leaders, and their partners on the Israeli Right, is that the advances of the first Trump administration—including moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and launching the Abraham Accords<sup>11</sup>—were a good start, but didn't go far enough. This time, Trump has taken on a "new mantle" from heaven, proclaimed Bramnick at the Jerusalem Prayer Breakfast—a gathering of influential Christian Zionist, Israeli and U.S. Jewish leaders held at Mar-a-Lago this January—"we're in a tipping point moment."<sup>12</sup>

Christian Zionists are working to pressure Trump to declare support for full Israeli annexation of the West Bank, a longstanding demand of the Israeli Right.<sup>13</sup> In February, prominent evangelical organizations including the National Religious Broadcasters and American Christian Leaders for Israel passed resolutions endorsing annexation. Meanwhile, White-Cain has met with Israeli Right legislators and activists in the White House and released a lengthy interview with Netanyahu for U.S. Christian audiences, further cementing the "special relationship" between the Religious Right in both countries.

Under the pretext of combating antisemitism, Christian Zionists have also lent backing to the administration's brutal repression against the Palestine solidarity movement.<sup>14</sup> Bramnick and others are leading a Heritage Foundation–developed task force on antisemitism, whose Project Esther report recommended deporting non-citizen student activists, intimidating universities, and more.<sup>15</sup> "We know that a lot of the efforts of the task force that we launched are now being implemented by the Trump White House," Bramnick celebrated on a prayer call with NAR leaders in February. The executive order announcing the White House Faith Office charged the office with "combatting anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, and additional forms of anti-religious bias," signaling that White-Cain may help lead these efforts from within the White House.

### **ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES AND STATE REPRESSION**

As Israel annihilates Gaza with U.S. support, decades of White Christian nationalist policy and rhetoric<sup>16</sup> has aligned with Zionist, Jewish nationalist ideology to render the figure of the "brown Arab Muslim terrorist" as an explicit political target to be removed and exterminated in the United States. But today's targeting of dissidents is not new—it is part of a long tradition of U.S. state repression that has enjoyed bipartisan support while covertly targeting racial, ethnic, and religious minorities—especially those at the center of the Global War on Terror. These repressive policies have now found a champion in the current administration.

On March 10, the White House posted to X a message that began with the words, "Shalom, Mahmoud."<sup>17</sup> It appeared nine days after Donald Trump's executive order designating English as the official language of the U.S.,<sup>18</sup> and its message was clear. Two nights before, a Palestinian graduate student at Columbia University, Mahmoud Khalil, was abducted by plainclothes Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents waiting in an unmarked van outside his apartment building. Khalil's abduction marked the start of a retaliatory crackdown on pro-Palestine student protesters, with the White House claiming that Khalil was "a Radical Foreign Pro-Hamas Student" and promising that his was "the first arrest of many to come."<sup>19</sup>

Some analysts and advocates contend<sup>20</sup> that Khalil's forced disappearance is a "trial run" for future mass roundups inspired by the Heritage Foundation's Project Esther,<sup>21</sup> but such efforts actually began decades ago and primarily targeted Black<sup>22</sup> and Arab<sup>23</sup> activists. Since 1969, U.S. institutions have engaged in unpublicized, bipartisan, anti-Arab and Islamophobic counterterrorism legislation and policy<sup>24</sup>—Heritage just gives it a name.

Still, while Khalil is not the first Palestinian or dissenter to be punished by authoritarian immigration policy and measures, he is the first individual the White House has publicly boasted about remov-

ing. The forced disappearance of political dissidents is a repressive tactic that both Trump administrations have used to punish protestors and make an example of them to the whole world.

The second administration's practice of forced disappearances picks up where the first one left off. In 2017, a leaked FBI report labeled those it called "Black identity extremists" as domestic terrorists.<sup>25</sup> In 2020, federal agents used unmarked vans to abduct protestors during the George Floyd protests in Portland, Oregon,<sup>26</sup> and New York City<sup>27</sup> after surveil-

ing them for days. These disappearances were part of an effort to protect police and law enforcement who comprise a necessary component of U.S. authoritarianism, regardless of which political party is in power. Whereas the pretense for expanding the security state has consistently been framed around claims of protecting "law and order" by "reducing crime," now it also includes combating antisemitism.<sup>28</sup> The administration will likely fulfill its promises of more violence, such as deporting citizens to El Salvador,<sup>29</sup> now that it controls an emboldened security state built with bipartisan support.

## ***Enforced disappearances inadvertently make political violence visible by exposing the authoritarian state's insecurities.***

of revoking more student visas. On March 27, Secretary of State Marco Rubio claimed that he had already revoked 300 student visas.<sup>33</sup> While pro-Palestine activists are the main target, other movement leaders are also being targeted, such as Alfredo Juarez Zeferino, a Mexican activist farmworker who successfully secured better working conditions for farmworkers. These enforced disappearances inadvertently make political violence visible by exposing the authoritarian state's insecurities. Solidarity is a necessary posture to disrupt such attempts to create suspicion, instill fear,

and silence dissent. As of April 24, Rubio's State Department had revoked over 1,800 student visas.<sup>34</sup> On April 25, although the administration said it would temporarily restore the legal status of thousands of students whose records had been deleted from a federal database, following major legal pushback, immigration officials also warned of future removals.

Such efforts are no longer a "trial run" for something more authoritarian or fascistic—this is our reality for the foreseeable future. It's also an opportunity to strengthen our communal and movement networks to develop meaningful, world-building power in the shade of a dark future.

### **IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT**

In addition to disappearances and visa revocations, the federal government is weaponizing centuries-old laws like the Alien Enemies Act and grossly expansive interpretations of anti-terrorism laws against immigrants—undocumented and documented alike.<sup>35</sup> Citing a supposed "invasion" to claim emergency authority and further militarize the U.S.-Mexico border, the government is functionally eliminating due process protections for many and ushering in a new era of overzealous law enforcement and political repression.<sup>36</sup> Hundreds of immigrants, many with legal status, have been renditioned to a notorious Salvadoran prison, and government officials are openly discussing plans to send

U.S. citizens there as well.<sup>37</sup> In this climate, many are placing faith in the judiciary to uphold civil protections. But even when those rights are upheld, the Trump administration is ignoring court rulings that would constrain their practices<sup>38</sup> and has arrested a judge who refused ICE access to her courtroom, presumably to intimidate judges who might challenge the administration.<sup>39</sup> While settling the contradictions between the administration's actions and courts' orders may well take months or even years to resolve, there is also an effort concurrently happening in states and local municipalities to ensure the expanding architecture for mass deportation will outlast the current president's time in office.

287(g) agreements are one of the most visible examples of localities enmeshing with the deportation machine by allowing local law enforcement to assume some or all of a federal immigration agent's duties. As of April 30, 2025, ICE has enacted 382 new or updated 287(g) agreements this year.<sup>40</sup> A substantial number of these new agreements are under the recently-revived "Task Force Model," which allows local police to question and detain suspected immigrants on the street (the two other 287(g) models are limited to operations within jails). The Task Force Model was previously suspended in 2012<sup>41</sup> after legal challenges and documented instances of racial profiling.<sup>42</sup> Aided by anti-immigrant groups and the National Sheriffs' Association,<sup>43</sup> 287(g) agreements nearly quadrupled during Trump's first administration. President Biden campaigned on ending all of those new agreements, but reneged on those promises.<sup>44</sup> This failure to meaningfully scale back the first Trump administration's expansions of enforcement authority has facilitated the deportation machine's recent rapid growth and reach across communities.

Local lawmakers and officials in states such as Florida<sup>45</sup> and Texas<sup>46</sup> are working to ensure their communities remain ensnared with the deportation machine. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis recently touted the results of Operation Tidal Wave, a statewide, multiagency enforcement action and "first-of-its-kind partnership" resulting in the arrest of over 1,100 people—the largest number of single-week

arrests in a single state in ICE history.<sup>47</sup>

“I’ve insisted that Florida be the tip of the spear when it comes to state support of federal immigration enforcement,” said DeSantis, who promised to continue those efforts.

State-level efforts to criminalize and marginalize immigrants are not ending there.<sup>48</sup> These include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Kansas Attorney General and anti-immigrant lawyer Kris Kobach is leading

legal services for immigrants.

The escalation of federal immigration enforcement that includes due process-free deportations to foreign prisons and the disappearing of Palestine solidarity activists is terrifying, but these actions are not occurring in a vacuum. Efforts to buttress this cruelty are being pursued in statehouses across the country. The deportation machine’s reach has been expanding for decades. The Right’s appetite for further growth—often

pro-life task force” and its anti-abortion alternatives, leveraging religious conscience exemptions to defund clinics and funnel the funds to crisis pregnancy centers.<sup>57</sup> The move to freeze Title X funding—the sole federal grant program providing comprehensive reproductive healthcare, including birth control and cancer screenings—underscores its efforts to gut healthcare for low-income communities, disproportionately harming Black, Indigenous, young, and disabled people.<sup>58</sup> This funding freeze targeted providers for opposing racism or offering gender-affirming care, demanding an inordinate amount of paperwork to justify receiving funding. This sabotage parallels their anti-trans executive orders: sports bans weaponizing Title IX to exclude trans athletes (spurring NCAA overcompliance) and removing gender dysphoria protections under Section 504 disability protections—revealing how attacks on marginalized communities are mutually reinforcing.<sup>59</sup> By folding “accessibility” into its attacks on DEI programs, the administration is removing protections for disabled and trans communities, stripping legal recourse for trans people facing discrimination in health care, education, and housing by redefining civil rights as “special privileges.”<sup>60</sup>

These very attacks have exposed critical fractures in the far-right coalition. Trump’s executive order restricting federal recognition of gender identity aimed to erase trans people by stripping their self-determination, while also smuggling in fetal personhood rhetoric.<sup>61</sup> But his IVF executive order, positioned as “pro-family,” has drawn backlash from anti-abortion groups like Students for Life Action, who argue that it betrays their movement’s principles. The tension stems from Trump’s seeming political pragmatism (leveraging IVF’s broad popularity) versus the anti-abortion movement’s stance that life begins at conception, equating unused embryos with the loss of children and branding the practice morally unacceptable. Compounding that tension is Trump ally and tech billionaire Elon Musk who, having fathered most of his 14 children via IVF, promotes the technology as a solution to declining birth rates. Musk’s push for “smart people” to reproduce more while echoing “great

## **Behind the Trump administration’s attacks on reproductive and LGBTQ rights is a brutal strategy of systemic erasure.**

an effort to exclude immigrants from the U.S. Census—which, along with new efforts to end birthright citizenship, is an attack on the 14th Amendment that could limit the political influence of states with larger immigrant populations.<sup>49</sup> This would also reduce federal funds that these states receive for critical social services.

- Tennessee lawmakers are directly challenging the 1982 U.S. Supreme Court ruling granting children the right to public education regardless of immigration status.<sup>50</sup>
- In Missouri, a proposed bill would create financial incentives for bounty hunters to detain immigrants.<sup>51</sup>

Such efforts follow a growing lobbying and organizing effort by the anti-immigrant movement to more directly influence state and local lawmakers. In February, leading anti-immigrant group Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) hosted a group of sheriffs and state lawmakers in Washington DC to lobby Congress for additional border security measures.<sup>52</sup> The Heritage Foundation published multiple pieces of model legislation this year designed for local lawmakers to enshrine anti-immigrant policies in state law.<sup>53</sup> Policies that Heritage is encouraging states to adopt include requiring 287(g) agreements for local law enforcement, mandating employers to check workers’ immigration status, and eliminating state funds for individuals and organizations that provide

enabled by centrists—will remain, regardless of who the next president is.

### **REPRODUCTIVE & LGBTQ RIGHTS IN THE U.S.**

Behind the Trump administration’s attacks on reproductive and LGBTQ rights is a brutal strategy of systemic erasure. The administration launched a sweeping assault on bodily autonomy with a Day 1 executive order declaring recognition of only two, immutable sexes while rejecting gender identity as a legal category—effectively erasing transgender and nonbinary people from federal recognition. This agenda quickly escalated: pardoning violators of the FACE Act (greenlighting violence against abortion providers),<sup>54</sup> eliminating federal support for interstate travel for out-of-state abortion care, and weaponizing the federal bureaucracy to strip transgender Americans of legal protections as a pretext for gutting federal spending.<sup>55</sup> Together, these actions have emboldened the anti-gender U.S. far-right coalition’s relentless assault on bodily autonomy. These parallel assaults on reproductive care and LGBTQ rights share a common goal: enforcing a Christian nationalist vision<sup>56</sup> of public life using every lever of government power. But a closer look at these actions also reveals the Trump administration’s growing political vulnerabilities.

The Trump administration’s dismantling of reproductive healthcare follows Project 2025’s blueprint to replace secular public health infrastructure with “a



replacement” anxieties to justify curbing immigration further reinforces racist and ableist hierarchies.<sup>62</sup>

These federal attacks have galvanized state-level offensives, resulting in a record-breaking 800+ anti-LGBTQ bills so far this year—but also resistance, and with

women and girls in crisis zones, including Afghanistan, Palestine, and Ukraine, while one February 2025 survey<sup>67</sup> found that the cuts had already forced LGBTQ organizations in dozens of countries to shutter their programs and/or lay off staff. While trenchant critiques have lob-

in regional and global governing bodies. Days after Trump took office, for example, Secretary of State Marco Rubio instructed U.S. diplomats<sup>75</sup> to rejoin the international anti-abortion pact known as the “Geneva Consensus Declaration.”<sup>76</sup> And during the Commission on the Status of Women’s 69th session, U.S. diplomat Jonathan Shrier deployed anti-trans rhetoric<sup>77</sup> to oppose gender inclusion, echoing Trump’s anti-“gender ideology” executive order.<sup>78</sup>

Finally, Trump’s demonization of trans people and “gender ideology” has not only emboldened state-level offensives in the U.S. but those at a transnational level also. In 2025, global autocrats and private actors have escalated attacks on LGBTQ people and rights, displaying the mutual borrowing of “anti-gender” rhetoric, tactics, and strategies among transactional authoritarians like Tayyip Erdoğan, Viktor Orbán, Javier Milei, and Yoweri Museveni. LGBTQ organizations around the world have reported spikes in anti-LGBTQ violence,<sup>79</sup> like the murder of Muhsin Hendricks, an openly queer imam and well-known advocate for queer Muslims in South Africa, by two masked assailants in February 2025.<sup>80</sup> In Turkey, amid escalated anti-LGBTQ laws and censorship,<sup>81</sup> activists report a wave of vigilante violence and police attacks against LGBTQ people under Erdoğan’s authoritarian government.

And in Viktor Orbán’s<sup>82</sup> Hungary, which the Heritage Foundation heralded as a “model” and blueprint for authoritarian capture and consolidation,<sup>83</sup> the Fidesz party rammed through a Constitutional amendment in April 2025 that recognizes only two sexes (male and female), effectively bans any public LGBTQ event, and enables facial recognition surveillance to identify attendees and the suspension of citizenship of persons deemed a security threat. Weeks later, the United Kingdom’s Supreme Court issued a nearly identical ruling.<sup>84</sup> These moves not only echo Russia’s 2013 “gay propaganda law” and Florida’s copycat “Don’t Say LGBT” law<sup>85</sup> but also the language of Trump’s anti-“gender ideology” executive order and recent threats to suspend fundamental civil liberties<sup>86</sup> and citizenship rights,<sup>87</sup> providing clues about where the Trump administration’s next steps may lead.

## ***With every escalation, more contradictions are exposed—between the rhetoric and policies, between Trump and his base, between state and federal power.***

it, some victories. Mass protests led some hospitals to reverse bans on gender-affirming care, and shield laws are protecting providers like Dr. Margaret Carpenter from interstate prosecution, proving that public and legislative support for reproductive care can combat compliance with Trump’s fearmongering tactics.

With every escalation, more contradictions are exposed—between the rhetoric and policies, between Trump and his base, between state and federal power. We’re not just surviving these assaults; we can exploit their weaknesses too.

### **ATTACKS ON REPRODUCTIVE AND LGBTQ RIGHTS IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY**

The Trump administration’s attacks on reproductive and LGBTQ rights extend well beyond U.S. borders. Cuts to foreign assistance have devastated access to vital reproductive and sexual healthcare for millions of people around the world while shuttering gender equality initiatives, from girls’ education programs to support for vulnerable LGBTQ groups.

Following his Day 1 executive order halting new foreign assistance,<sup>63</sup> Trump issued a “stop-work order,”<sup>64</sup> immediately cutting support for existing programs and services funded by USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and PEPFAR (President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief). Within days, the 90-day funding freeze led to clinic closures and denials of care, including access to contraceptives<sup>65</sup> and HIV medicines.<sup>66</sup> U.S. contributions to UNAIDS (the United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS) and the UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) were defunded several weeks later, denying humanitarian aid to

bied for the dismantling of the “humanitarian industrial complex,”<sup>68</sup> the second Trump administration’s actions amount to an organized abandonment of LGBTQ people, women, and birthing people rather than a just remedy for the structural failures of foreign assistance.

Like his GOP predecessors since 1984, Trump also reinstated<sup>69</sup> the Global Gag Rule<sup>70</sup> (the Mexico City Policy), which prohibits recipients of U.S. global health funding from providing or mentioning abortion. By threatening to withhold resources from providers, the policy steeply curtails access to preventative and life-saving healthcare, which accelerates morbidity and mortality for birthing people and infants—a pattern mirrored in the U.S. after Dobbs.<sup>71</sup>

Trump’s order prohibiting DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) in foreign assistance further endangers LGBTQ recipients facing state criminalization and vigilante violence.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, the Trump administration is unlawfully deporting asylum-seekers without due process to contexts where they face a high risk of persecution, including LGBTQ asylum-seekers like Andry José Hernández Romero,<sup>73</sup> a gay Venezuelan man sent to the brutal CECOT prison in El Salvador on spurious allegations of gang involvement, where he faces a high likelihood of facing targeted violence.

The Trump administration is also using the disproportionate power wielded by the United States in shaping global governance systems and policy to actively erode commitments to LGBTQ rights and gender equality on the global stage. This undermining of the international human rights system’s bulwark against authoritarianism realigns the U.S. with the bloc of anti-rights countries and movements<sup>74</sup> with-

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BY KATHERINE STEWART

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# Burning Down the House

What's Behind the U.S. Antidemocratic Reaction?



*A collage of protestors: one protestor holding a sign for gun rights and a second protestor at a QAnon protest (Credit: PRA)*

This adapted essay is based on excerpts from *Money, Lies, and God: Inside the Movement to Destroy American Democracy* (Bloomsbury, 2025), which are reprinted with permission from the author and publisher.

The man in the MAGA cap and the “Size Matters” T-shirt allowed me to take his picture. The “size” in question had to do with bullets, which were represented on the shirt in a line from pistol- to bazooka-grade. Not far from us stood a man in a T-shirt that read “MAKE MEN MEN AGAIN.” Women walked past us in red-white-and-blue outfits. Many had Bible verse numbers or slogans on their T-shirts, though quite a few sported images of guns, some of them aimed at “RINOs.” At one of the booths nearby a group of women was raising money for the “patriots” of January 6, now incarcerated in “the DC gulag.”

It was a hot summer day in 2023, and there was little new for me at this gath-

ering of right-wing activists in Las Vegas. Yet as I took in the January 6 memorabilia, I couldn’t help thinking back on another, very different event four years earlier. In 2019, I found myself in a seventeenth-century palazzo in Verona, Italy, for a gathering of the World Congress of Families, where I sat in on speeches and discussions with American, Russian, and European political activists on “the LGBT totalitarians” and the evils of “global liberalism.” The message was in some sense the same as the one in Las Vegas, but it is safe to say that among the well-heeled, stylishly dressed, highly educated, and well-traveled participants there, members of the Nevada T-shirt crowd would have stuck out like a platter of corn dogs at a fine Italian trattoria.

The last of the speakers in Verona was a diminutive white-haired academic in a nondescript jacket and tie, the dean of a small law school in California, and his brief tirade about “gender confusion” among the “radical left” did not leave

much of an impression on me. I did, however, take note of his name: John Eastman. The same Eastman would later show up at the podium on the White House lawn on the morning of January 6. He would then turn up as “Co-Conspirator 2” in the federal indictment of Donald Trump for conspiring to overturn the 2020 election, and he himself would be indicted in Georgia for the same conspiracy and disbarred in his home state of California.<sup>1</sup> (He has pled “not guilty” to conspiracy fraud and forgery charges.)<sup>2</sup>

It’s a long way from the palazzo populists of Verona to the RINO hunters of Las Vegas, but they are clearly part of the same story—the rise of an antidemocratic political movement in the United States. Though diverse and complicated, the movement is united in its rejection of the Enlightenment ideals on which the republic was founded. It represents the most serious threat to American democracy since the Civil War.



## AN ANTIDEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT TAKES ROOT

The American idea, as Abraham Lincoln saw it, is the familiar one articulated in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence. It says that all people are created equal; that a free people in a pluralistic society may govern themselves; that they do so through laws deliberated in public, grounded in appeals to reason, and applied equally to all; and that they establish these laws through democratic representation in government. While the American republic has often fallen short of this idea, many people rightly insist that we should try to live up to it. And in its better moments, the United States and its revolutionary creed has inspired freedom movements around the world.

But in recent years a political movement has emerged that fundamentally does not believe in the American idea. It claims that America is dedicated not to a proposition but to a particular religion

ment take root in America?

The antidemocratic movement is not the province of any single demographic or even ideology. The real story of the authoritarian Right features a rowdy mix of personalities, often working at odds with one another: “apostles” of Jesus, atheistic billionaires, reactionary Catholic theologians, pseudo-Platonic intellectuals, woman-hating opponents of “the gynocracy,” high-powered evangelical networkers, Jewish devotees of Ayn Rand, pronatalists preoccupied with a dearth of (White) babies, COVID truthers, and battalions of “spirit warriors”<sup>3</sup> who appear to be inventing a new style of religion even as they set about undermining democracy at its foundations.

To repeat the obvious: this movement represents a serious threat to the survival of American democracy. Today’s political conflicts are not simply the result of incivility, tribalism, “affective partisanship,” or some other unfortunate trend in manners. All will be well, the thinking goes, if the red people and the blue people would

spent reporting on the subject, the escalation of the threat appears breathtaking. In 2009, I was reporting on an antidemocratic ideology focused on hostility to public education that appeared to be gaining influence on the Right. By 2021, I was writing about an antidemocratic movement whose members had stormed the Capitol—and about a Republican Party whose leadership disgracefully acquiesced in the attempted overthrow of American democracy. Yet the swiftness of the fall should not distract from the long duration of the underlying causes.

The present crisis is deeply rooted in material changes in American life over the past half century. The antidemocratic movement came together long before the 2016 election, and the forces hurling against American democracy will long outlive the current political moment. Their various elements have emerged along the fissures in American society, and they continue to thrive on our growing educational, cultural, regional, racial, religious, and informational divides.

The antidemocratic reaction draws much of its energy from the massive increase in economic inequality and resulting economic dislocations over the past five decades. In the middle of the twentieth century, capitalist America was home to the most powerful and prosperous middle class the world had hitherto seen. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, capitalism had yielded in many respects to a form of oligarchy, and the nation had been divided into very different strata. At the very top of the wealth distribution arose a sector whose aggregate net worth makes the rich men of earlier decades look like amateurs. Between 1970 and 2020, the top 0.1 percent doubled its share of the nation’s wealth. The bottom 90 percent, meanwhile, lost a corresponding share.<sup>5</sup>

For the large majority of Americans, the new era brought wage stagnation and even, within certain groups in recent years, declining life expectancy. In the happy handful of percentiles located just beneath the 0.1 percent, on the other hand, a hyper-competitive group has managed to hold on to its share of the pie even as it remains fearful of falling behind.

While the political conflicts of the present cannot be reduced to economic conflicts, the great disparity in wealth distribution is a

## ***The authoritarian movement isn’t looking for a seat at the noisy table of American democracy; it wants to burn down the house.***

and culture. It asserts that an insidious and alien elite has betrayed and abandoned the nation’s sacred heritage. It proposes to “redeem” America, and it acts on the extreme conviction that any means are justified in such a momentous project. It takes for granted that certain kinds of Americans have a right to rule, and that the rest have a duty to obey. No longer casting the United States as a beacon of freedom, it exports this counterrevolutionary creed through alliances with leaders and activists who are themselves hostile to democracy. This movement has captured one of the nation’s two major political parties, and now controls the Presidency, Congress, and the Supreme Court. It claims to be “patriotic,” and yet its leading thinkers explicitly model their ambitions on corrupt and illiberal regimes abroad that render education, the media, and the corporate sector subservient to a one-party authoritarian state.

How did such an anti-American move-

ment just sit down for some talk therapy and give a little to the other side. In earlier times this may have been sage advice. Today it is a delusion. American democracy is failing because it is under direct attack, and the attack is not coming equally from both sides. The authoritarian movement isn’t looking for a seat at the noisy table of American democracy; it wants to burn down the house. It isn’t the product of misunderstandings; it advances its antidemocratic agenda by actively promoting division and disinformation. In my book, *Money, Lies and God*, I bring the receipts to support these uncomfortable facts.<sup>4</sup>

### **A SWIFT FALL, DECADES IN THE MAKING**

When did the crisis begin? It can sometimes seem that the antidemocratic reaction snuck up on us and suddenly exploded in our living rooms when Donald Trump descended on the escalator and announced his candidacy. Looking back over the decade and a half that I have

***The tragedy of American politics is that the same forces that have damaged so many personal lives have been weaponized and enlisted in the service of a political movement that is sure to make the situation worse.***

significant contributor. It has fractured our faith in the common good, unleashed an epidemic of status anxiety, and made a significant subset of the population susceptible to conspiracism and disinformation.

Different groups, of course, have responded differently. The antidemocratic movement is not the work of any one social group but of several working together. It relies in part on the narcissism and paranoia of the subset of the super-rich who invest their fortunes in the destruction of democracy. They appear to operate on the cynical belief that manipulation of the masses through disinformation will enhance their own prosperity. The movement also draws in a sector of the professional class that has largely abdicated its social responsibility. Much of the energy of the movement, too, comes from below, from the anger and resentment of those who perceive that they are falling behind.

As these groups jockey for status in a fast-changing world, they give rise to a politics of rage and grievance. The reaction may be understandable. But it is not, on that account, reasonable or constructive. Although the antidemocratic movement emerged, in part, out of massive structural conflicts in the American political economy, along with investment, by antidemocratic forces, in the infrastructure of their movement, it does not represent a genuine attempt to address the problems from which it arose. The new politics aims for results that few people want and that ultimately harm everybody.

### **THE NEW AUTHORITARIANISM'S ROCKET FUEL**

What are the main features of this new American fascism grounded in resentment? In America, just as in unstable political economies of the past, the grievances to which the daily injustices of an unequal system give rise inevitably vent on some putatively alien “other” supposedly responsible for all our ills. America’s demagogues, however, have a special advantage. They can draw on the nation’s barbarous history of racism and the fear

that the “American way of life” is slipping away, abetted by an out-of-touch elite. The story of this movement cannot be told apart from the racial and ethnic divisions that it continuously exploits and exacerbates. The psychic payoff that the new, antidemocratic religious and right-wing nationalism offers its adherents is the promise of membership in a privileged “in-group” previously associated with being a White Christian conservative, a supposed “real American,” with the twist that those privileges may now be claimed even by those who are not White, provided they worship and vote the “right” way. At the same time, the movement is the result of the concerted cultivation of a range of anxieties that draw from deep and wide roots.

Anxiety about traditional gender roles and hierarchies is the rocket fuel of the new American authoritarianism. Among the bearded young men of the New Right, it shows up in social media feeds bursting with rank misogyny. In the theocratic wing of the movement, it puts on the tattered robes of patriarchy, with calls for “male headship” and female subordination, and relentlessly demonizes LGBT people. On the political stage, it has centered around the long-running effort to strip women of their reproductive health rights and, in essence, make their bodies the property of the state. That effort has had significant consequences at the ballot box—which is why a sector of movement leadership is starting to speak openly about stripping women of the right to vote. The tragedy of American politics is that the same forces that have damaged so many personal lives have been weaponized and enlisted in the service of a political movement that is sure to make the situation worse.

### **A REACTIONARY NIHILISM: PAIN, NOT PLANS FOR THE FUTURE**

The bulk of this movement is best understood in terms of what it wishes to destroy rather than what it proposes to create. Fear and grievance, not hope, are the moving

parts of its story. Its members resemble the revolutionaries of the past in their drive to overthrow “the regime”—but many are revolutionaries without a cause.

To be sure, movement leaders do float visions of what they take to be a better future, which typically aims for a fictitious version of the past: a nation united under “biblical law”; a people liberated from the tyranny of the “administrative state”; or just a place somehow made “great again.” But in conversations with movement participants, I have found, these visions quickly dissipate into insubstantial generalizations or unrealizable fantasy. There is no world in which America will become the “Christian nation” that it never actually was; there is only a world in which a theocratic oligarchy imposes a corrupt and despotic order in the name of sectarian values.

These visions turn out to be thin cover for an unfocused rage against the diverse and unequal America that actually exists. They are the means whereby one type of underclass can be falsely convinced that its disempowerment is the work of another kind of underclass. They are expressions of pain, not plans for the future. This phenomenon is what I call “reactionary nihilism.” It is reactionary in the sense that it expresses itself as mortal opposition to a perceived catastrophic change in the political order; it is nihilistic because its deepest premise is that the actual world is devoid of value, impervious to reason, and governable only through brutal acts of will. It stands for a kind of unraveling of the American political mind that now afflicts one side of nearly every political debate.

Yet there is method in this phenomenon. The direction and success of the antidemocratic movement depends on its access to immense resources, a powerful web of organizations, and a highly self-interested group of movers and backers. It has bank accounts that are always thirsty for more money, networks that hunger for ever more connections, religious demagogues intent on exploiting the faithful, communicators eager to spread propaganda and disinformation, and powerful

leaders who want more power. It takes time, organizational energy, and above all, money to weaponize grievances and hurl them against an established democracy—and this movement has it all.

To be clear, there is no single headquarters for the antidemocratic reaction. There are, however, powerful networks of leaders, strategists, and donors, as well as interlocking organizations, fellow travelers, and affirmative action programs for the ideologically pure. That matrix is far more densely connected, well-financed, and influential at all levels of government and society than most Americans appreciate.

History shows, however, that better organization does not always flatten the contradictions. On the contrary, it can sometimes amplify the conflicts. This is perhaps the most difficult aspect of the antidemocratic movement to appreciate and the source of both its weakness and its strength. This movement is at war with itself even as it wages war on the rest of us. It consists of a variety of groups and organizations, each pursuing its own agendas, each in thrall to a distinct set of assumptions. Viewed as a whole, it seems to want things that cannot

go together—like “small government” and also a government big enough to control the most private acts in which people engage; like the total deregulation of corporate monopolies and also a better deal for the workforce; like “the rule of law” and also the lawlessness of a dictator and his cronies who may pilfer the public treasury; like a “Christian nation” that excludes many American Christians from the ranks of the supposedly righteous. It pursues this bundle of contradictions not merely out of hypocrisy and cynicism but because the task of tearing down the status quo brings together groups that want very different things and are even at odds with one another.

### HOPE IN THE CHAOS

While a survey of the antidemocratic reaction in the United States is bound to provoke alarm and perhaps even a feeling of hopelessness, the self-contradictory nature of this reaction should be a source of hope for those who want to defend American democracy. MAGA is in many regards a weak movement, not a strong one. It draws on multiple factions, including oligarchic funders, the Christian Right, the New

Right, libertarians, Q-Anoners, White nationalists, “parent activists” radicalized by disinformation, health skeptics, a small segment of the Left, and others, all of whom worked together to bring slim majorities of voters to their side. These groups don’t really belong together, and they probably won’t stay together indefinitely.

In spite of their differences, for now these groups are rowing in the same boat. They told us ahead of the 2024 election that they were going to smash the federal bureaucracy, which they view for ideological reasons as interfering with their agenda.<sup>6</sup> Trump said in no uncertain terms that he would turn the Department of Justice into his personal vendetta machine, and that’s what he’s attempting to do.<sup>7</sup> He promised trade wars and let everybody know he would trash vital international alliances, and that’s what he’s doing.<sup>8</sup>

So this is no time to retreat under the covers. Now is the time for moral courage. There are more Americans who would prefer to live in a democracy than a kleptocratic, Christian nationalist autocracy. We need to come together in broad coalitions and stay focused on organizing—from developing pro-democracy strategies and infrastructure to taking local action to improving voter turnout operations—now and in the long term.

When they lost in 2020, the MAGA movement didn’t roll over. They simply resolved to organize better and fight harder. Above all, they found new populations to evangelize with untruths. We would not wish to emulate their most craven tactics, of course, but could learn something from their strategic resolve.

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*A protestor holding an America First flag at a protest against COVID mandates in Washington DC (Credit: Anthony Crider/Flickr.com)*





BY MATTHEW N. LYONS

# Tech Capitalism and the Neoreactionary Movement Behind DOGE



Collage of Marc Andreessen, Elon Musk, Curtis Yarvin, Peter Thiel, and posters against Elon Musk's DOGE (Credit: PRA)

On January 20, 2025, the day Donald Trump was sworn in as U.S. president for a second time, a team of Elon Musk's current and former employees seized control of the federal government's human resources agency, the Office of Personnel Management. In what one OPM employee likened to "a hostile takeover," the team locked career civil servants out of systems holding the sensitive personal data of millions of federal government workers. In the following weeks, Musk's operatives took control of one federal agency after another, firing or forcing out tens of thousands of employees and seizing access to databases and payment systems spanning most federal operations. Sensitive data on the finances, health, employment, education, social services and benefits, and immigration status of virtually everyone in the United States was suddenly made vulnerable to being exposed, sold, altered, deleted, or used for profit or political retribution. This was the work of the so-called Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, an entity that Musk and others began planning in 2024

and which Trump made official on his first day in office.<sup>1</sup>

DOGE is at the cutting edge of Trump's drive to expand presidential authority while shredding the U.S. government's system of checks and balances.<sup>2</sup> The initiative aims to shrink the administrative state and remake it as the president's political tool. It also places core state functions under the control of an essentially private body unaccountable to anyone except—at most—Trump himself. The regime's authoritarian power drive has already begun to have devastating effects on people's livelihoods, health care, social services, and beyond.<sup>3</sup> Whether the courts will capitulate to this assault or try to block it is uncertain, but it will likely have irreversible impacts.

DOGE's role in the new regime's power grab signals two interrelated changes in Trump's political project. Unlike the MAGA movement's right-wing populism, which combines supremacist attacks on various oppressed groups with distorted anti-elitism, DOGE is guided by self-described

neoreactionaries who glorify elites and reject populist appeals in principle. And while the first Trump administration was backed by an unstable coalition of competing capitalist interests, tech billionaires closely aligned with neoreactionary politics now appear to be at the forefront of the pro-Trump business bloc. These changes have helped make the second Trump presidency more dangerous than the first, but they also point to potential divisions and conflicts within the Trump coalition—vulnerabilities that might be used to develop more effective resistance strategies.

Although liberals and Democratic Party leaders often frame resistance to Trump as a struggle to defend democracy, the U.S. government has always been an oligarchy in which a tiny capitalist elite holds most political power, co-opting mass support and wielding systemic violence to serve its own ends, from genocide against the indigenous peoples of North America to genocide against Palestinians. At the same time, generations of social movements in the U.S. have fought and won

## **Neoreactionaries believe firmly that elites should rule and “the people” should not.**

real political space and social reforms that have mitigated some of the system’s worst effects. The Trump regime’s dictatorial power grab threatens these gains. Left unchecked, its actions will have massive human costs, disproportionately hurt oppressed communities, and sharply constrict the space for political activity, especially radical organizing.

The Democratic Party’s resistance to Trump is also deeply compromised because Democrats, along with Republicans, laid the groundwork for the current regime’s actions by expanding both state repression and tech capitalists’ power. The neoreactionary ideology animating DOGE departs from that legacy but also builds on it.

### **NEOREACTION’S RAGEFUL VISION**

Neoreaction (abbreviated as NRx and also called Dark Enlightenment) is a political ideology that “rejects egalitarianism in principle, argues that differences in human intelligence and ability are mainly genetic, and believes that cultural and political elites wrongfully limit the range of acceptable discourse.” Neoreactionaries advocate authoritarian systems of rule based on monarchy or corporations, and they glorify both pre-French Revolution social hierarchy and futuristic visions of radically transforming human beings through technology.<sup>4</sup> Computer scientist Curtis Yarvin first voiced neoreactionary ideology in 2007, and it spread largely through the tech startup subculture, assisted by Silicon Valley venture capitalists including Marc Andreessen, Balaji Srinivasan, and Peter Thiel. By 2022, a *Vanity Fair* article described Yarvin’s ideas as “foundational to a whole political and cultural scene.” Vice President JD Vance, a former Thiel employee whose 2022 U.S. Senate run was heavily funded by Thiel, has cited Yarvin as a political influence, and the two are or have been friends.<sup>5</sup>

Many of Yarvin’s pronouncements closely foreshadowed what the Trump regime, and DOGE specifically, have been doing. In 2012, Yarvin proposed a “reboot” of government that centered on appointing a

“national CEO, [or] what’s called a dictator,” who would oversee an operation to “Retire All Government Employees” (RAGE) and replace civil servants with political loyalists. In 2022, Yarvin envisioned a “butterfly revolution” under a second Trump administration that would give “absolute sovereignty to a single organization” treating the federal government as a conquered enemy. “Trump himself will not be the brain ... He will not be the CEO. He will be the chairman of the board—he will select the CEO (an experienced executive),” who would operate “without any interference from the Congress or courts.” The CEO would shut down “most existing important institutions, public and private” and replace them with “new and efficient systems.” The only check on the CEO would be Trump himself, who “can fire him if need be.”<sup>6</sup>

While other Trump supporters have also proposed a systematic purge and dismantling of the federal bureaucracy, the similarities between Yarvin’s proposal and DOGE’s role within the Trump regime are too striking to ignore. While I’m not aware of any direct links between Musk and Yarvin, several of the young men staffing DOGE have either worked for Thiel or expressed neoreactionary views.<sup>7</sup>

Despite its impact on the current Trump regime, neoreactionary politics is not MAGA politics. The movement to Make America Great Again, Trump’s political base, is a classic example of right-wing populism, i.e., a movement that combines calls to intensify oppression with twisted forms of anti-elitism.<sup>8</sup> MAGA politics is about defending privilege and attacking those who are seen as threatening it from below, but it also feeds on people’s sense of being beaten down by a few people on top, a belief that those in power have betrayed “we the people” and must be stripped of their positions.

Neoreactionaries, by contrast, believe firmly that elites should rule and “the people” should not. (Neoreactionary Nick Land has written that “fleeing [democracy] approaches an ultimate imperative.”) Since Trump first entered the 2016 presidential race, MAGA aimed to mobilize a mass movement to overturn the political

establishment, liberal and conservative alike. This initiative included not just electoral campaigns but also broad-based organizing and physical protests that culminated in the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol in hopes of overturning the 2020 election results by force. But neoreactionaries dismiss the whole idea of a popular uprising. As Yarvin wrote in June 2024, “Charlottesville [the 2017 Unite the Right rally] and January 6 were the last lame breaths of what John Adams called ‘mobocracy’ in America.” What Yarvin envisioned wasn’t a popular uprising, but rather a top-down plan to “hack” the system in order to break it.<sup>9</sup>

### **TECH CAPITALISTS TURN TOWARD TRUMP**

The neoreactionary movement is rooted in the computer technology sector, and its growing influence has been closely tied with tech capitalists’ shift toward the political Right. These developments have altered the Trump administration’s relationship with the business community.

In 2016, Trump’s support from big business was limited and shaky. As one team of analysts argued, his capitalist supporters drew from “several layers of investor blocs with little in common other than their intense dislike of existing forms of American government.” Partly for this reason, Trump’s administration pushed conflicting policies that appealed to both supporters and opponents of neoliberalism. They rolled back environmental regulations and taxes for corporations and the wealthy on one hand, but restricted immigration and trade on the other, while oscillating between interventionist and anti-interventionist approaches to foreign and military policy.<sup>10</sup>

This situation changed in 2024 when a bloc of high-tech business leaders swung toward Trump. Former Democrat Elon Musk donated almost \$200 million toward Trump’s reelection and became one of his closest advisors, while billionaire investors in cryptocurrency and TikTok became campaign supporters, leading Trump to switch from opposition to support on their issues. Tech CEOs held seats of honor at Trump’s January 2025 inauguration, symbolizing their sector’s leadership of the pro-Trump business faction.<sup>11</sup>

## **Neoreactionary elitism may also collide with MAGA populism, especially as the real-world impact of dismantling federal agencies and withholding funding is increasingly felt.**

Right-wing politics have deep roots in Silicon Valley, but the tech billionaires' wholesale shift toward Trump reflects their hopes that a second Trump administration would protect their massive investments in artificial intelligence and cryptocurrency, boost fossil fuel production to support AI and crypto's vast energy demands, and build higher walls against Chinese tech competition.<sup>12</sup> In addition, newer tech firms such as Anduril Industries and Palantir Technologies (both bankrolled by Peter Thiel) and Musk's SpaceX are increasingly challenging traditional military manufacturers such as Lockheed Martin and Boeing for lucrative Pentagon and Homeland Security contracts. Analyst Michael Klare argues that while most Republican members of Congress rely on the traditional military suppliers for campaign contributions, Musk and Vance could push Trump to favor the newer firms.<sup>13</sup>

### **POINTS OF WEAKNESS**

DOGE's operations help us identify several potential points of weakness within the Trump regime. Although Musk's recently announced plans to reduce his DOGE involvement may not change DOGE's role or indicate any tension between him and Trump, a falling out between the two is always possible. (*Ed note: Musk has since left and has been publicly feuding with Trump.*) DOGE may overreach through recklessness, incompetence, and hubris, alienating supporters and provoking stronger push-back from the courts, Democrats, Republicans, or other sections of the regime itself. Occasionally we've seen Republican congressmembers criticizing DOGE and Trump-appointed heads of key agencies countermanding instructions from the DOGE-controlled Office of Personnel Management.<sup>14</sup> Tech capitalists' new status as Trump favorites may foster greater cohesiveness within the regime on economic policy and geostrategy, but it could also alienate other powerful sections of the business community, and Trump's aggres-

sive and volatile promotion of tariffs does not reflect tech capitalist interests.<sup>15</sup>

Neoreactionary elitism may also collide with MAGA populism, especially as the real-world impact of dismantling federal agencies and withholding funding is increasingly felt. Even before the inauguration, Musk clashed publicly with MAGA stalwarts Steve Bannon and Laura Loomer over the H-1B visa program.<sup>16</sup> Some antifascists assume that tech capitalists will win any such fight. But there are sections of the MAGA movement, particularly the vast New Apostolic Reformation network, whose ideological commitment runs deeper than loyalty to Trump, and who have extensive financial and media resources wholly independent of Silicon Valley.<sup>17</sup>

Such fault lines within the Trump coalition deserve close attention. They bely the regime's projection of unity and omnipotence, and may create opportunities we can exploit, such as pointing out how DOGE's actions hurt many of Trump's own followers.

Yet in looking for ways to combat the Trump regime, rallying to the Democratic Party would be a serious mistake. As I wrote recently,

Since the late 1970s, Democrats have been complicit with Republicans in making neoliberalism the dominant form of capitalist rule, expanding the repressive state apparatus, and strengthening military interventionism—policies that in some ways laid the groundwork for Trumpism and in others fueled a right-wing populist backlash from which Trump has benefited.<sup>18</sup>

While the Republican Party's leadership in expanding state repression (such as passing the Patriot Act and authorizing the use of torture) has received more attention, the Democrats, too, have played an active role—from Bill Clinton's Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (which weakened defendants' rights

and restrictions on wiretapping) to the Biden administration's dangerous use of "seditious conspiracy" charges against Far Rightists (a tactic that inevitably fuels repression against the Left).<sup>19</sup> In between, Barack Obama oversaw the \$100 billion construction of "the most powerful surveillance state the world has ever seen." State- and local-level Democrats have actively promoted measures to suppress Palestine solidarity protests against the U.S.-backed genocide in Gaza. Unlike the Trump administration and DOGE, none of these initiatives represented a systemic shift or targeted the administrative state—they mostly targeted radicals, foreigners, poor people, and other subversives.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, while tech capitalists' collective embrace of Trump is a new and dangerous development, Democrats helped build their influence in Washington. The shift to unmanned weapons systems that helped tech companies win more military contracts has its roots in the Obama administration, which vastly expanded the use of drones to carry out assassinations, at a cost of hundreds of civilian lives.<sup>21</sup> And given the Obama administration's massive construction of surveillance infrastructure, it's no surprise that web, telecommunications, software, and other computer-related companies favored Obama over his Republican opponent.<sup>22</sup>

Democrats' past coziness with tech companies doesn't mean we should treat all examples of capitalist political influence as the same, or ignore the immediate, overriding threat the Trump administration presents. Rather, it underscores the pressing need to build a broad-based resistance movement independent of the Democratic Party, where radical and anti-capitalist voices are not silenced.

*This article is adapted from an analysis that was first published in "The DOGE and the Neoreactionaries," Three Way Fight, March 2, 2025, <https://threewayfight.org/the-doge-and-the-neoreactionaries/>.*

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BY FAITH LAZAR

# A Deep State Affair

How the Right Fell out of Love with the FBI



*Collage of Kash Patel, FBI agents posing near Mount Carmel in 1993, and J. Edgar Hoover (Credit: PRA)*

On March 15, 1963, the far-right militia known as the Minutemen issued a chilling threat. They published an “in memoriam” list naming twenty congressmen who had voted to abolish the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), the powerful Congressional body created to root out alleged subversive activity of private citizens. Other suspected “reds” received cards at their homes warning, “Traitors beware ... the cross-hairs are on the back of your necks.”<sup>1</sup>

The Minutemen believed communist interlopers had overtaken the U.S. government, supplanting the legitimate constitutional republic. Seeing themselves as auxiliary enforcers for HUAC and the FBI, they adopted similar investigative tactics. They spied on labor unions, civil rights groups, and leftist organizations while preparing for guerilla warfare from fortified bunkers. They aimed to overthrow what they called the “Invisible Government,” a precursor to today’s “Deep State.”<sup>2</sup>

For mid-20th-century far-right groups like the Minutemen, communism and New Deal-era “welfarism” were seen as one and the same: collectivist threats to freedom.<sup>3</sup> Though often described as “anti-government,” they were selectively so, championing security institutions like the FBI when used against leftist opponents, while opposing state efforts at redistributing power or wealth.<sup>4</sup>

This alliance with the security state frayed over time. By the mid-1960s, far-right leaders who had once modeled their organizations on the FBI—like Minutemen founder Robert Depugh<sup>5</sup>—turned against the very agency they had once supported, denouncing the FBI as irreparably infiltrated and a lethal apparatus of the “occupied” or “invisible government.” By the twentieth century’s end, mistrust of federal police had become a defining feature of militia movements, fueling violent clashes and turning fear of the state into a rallying cry.

The difference in the present is that the electoral Right has historically supported

the FBI, whereas now MAGAism, framed as a populist rebellion against an “elite” bent on destroying true Americans, denounces the FBI and the so-called “Deep State.” This anti-FBI rhetoric taps into the Far Right’s insurgent energy while resonating with broader public distrust of the FBI as a repressive institution. One clear example is Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, who began selling “Defund the FBI” and “Enemy of the State” merchandise after the FBI raided Trump’s Mar-a-Lago estate.<sup>6</sup> Though far from a civil libertarian—given her attacks on trans people, immigrants, and opponents of the genocide in Gaza—Greene appeals to a right-wing populist base that feels crushed by the status quo and is eager to see its enemies punished. Before his confirmation as Trump’s new FBI Director, Kash Patel tapped into this retributive desire, threatening to go after “Deep State” officials and “conspirators.”<sup>7</sup>

The MAGA Right’s supposed rebellion is less a break than a power struggle within an antidemocratic framework that

enables the security state's continued expansion while dismantling the redistributive state. It intensifies far-right militancy while expanding state surveillance and deepening public distrust of government, all while destroying the other half of the so-called "Deep State"—the administrative state and what remains of public provision—which has been steadily

version.<sup>12</sup> Ultraconservatives responded to this call, blending libertarian anti-statism with authoritarian anticommunism.

Mid-century ultraconservatives viewed domestic subversion as posing an even greater threat than foreign communist forces.<sup>13</sup> They revered figures like Joseph McCarthy and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, viewing them as defend-

## **Far-right groups selectively used state power to suppress leftist enemies while advocating for small government when it suited them.**

privatized, defunded, or, in terms of real growth, left at a standstill over the past several decades.<sup>8</sup>

### **THE "DEEP STATE" NARRATIVE'S ULTRA-CONSERVATIVE ROOTS**

The concept of the "Deep State" has deep historical roots, but Trump adopted the phrase into his lexicon during his first term to describe a group of shadowy elites allegedly orchestrating coordinated opposition to his mandate.<sup>9</sup> This includes opponents in intelligence agencies (especially the FBI), and senior officials in the Department of Homeland Security and the Justice Department who supposedly leak false intelligence, targeting Trump and his allies through the courts and the media in cooperation with the Democratic party. But similar concepts had been circulating within the Right, such as "one-worldism," "the invisible government," and "the New World Order."<sup>10</sup>

"Deep State" is a direct translation of the Turkish concept *derin devlet*. Originating in the late Ottoman Empire, the term evokes the shadow side of civil governance, specifically the hidden, undemocratic systems and conspiracies wielded by military factions and organized crime within government.<sup>11</sup> However, the notion of a secret, replacement government that holds true power is a feature of U.S. right-wing thought that dates back to at least World War I. The concept gained significant traction during the second Red Scare, when the FBI stoked fears of a lurking communist menace and called for citizens' "eternal vigilance" to fight such sub-

vers of American values against communism. They saw them as protectors of the "good state," the security state, in opposition to the "bad state," the New Deal state, which ultraconservatives viewed as a Trojan horse for Soviet-style communism. Ultraconservatives and some of the Right's most radical voices, like the militant Minutemen and the John Birch Society, thus became the grassroots base of a deeply antidemocratic security state.

### **CONSPIRATORIAL ANTI-STATISM AND LOYALISM TO THE SECURITY STATE**

The Right supported the FBI in establishing a massive domestic surveillance apparatus, advocating for the agency's right to act with little restraint. Backed by nationalist business interests, segregationists, and grassroots groups, ultraconservative activists rallied behind the conspiratorial anticommunism that went hand-in-hand with their crusade to dismantle the New Deal welfare state while supporting the security state's expansion.<sup>14</sup> This dual strategy allowed movement leaders to root out communist infiltrators domestically through Hoover's FBI, and engage in aggressive military actions and covert operations to combat communism abroad. Under Hoover's leadership the FBI expanded its surveillance powers, identifying communism as a pervasive threat in American society.<sup>15</sup> The Far Right legitimized itself through the FBI's analysis, blending anti-communism with virulent and sometimes insurgent anti-statism.

This alliance with the security state was opportunistic—far-right groups selectively used state power to suppress leftist enemies while advocating for small government when it suited them. For instance, while pushing for a free-market agenda, they supported expanded FBI surveillance to root out subversion. By the 1950s, the FBI had greatly deepened its reach through measures like the 1947 "Loyalty Order," enabling invasive investigations into federal employees.<sup>16</sup> HUAC collaborated with the FBI to investigate people and groups suspected of having associations with the American Communist Party, together embodying the Far Right's selective anti-statism: using the state to suppress leftist movements while opposing any redistribution of power and wealth.

The communist threat had been a flexible and expansive concept for American conservative politics since the first Red Scare, representing fears ranging from sexual liberalism to integration. But factions within the ultraconservative milieu profoundly disagreed about whether its "true nature" was a political or racial problem.<sup>17</sup>

For the racist faction, the communist conspiracy was a Jewish conspiracy. World War II military intelligence officer John O. Beaty's *Iron Curtain Over America* (1951) provided the theoretical framework for the ZOG (Zionist Occupation Government) conspiracy. Racialists claimed that a cabal of Jews had surreptitiously infiltrated the government in order to socially engineer race-mixing to subdue and conquer the White, Christian American population.<sup>18</sup>

The Americanist faction's ultraconservative groups, like the John Birch Society, avoided explicit race-based explanations but also believed that malevolent forces secretly occupied the positions of state power to enforce collectivism. The Society's founder, Robert Welch, repeated the phony statistic that "70% to 90% of the responsible personnel in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare are Communists."<sup>19</sup> Even Republican President Eisenhower was accused of taking direct orders from the Kremlin.<sup>20</sup>

Despite their differences, both factions generally agreed on supporting the Bureau.<sup>21</sup> The John Birch Society promoted Hoover's *Masters of Deceit* in each month-

ly issue of its newsletter, *American Opinion*.<sup>22</sup> The official United Klans of America newsletter *The Fiery Cross* praised Hoover as an ally in maintaining White supremacy, working to reveal the communist conspiracies underlying the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>23</sup> And the American

some Klan leaders, like UKA Imperial Wizard Robert Shelton, refused to believe the evidence. Shelton and others reconsidered only after a group of anti-war activists broke into a records office and accidentally uncovered the mass operations. In a 1971 speech, Shelton decried

***The fantasies were paranoid in their extravagances, but like many conspiracy theories, they resonated because they spoke to real conditions.***

Nazi Party founder George Lincoln Rockwell declared “Heil Hoover” in honor of the long-serving director.<sup>24</sup>

### THE FAR RIGHT’S BREAK WITH THE FBI

As FBI surveillance of Rightist groups ramped up in the mid-1960s, Hoover and his bureau—once the “patron saint of the Far Right”<sup>25</sup>—became the central villain within the far-right imagination and its evidence that the “Invisible Government” had taken over the state.<sup>26</sup>

The FBI first initiated investigations into fascist groups during World War II and continued to monitor other Far Right, anticommunist groups on a small scale since the 1940s. Monitoring and infiltration increased as armed right-wing organizations, such as the Minutemen and the Klan, grew. These groups opposed federally mandated integration with vigilante violence and terror directed at Black liberationists and civil rights advocates, leading to the launch of COINTELPRO-White Hate (1964–1971). During the same period—and to an even greater extent—the FBI aggressively infiltrated left-wing groups, including socialists, civil rights organizations, and antiwar activists.<sup>27</sup> Before this significant escalation, some far-right organizations had already begun noticing informants within their ranks and had caught FBI agents recording license plate numbers outside their meeting halls. Racist paramilitary groups like the National States Rights Party emerged as vocal critics of the FBI, referring to it as the “Federal Bureau of Integration.”<sup>28</sup>

Revelations of COINTELPRO and its impact on the broader Far Right did not unfold all at once. Though hard to miss,

his newfound foes: “[t]he FBI ladies and Gentlemen is no longer the respected and honorable arm of justice that it once appeared to be, it is the pawn of the one-worlders ... and we intend to fight them as long as they continue to fight us.”<sup>29</sup> Hostility and, at times, outright warfare defined the Far Right’s relationship with the FBI throughout the 1970s and 1980s. As far-right militancy escalated, the Bureau responded with sweeping crackdowns and infiltration by informants and undercover agents.<sup>30</sup>

The exposure of FBI infiltration and covert operations aimed at neutralizing far-right organizations crystallized a sense of betrayal and anti-government animus that became central to conservatism following Waco, where over 80 people died in 1993 while under siege by the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF). Federal agents’ excessive use of force helped fuse a narrative of political repression and anti-government resentment with standard conservative critiques of government encroachment on gun ownership, federal land regulation, taxes, and religious freedom.<sup>31</sup>

### ANTI-FBI RHETORIC POST-WACO: THE MILITIA MOVEMENT’S RISE

Waco marked a pivotal moment for the nascent U.S. militia movement, galvanizing fears of a tyrannical federal government and sparking a militant response that would define the 1990s. In the months following the violent standoff, the militia movement swelled, attracting tens of thousands of new members. They were drawn in by myths steeped in White producerist ideology and conspir-

acy theories that depicted heroic patriots resisting what they viewed as a parasitic federal government eroding individual freedoms and traditional American values.<sup>32</sup> Anti-federal sentiment, fueled by Waco, served as the glue that united the Far Right’s various factions.

The 1990s militia movement is often characterized by its most extreme paranoid fantasies. Scattered and loosely affiliated outposts of militant activists shared rumors and other “intelligence” through short-wave radio, newsletters, and a country-wide fax chain; fax machines belched out conspiratorial reports about United Nations troops secretly camped out on U.S. soil, infringing on its sovereignty; black helicopters carrying jack-booted state agents who would raid houses and disarm the population to institute a totalitarian regime; false-flag terrorist attacks being planned by the FBI to discredit the militia movement; and maps of FEMA camp locations that would be used to intern patriotic Americans who tried to resist the New World Order.<sup>33</sup>

The fantasies were paranoid in their extravagances, but like many conspiracy theories, they resonated because they spoke to real conditions—like militarized police; national sovereignty eroded by the frictionless, unfettered movement of transnational corporations and intragovernmental agencies; mass surveillance and aggressive counterintelligence; and a permanent, unelected national security state.<sup>34</sup>

But militia members exceptionalized their circumstances instead of recognizing that they were “the most recent victim[s]”<sup>35</sup> of repressive state power and economic disparity, or connecting preemptive and paramilitarized policing policies as a thread binding them to people impacted by racist criminalization. In their analysis of the second wave of post-Obama era militias, Joseph Lowndes and Daniel Martinez HoSang identify a dynamic: as the government’s role in providing services has weakened, its repressive powers have grown, a process aided by “racialized discourse[s] that demonized public provision.”<sup>36</sup> The militias positioned themselves as the primary victims of state violence and repression, and simultaneously, the only legitimate





A person looking out of the window of a decaying building with the words "New World" on the wall (Credit: Wendelin Jacober/Wikimedia Commons)

authority to enforce law and order. Members took up arms, claiming self-defense against a tyrannical government, while asserting that they, as unfairly treated law-abiding citizens, were best suited to tackle lawlessness and threats to national security, as organized militias.<sup>37</sup>

The bitter irony of the militias' security state concerns was that they railed against the expanded police powers that far-right movements had played a part in creating—like the surveillance dragnet and its seeming ubiquity of informants, militarized raids in lieu of regulation, and the police's ability to use deadly force with impunity. Expanded federal law enforcement power and mass incarceration had largely been accomplished as a bipartisan effort; but conservatives and the Far Right had played a historic role not merely supporting the growth of the security state and its mandate to operate without restriction but had often played the role of an informal security state in the face of overcoming such restrictions.

## CLINTON-ERA POLICIES AND THE GROWTH OF ANTIGOVERNMENT RAGE

The Right's fury against the "New World Order" in the 1990s was rooted in the legacy of 1950s ultraconservative grassroots red-baiting and "invisible government" conspiracies that contributed to a rightward shift in U.S. domestic politics and a period of intense political repression. At the same time, this rage reflected the post-Cold War era's contradictions, in which many ultraconservative goals were realized under a Democratic president instead of a Republican one. Clinton-era policies continued attacks on labor, accelerated deregulation that enabled the offshoring of manufacturing and jobs, militarized the U.S.-Mexico border, and most significantly, restructured welfare.<sup>38</sup>

One striking example is the dismantling of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a New Deal legacy program targeted by conservatives. They portrayed it as emblematic of government waste

and moral decay, often through racialized stereotypes of Black single mothers as dependent and sexually irresponsible. In reality, AFDC accounted for just short of one percent of the federal budget at its peak in the 1994 fiscal year. Yet it was slashed and replaced in 1996 by the deeply punitive *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families* (TANF), which imposed work requirements and limited windows in which recipients could receive benefits.<sup>39</sup>

As Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons have argued, the relatively small gap between Clinton and the Right fueled the latter's fury,<sup>40</sup> which "made it possible to lose sight of how much ultraconservatives had already won, and how far they had succeeded in shifting the whole political spectrum."<sup>41</sup> The contradictory and self-perpetuating immiseration and rage that accompany the successes of eliminating the state are often articulated through radical self-reliance and a refusal of "dependency" on government assistance or services. This dependency is often racialized or even literally

demonized as a trap set by an evil, plotting, malevolent state. As HoSang and Lowndes have argued, “the more people ... are abandoned by the state, the greater the possibili-

Ultimately, despite the bluster of figures like Rep. Greene and Director Patel, the FBI is in no real danger of being defunded and the “Museum” isn’t selling

derstands that dismantling the administrative state is a balancing act.<sup>51</sup> While musing on his *War Room* podcast that Americans need to “stop whining about Entitlements,” he cautioned: “A lot of MAGAs on Medicaid ... Just can’t take a meat axe to it.”<sup>52</sup>

## ***The Far Right’s anti-government rhetoric and conflicted relationship with federal policing masks deep investments in state power. Rather than reject the state, they seek to reshape it.***

ty for anti-statist sentiment to grow.”<sup>42</sup>

This dynamic set the stage for what Ruth Wilson Gilmore terms the “anti-state state,” in which political figures and institutions gain power by denouncing the state while simultaneously expanding carceral and military institutions such as prisons, policing, and the military.<sup>43</sup> This dynamic narrows the public sector’s legitimacy in everyday life, often replacing it with security solutions.

Such an erosion of state legitimacy found expression in the militia movement, which sought to challenge the security state’s monopoly on force. It claimed a share of that repressive power for itself, decentralizing it to “the people,” who could then arm and govern themselves. Militias began to operate in the shadow of the state by taking on repressive roles the state traditionally held. Their critique of federal policing was not a call for abolition or mutual aid, but for privatization and localized policing rooted in the “private” sphere of male-headed family households. The ability to police and defend oneself became the ultimate expression of a fantasy to eliminate the state in the name of “freedom.”

### **HOW MAGA USES ANTI-FBI TALK TO UNDERMINE SOCIAL PROVISION**

Before his confirmation as FBI Director, Kash Patel promised to shutter the Bureau’s headquarters and turn it into a “museum of the deep state.”<sup>44</sup> Framed as a populist rebellion against a corrupt elite, Patel’s anti-“Deep State” crusade recasts the FBI director as an anti-establishment maverick. His break from institutional norms and the agency’s nonpartisan image—one that was always more fantasy than fact—transforms his blatant partisanship and sycophancy into a virtue.

tickets. Patel recently boasted that he’s already restored public trust in the FBI. The bureau, he says, is seeing a record number of applicants, allowing “good cops [to] be cops” again.<sup>45</sup>

So, what are these “good cop” FBI agents up to? They are pulling all-nighters to process the agency’s “Epstein Files” amid a FOIA backlog,<sup>46</sup> which the Trump administration touts to its QAnon-minded MAGA base as transparency toward uncovering the “Deep State.”<sup>47</sup> And in April, they arrested a Wisconsin judge, accusing her of obstructing justice for directing an undocumented immigrant out of her courtroom as ICE agents waited to arrest him—presumably to intimidate judges who appear to challenge the administration’s mass deportation efforts.<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile, the Trump-Musk DOGE initiative has launched a blitzkrieg of mass layoffs and intimidation of federal employees to gut the federal budget. Basic social programs are also facing serious threats of being slashed, including the Department of Education, Medicaid, food assistance for low-income families, and emergency income support.<sup>49</sup>

“Deep State” conspiracies have helped MAGA maintain an aura of insurgency and support from its popular base, even while becoming the Republican Party’s mainstream. But it’s doubtful that its current slash-and-burn approach to the federal government can be sustained. As a conservative *National Review* analyst recently put it: “Firing lefty bureaucrats is exhilarating. DOGE’s savings to the budget are the equivalent of pocket change in the sofa cushions: good to collect, no substitute for a realistic budget.”<sup>50</sup>

Even the “Deep State” conspiracy’s loudest proponent, Steve Bannon, un-

derstands that dismantling the administrative state is a balancing act.<sup>51</sup> While musing on his *War Room* podcast that Americans need to “stop whining about Entitlements,” he cautioned: “A lot of MAGAs on Medicaid ... Just can’t take a meat axe to it.”<sup>52</sup>

Ultimately, the Far Right’s anti-government rhetoric and conflicted relationship with federal policing masks deep investments in state power. Rather than reject the state, they seek to reshape it. From red-baiting and glorifying J. Edgar Hoover to today’s “Defund the FBI” slogans, far-right movements have oscillated between collaborating with and opposing federal policing. They have also grown as the security state and military have expanded, with declining living standards, antidemocratic revanchism, and returning veterans continuing to fuel their ranks.<sup>53</sup> This history reveals that today’s anti-FBI rhetoric is not a principled anti-statism concerned with ending repressive power, but one that aims to reallocate it from public accountability to privatized, authoritarian control within racialized, patriarchal domains by eliminating the redistributive state.

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