Draft Chapter 13: Contagion of Compliance

\chapter{Contagion of Compliance --- From Cognitive Capture to Civilian Surrender}

As explored in Chapter 11, The Fracture Zone, the United States has increasingly resembled what Barbara F. Walter (2022) would term an “anocracy” – neither fully democratic nor overtly autocratic, but a brittle hybrid state (p. 32). Chapter 11 outlined how our nation’s democratic facade masks a dangerous decay of norms: rules bent, expectations broken, and a society cleaved into warring epistemic factions. Chapter 12 built on this by examining how institutional guardrails have been quietly removed or reversed. The judiciary’s feedback function was shown to be captured, with courts often abdicating their role as a check on power; media echo chambers replaced genuine accountability with amplified propaganda; and strategic silence among elites normalized the erosion of constitutional constraints. Now, in Chapter 13, we turn to the final and perhaps most insidious mechanism of democratic collapse: the **contagion of compliance**. This chapter delves into how public complicity, social conformity, and psychological capture form self-reinforcing loops that accelerate the breakdown of democratic norms. In the collapse algorithm that is unraveling the American republic, the populace itself becomes an unwitting feedback loop – one that, if left unchecked, will iterate from cognitive capture all the way to civilian surrender.

\section\*{Democratic Decay and Public Complicity}

Democratic backsliding does not occur in a vacuum; it requires acquiescence, whether tacit or overt, from the very public whose rights are at stake. In the previous chapters, we saw how institutional failures set the stage. But even the most power-hungry regime cannot erode democratic norms without a critical mass of the public either cheering it on or quietly complying. Compliance becomes contagious when individuals see those around them accepting new abuses as “normal.” What begins as strategic silence among leaders (as noted in Chapter 12 regarding elite accountability) trickles down as learned silence among everyday citizens. Each person who shrugs off a transgression – a racist policy, a censorious law, a politically motivated prosecution – contributes to a widening sphere of normalized deviance. This is the phenomenon of **habituated collapse**: people adapting to incremental violations as though they were ordinary, even acceptable. Over time, abnormal becomes routine.

From a systems science perspective, this is a dangerous reinforcing feedback loop. Every instance of public compliance sends a signal to those in power that they can push further. The lack of immediate consequences – protests fizzling, courts deferring, media moving on – is read as a form of consent. That perceived consent emboldens the regime to commit even greater infractions, which in turn further stretches the populace’s threshold of outrage. The loop feeds on itself. In system dynamics terms, it is a **positive feedback cycle** of authoritarian consolidation: State overreach $\to$ Public compliance $\to$ State further overreach $\to$ Deeper compliance. Like an engine without a governor, this cycle accelerates until something breaks. As Walter (2022) cautions, “civil wars don’t start in the poorest countries, or the most brutal ones – they start where expectations break and rules are bent” (p. 32). America’s democratic expectations have been breaking; the rules have been bending. Public complicity in the bending of those rules only hastens the snap.

Crucially, this complicity is not always active support; often it is passive acquiescence. It is the quiet that greets a constitutional violation because outrage feels futile. It is neighbors telling each other to “stay out of trouble” rather than to speak out. It is millions of social media users scrolling past news of yet another norm violated, thinking someone else will fix it. This passivity is the lifeblood of authoritarian ambitions. In **How Civil Wars Start**, Walter (2022) identifies how factional entrepreneurs exploit citizen disengagement, using identity fears and propaganda to turn a divided public into accomplices of democratic collapse. When a critical mass of the public either believes the leader’s narrative or fears challenging it, democracy’s immune system fails. The very mechanisms that should correct course – public protest, whistleblowing, voting out authoritarians – instead fall dormant.

One need only look at early 2025 events to see these dynamics in motion. After the 2024 election, the new administration quickly tested the waters of compliance. In Los Angeles, a dramatic example unfolded: on the pretext of quelling “lawlessness,” President Trump unilaterally deployed 2,000 California National Guard troops and even active-duty Marines to the streets of Los Angeles, bypassing the Governor and invoking **Title 10** authority (Mason, 2025; Rodriguez, 2025). The move, executed via presidential order, was ostensibly to support Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids against undocumented workers. Chapter 12 foreshadowed this scenario with a discussion of judicial permissiveness – and indeed, initial responses showed dangerously little institutional resistance. Governor Gavin Newsom’s outspoken objection (“there is currently no unmet need… this will erode public trust” (Mason, 2025)) was a notable but rare challenge. For the most part, federal lawmakers in the President’s party applauded the action or remained mute. Federal courts, too, were hesitant: when a U.S. district judge finally ruled that the Guard deployment violated the Tenth Amendment and exceeded the President’s authority, the appellate court swiftly stayed that ruling, effectively deferring to the executive (Rodriguez, 2025). In public squares, outrage and protest were real – community members did protest the ICE raids and the military occupation of their city – but the national reaction was fragmented and subdued. Many Americans watched the spectacle on the news with a sense of helplessness or detachment. Some accepted the official narrative that this was necessary to restore “order.” Others were unsure what to believe amidst the media frenzy. The end result? The deployment stood, and an extraordinary violation of federalism was normalized in practice.

Each element of this incident illustrates complicity reinforcing collapse. The President’s advisors deliberately **weaponized feedback loops of state perception**: first, a media narrative of “immigrant-fueled chaos” and “sanctuary city lawlessness” was crafted to justify action; then the federal deployment itself provoked more unrest on the ground; that unrest was splashed across screens as evidence validating the crackdown; in turn, a broader swath of the public internalized the notion that extreme measures were needed (see Figure 13.1). In effect, a **coercive control loop** was created. By engineering a crisis and then “solving” it with force, the regime sent a clear message to the public: dissent will be met with militarized might, and few in power will stop it. The more people accepted that message – whether out of agreement or out of fear – the more it became reality.

\begin{figure}[h]\centering  
\caption{Figure 13.1: Civilian Normalization Loop --- a systems diagram illustrating how small acts of compliance cascade into collective capitulation.}  
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Notably, this feedback system relies on **cognitive capture** at mass scale: controlling the narrative to shape how people think about what is happening. State-aligned media and partisan echo chambers constantly reframed events to induce compliance. Night after night, television networks and social media influencers sympathetic to the administration described the Los Angeles protests as an “insurrection” and painted the President’s actions as “law-and-order leadership.” By saturating the discourse with these frames, they gradually captured the cognitive landscape – especially for those predisposed to trust the regime’s narrative. Cognitive capture is essentially a form of mass mental conditioning. When successful, it leads ordinary people to see authoritarian moves not as threats to their freedom, but as reasonable and even necessary steps. In a chilling echo of totalitarian regimes past, truth itself becomes so warped that many citizens lose the ability to recognize tyranny even as it unfolds in broad daylight.

This process has been turbocharged by technology and the fragmentation of the media ecosystem. **Chapter 12** discussed how echo chambers and disinformation replace genuine feedback loops in a failing democracy. In 2025, we see this clearly: one segment of America consumes a steady diet of state propaganda (from cable news to algorithmically-curated social feeds), while others struggle to have facts break through the noise. **Cognitive capture** thus feeds **social conformity**. As more people buy into the official narrative, dissenting voices become marginalized. Those who might disagree self-censor, fearing social backlash or simply the futility of speaking against the crowd. This is the classic **spiral of silence**, now supercharged by 21st-century information warfare. The end point is a populace that, en masse, yields its independent judgment – a cognitive surrender that precedes the physical surrender of rights.

\section\*{From Cognitive Capture to Social Conformity}

Cognitive capture sets the stage, but **social conformity** is the mechanism that spreads compliance like a virus through the population. Humans are social creatures; we take cues from our peers. Authoritarians exploit this by manufacturing the illusion of majority support and inevitability. If you are constantly told (and shown) that “everyone” supports the Leader or that resistance is futile, you may eventually believe it – or at least act as if you do. Thus, even those who privately harbor doubts often mute themselves, unwilling to stand apart from what they perceive as the new normal. This phenomenon has been observed in numerous backsliding democracies: citizens become **agents of their own repression**, policing one another in the name of social cohesion or patriotism.

Consider how quickly extreme measures can become normalized once peers begin to accept them. After the Los Angeles crackdown, polls showed a significant number of Americans – particularly within the President’s political base – not only accepting but approving the use of military force against “domestic unrest.” Friends and family members of those protesting in L.A. reportedly urged them to stay home, not out of disagreement with their cause, but out of a fearful new respect for federal power. “It’s not worth it – you can’t fight them,” became a common refrain. Such words, repeated in countless households, are the sound of democracy suffocating. When people start to discourage each other from exercising constitutional rights (to assemble, to speak, to petition) because they have internalized the consequences of defiance, the authoritarian project has achieved a major goal: society begins to **regulate itself** in line with the regime’s preferences.

This is the **contagion of compliance** in action. Each person who submits without a fight encourages others to do the same. Each neighbor who remains silent as another is targeted – whether an immigrant taken by an ICE raid, a protester beaten and jailed, or a journalist subpoenaed for reporting – helps normalize a culture of fear and obedience. Social conformity pressures the undecided to side with the apparent majority or simply keep their heads down. In psychological terms, a form of **pluralistic ignorance** can set in: many people might privately sense something is wrong, but seeing no one else object openly, they assume they are alone in their concern and thus remain quiet. Little do they realize that others share their alarm in private. The authoritarian regime thrives on this misperception. It wants the public to overestimate its support and underestimate the strength of any opposition.

Historical parallels abound. Repressive governments have long relied on good citizens doing nothing. In the early 1930s, many Germans who disagreed with Nazi extremism nevertheless kept quiet or outwardly conformed as the regime consolidated – a silence that Hitler took as license to go further. In more recent times, Turkey’s gradual slide into authoritarianism was enabled by a populace that, after a failed 2016 coup and subsequent purges, became increasingly cautious, conformist, and apolitical, leaving President Erdoğan with fewer obstacles to one-man rule. The United States in 2025 shows signs of a similar pattern. The “moderate middle” – those not zealously for or against the regime – becomes demoralized and opts for self-preservation over principled stand-taking. Judges, civil servants, military officers, even if uneasy, often defer or resign quietly rather than actively resist orders, fearing career consequences or worse. Such deference from inside the system was highlighted in Chapter 12’s discussion of **captured institutions**. But the same principle extends to the general population.

**Judicial deference** in particular sends a powerful signal to society. When courts consistently uphold or refuse to block the executive’s dubious actions, it lends a veneer of legality to authoritarian moves. For example, the legal battle over the Los Angeles deployments left many Americans confused about what was lawful. A district judge’s injunction against Trump’s action was hailed by some as a triumph of checks and balances – Governor Newsom declared it “a test of democracy” that California passed (Rodriguez, 2025). Yet within hours the decision was stayed, and in the end the higher courts (stacked with conservative, executive-friendly judges) allowed the federal troops to continue operating on L.A. streets. The message to the public was unmistakable: the courts will not save you. In fact, the administration’s lawyers explicitly argued that the President’s deployment of the Guard was “not subject to judicial review,” a claim Judge Breyer rebuked by reminding them the U.S. has a constitutional government “and not King George” (Rodriguez, 2025). Still, that such an argument could be made at all – and that an appeals court entertained it by delaying the corrective order – demonstrates how far the judicial branch’s willingness to defer has grown. As Chapter 12 noted, a captured judiciary ceases to provide negative feedback to correct executive abuses; instead it may actively enable them by rubber-stamping or stalling any challenges. When the public witnesses this pattern repeatedly, many conclude that what the government is doing must be legally and thus morally permissible. Or they conclude that if even judges can’t stop it, why stick their own necks out to resist?

This underscores a terrifying reality: **lawfare** – the strategic use of law and courts to undermine opponents – becomes a dual weapon. The regime uses the law to persecute dissidents (e.g., aggressive prosecutions of protest leaders, or civil suits to bankrupt opposition organizations) while also using the law’s complexity and slow pace to wear down resistance. By the time a court might rule in favor of civil liberties, the moment has passed or the facts on the ground have changed. Meanwhile, new laws are rapidly introduced to preempt future dissent. In just the first months of 2025, lawmakers aligned with the administration unleashed a blitz of anti-protest legislation at both state and federal levels. **Forty-one** new anti-protest bills across 22 states were introduced shortly after Trump’s return to office – an astounding surge compared to prior years (Lakhani, 2025). These laws sharply increased penalties for protests, especially targeting those speaking out on controversial issues like the administration’s foreign policy or climate stance (Lakhani, 2025). One proposed federal bill would make disrupting a fossil fuel pipeline project a felony punishable by up to 20 years in prison (Lakhani, 2025). The breadth and vagueness of such laws are no accident; they are designed to cast a chilling pall over activism. Each arrest or hefty sentence under these laws sends a ripple of fear through civil society, deterring others from even contemplating hitting the streets.

Here again we see a **reinforcing feedback loop**: Protest is met with draconian legal reprisals; fearing those reprisals, fewer people protest the next outrage; emboldened by the lack of pushback, the regime enacts even harsher measures. The loop continues until open dissent is virtually extinguished. A senior legal advisor observing the trend noted that when multiple pillars of civil society are under simultaneous attack (the press, independent courts, non-governmental organizations), and on top of that lawmakers are “trying to further suppress dissent,” it forecloses one of the last “critical means of democratic participation” (Lakhani, 2025). In other words, the avenues to voice opposition are systematically shut down, leaving compliance (or underground resistance) as the only options.

\section\*{Psychological Capture and Civilian Surrender}

As compliance becomes habitual and self-perpetuating, a deeper transformation takes hold: what began as reluctant acquiescence can morph into genuine psychological alignment with authoritarian rule. This is **psychological capture** – when a population internalizes the values and worldview of the oppressor, or at least loses the will to oppose it. At this stage, the collapse of democratic norms is nearly complete, because the very people who once might have defended those norms have either been converted, co-opted, or cowed into submission. Civilian surrender is not marked by a formal ceremony of defeat; it manifests in the blank stares of a populace that has stopped believing their voice matters. It looks like citizens going about daily life as if the extraordinary is normal: federal troops policing city streets, dissidents quietly disappearing into courtrooms and jail cells, new “emergency” edicts rolling out weekly – all met with a collective societal shrug.

The mechanisms of psychological capture are both carrot and stick. The stick is obvious: fear. Fear of violence, fear of legal consequences, fear of social ostracism. In 2025, highly publicized examples of punishment have instilled a broad climate of fear. Activists have been hit with multi-year prison sentences for minor acts of civil disobedience, whistleblowers have been charged under antiquated espionage laws, and journalists investigating corruption have been slapped with subpoenas or smear campaigns branding them as traitors. Such cases are not isolated miscarriages of justice; they are strategic signals to everyone else. **This could be you**, the regime effectively warns. And so fear spreads, a contagion of compliance rooted in survival instinct.

The carrot is more subtle but equally powerful: a sense of belonging and purpose offered to those who embrace the new order. Authoritarian movements often create a fervent in-group identity – “patriots” versus “enemies within.” Many citizens find psychological comfort in aligning with what seems like the winning side. Propagandists tell them that by supporting strong measures, they are part of a righteous crusade to “save the nation.” This narrative taps into deep wells of tribalism and pride. In the U.S., the Trumpist right wing (bolstered by think tanks and media allies) has fostered a mythology of restoring America – a return to an idealized past, a “revolution” against corrupt elites and undesirables. People are invited to comply not just out of fear, but out of a belief that they are contributing to a grand project. As insane as it might sound to outside ears, an authoritarian takeover is being sold as a form of patriotic duty. Those who buy into this feel cognitive dissonance no more – they comply willingly because they see it as morally right. They have surrendered their independent thought, but in exchange they feel a dopamine rush of collective belonging. This trade-off – freedom for the warm embrace of the Leader’s cause – is the psychological prize that completes the capture.

By mid-2025, we witness troubling examples of this dynamic. At political rallies and on social networks, ordinary Americans echo rhetoric straight from authoritarian handbooks. After the Los Angeles incident, one might expect widespread skepticism or horror at using the military on civilians. Instead, images circulated of crowds in other cities cheering National Guard convoys as they rolled out, waving flags and holding signs reading “Thank You for Keeping Us Safe.” In online forums, supporters of the administration applauded the arrests of “agitators,” rationalizing that “if they did nothing wrong, they have nothing to fear.” The concept of enemy has been expanded to include fellow citizens who dissent – whether they are protesting a war, advocating for racial justice, or simply fact-checking lies. This is a hallmark of an advanced stage of democratic collapse: when a portion of the citizenry effectively gives license to the regime to do whatever it wants to the rest. It is the point at which civilian surrender becomes a social contagion, not just an individual choice.

The role of **Project 2025** in facilitating this transformation cannot be overstated. Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation’s sweeping 900-page blueprint for a new administration, was not merely a bureaucratic plan – it was (and is) a manifesto for consolidating power and nullifying opposition (Heritage Foundation, 2023; Mascaro, 2023). It explicitly calls for restructuring the federal government to centralize authority in the presidency, purging disloyal officials, weaponizing agencies against ideological adversaries, and even deploying the U.S. military for domestic law enforcement (Heritage Foundation, 2023; Wikipedia, 2025). In short, it lays out an authoritarian architecture to ensure the executive branch can act unchecked and faces minimal resistance from within the government. But a plan on paper needs societal acquiescence to become reality. The genius – or rather malignancy – of Project 2025 is that it anticipated and engineered the compliance of multiple societal sectors. The judiciary was one target: by justifying an extreme interpretation of the unitary executive theory, the plan set the stage for judges (especially those ideologically aligned) to defer to nearly any assertion of presidential power (Barrón-López & Popat, 2024). The civil service was another target: by dismantling merit-based employment and installing loyalists, it ensured that bureaucrats would comply with orders that defy prior norms, or else face removal. Even the military and National Guard were eyed as tools of domestic enforcement – a radical idea normalized by policy papers and then literally realized on the streets of L.A. in June 2025 (Mason, 2025).

Project 2025 also recognizes the importance of public opinion in sustaining an authoritarian transition. It outlines control over federal communications and suggests cracking down on dissenting media under the guise of combating “woke” ideology or “radical left” subversion (Heritage Foundation, 2023; SPLC, 2024). This is a strategic interplay of **lawfare and narrative warfare**: change the laws to empower crackdowns, and change the narrative to persuade the public those crackdowns are good. One chilling line from a key architect of Project 2025, Heritage president Kevin Roberts, encapsulated the mindset: “We are in the process of the second American Revolution, which will remain bloodless — if the left allows it to be” (cited in SPLC, 2024). The implication is unmistakable: if the “left” (broadly meaning any opposition) does not passively comply, blood may be shed. It’s an ultimatum to civilian society – surrender without a fight, and perhaps you’ll be spared. Such rhetoric itself accelerates the contagion of compliance: it instills fear while also providing a twisted justification for preemptive surrender (“for the good of the country, to avoid violence”).

\section\*{Reinforcing Loops and the Collapse of Norms}

Throughout this chapter, we have invoked metaphors of systems science to make sense of how compliance spreads and democracy collapses. We have described positive feedback loops, contagions, cascades, and self-reinforcing cycles. These are not just abstractions; they are the lived reality of 2025 America. Let us summarize the core dynamics in plain terms:

* **Reinforcing Fear Loop:** Each act of state repression (a protest crushed, a dissenter punished) instills more fear in the public. That fear reduces the likelihood of the next act of resistance, which in turn emboldens the state to escalate repression. Fear begets silence, which begets more reasons to fear.
* **Normalization Loop:** Each violation of democratic norms that goes unpunished or uncontested becomes precedent for the next, slightly worse violation. What was outrageous a year ago (e.g., a President defying court orders or using soldiers against citizens) becomes routine now. This is a societal equivalent of the “boiling frog” – by slow degrees, the public doesn’t realize how far standards have fallen. Normalization begets acceptance, which begets further normalization.
* **Legitimation Loop via Institutions:** When key institutions like courts, media, and legislatures legitimate or fail to check authoritarian actions, they send cues to the public that everything is under control. This dampens mass outrage and channels discontent into private grumbling rather than collective action. In turn, the regime capitalizes on the calm to push the envelope further. Institutional silence or support begets public acquiescence, which begets further institutional complicity.
* **Identity and Conformity Loop:** As the regime rallies a core base with identity-based appeals (e.g., portraying itself as the defender of traditional values against “socialist anarchists” or other bogeymen), it solidifies a loyalist faction of the public. Those loyalists, in workplaces and communities, exert peer pressure on others to conform – to show patriotism, to avoid being labeled un-American. The more people conform externally, the more the perception of unanimous support grows, pressuring even skeptics to fall in line. Conformity begets perceived consensus, which begets further conformity.

All these loops interact in a complex systems diagram – a grim picture of a society engineering its own democratic demise. At the heart of these loops is a loss of **feedback**. In a healthy democracy, negative feedback mechanisms (checks and balances, investigative journalism, public protest, fair elections) serve to correct and dampen excesses. In the current collapse algorithm, those mechanisms have been perverted or muted. What we have instead are **positive feedback loops** that amplify instability: each departure from democratic practice is not corrected but doubled down. The result is a cascade – a rapid, self-accelerating slide toward authoritarianism.

Yet, systems science also teaches that reinforcing loops can be broken if a new feedback or intervention is introduced. Contagion can be halted by inoculation. The final chapter of this book will explore whether and how that might be possible – how citizens might disrupt these loops and reintroduce stabilizing negative feedback into the system. For now, in the thick of Chapter 13’s harrowing narrative, we must acknowledge the depth of the crisis.

**Civilian surrender** is not a metaphor; it is happening in slow motion. We are watching a great republic slip into what Walter (2022) would describe as the later rungs of the “escalation ladder” toward internal conflict (see Chapter 11, Figure 11.1). The contagion of compliance has advanced so far that many Americans have ceased to imagine that things could be otherwise. The civic muscle memory of resistance is atrophying. Each day that people remain in denial or resignation, the harder it becomes to regain what has been lost.

In this chapter, we traced the path from cognitive capture to civilian surrender. It is a path marked by fear, manipulation, and the slow death of outrage. The collapse of democratic norms in the United States is being reinforced not only by those in power, but by the compliance – willing or coerced – of those they govern. This is not to “blame the victims,” but to illuminate the social dynamics that authoritarianism exploits. Understanding these dynamics is a first step to countering them.

The contagion thrives on people believing their individual choices don’t matter. It thrives on the logic that keeping one’s head down is the safest course. But as we have seen, that logic, when adopted collectively, leads to everyone losing their freedoms in the end. Each person who complies unthinkingly or out of fear adds one more brick to the edifice of civilian surrender.

The urgent, unapologetic truth is this: The American public must awaken to the psychological capture that is underway. **Compliance is not a virtue when democracy is at stake**. Conformity is not peace, it is surrender. The normalization of the absurd and the unjust must itself be seen as a profound emergency. As long as these reinforcing loops churn unopposed, the collapse will continue. Recognizing the contagion of compliance for what it is – a systemic pathology, a collective action problem, a cowardice turned epidemic – is crucial. Only then can the final chapters of this story be rewritten.

In Chapter 14, we will turn to the possibility of interrupting this collapse algorithm. But the road to any solution begins with clear recognition: A populace captured by propaganda, bonded by silent conformity, and intimidated by lawfare is a populace in peril. Breaking free will require deliberate, courageous effort to restore truth to our discourse, solidarity to our communities, and accountability to our institutions. The feedback loops of authoritarianism must be met with feedback loops of resistance – an amplifier effect in the opposite direction. The question, as ever, is whether it will happen in time.

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