



David smith, *The Guardian*, 22nd Mar. 2025

Entering the magnificent great hall of the US Department of Justice, Donald Trump stopped for a moment to admire his portrait, then took to a specially constructed stage where two art deco statues, depicting the Spirit of Justice and Majesty of Justice, had been carefully concealed behind a blue velvet curtain. The president, who since last year is also a convicted criminal, proceeded to air grievances, utter a profanity and accuse the news media of doing “totally illegal” things, without offering evidence. “I just hope you can all watch for it,” he told justice department employees, “but it’s totally illegal.” Trump’s breach of the justice department’s traditional independence last week was neither shocking nor surprising. His speech quickly faded from the fast and furious news cycle. But future historians may regard it as a milestone on a road leading the world’s oldest continuous democracy to a once unthinkable destination.

Why do you think this event might be regarded like that?

Eviscerating the federal government and subjugating Congress; defying court orders and delegitimising judges; deporting immigrants and arresting protesters without due process; chilling free speech at universities and cultural institutions; cowing news outlets with divide-and-rule. Add a rightwing media ecosystem manufacturing consent and obedience in advance, along with a weak and divided opposition offering feeble resistance. Join all the dots, critics say, and America is sleepwalking into authoritarianism.

Which of that long list do you think is the most significant?

“These are flashing red lights here,” Tara Setmayer, a former Republican communications director turned Trump critic. “We are approaching Defcon 1 for our democracy and a lot of people in the media and the opposition leadership don’t seem to be communicating that to the American people. That is the biggest danger of the moment we’re in now: the normalisation of it.”

The president now has the courts in his sights.

Why do the courts matter so much?

Last weekend, the White House defied a judge’s verbal order blocking it from invoking the Alien Enemies Act, a 1798 law meant only to be used in wartime, to justify the deportation of 250 Venezuelan alleged gang members to El Salvador, where they will be held in a 40,000-person megaprison. Trump accused James Boasberg, the chief district judge in Washington who made the ruling, of being “crooked”, said he should be “impeached” and labelled him a “radical left lunatic of a judge”. The outburst prompted

John Roberts, the chief justice of the supreme court, to deliver a rare rebuke of the president, emphasizing that “impeachment is not an appropriate response to disagreement concerning a judicial decision”. In an interview on the conservative Fox News network, Trump denied defying a court order and said he would not do so in future. But he added ominously: “We have very bad judges and these are judges that shouldn’t be allowed. I think at a certain point, you have to start looking at what do you do when you have a rogue judge?”

The White House has yet to release the names of the deported Venezuelans or proof that they were indeed criminal gang members. In another recent incident, it sent 40 undocumented immigrants to the notorious detention facility at the Guantánamo Bay naval base, only for a judge to intervene and force their return to the mainland. Some commentators suggest that the Trump administration is exploiting the power of sadistic spectacle. They say it is priming the public for future crackdowns and testing its level of tolerance for a moment when, for example, it might invoke the Insurrection Act to target anti-Trump protesters.

Violations of civil liberties are piling up on an almost daily basis. They include incidents that, if they had happened anywhere else in the world before 2025, the US would have been among the first to condemn. Jasmine Mooney, a Canadian entrepreneur and actor in the American Pie movie franchise, was detained for almost two weeks in “inhumane” conditions by US border authorities over an incomplete visa. She wrote in the Guardian: “I was taken to a tiny, freezing cement cell with bright fluorescent lights and a toilet. There were five other women lying on their mats with the aluminum sheets wrapped over them, looking like dead bodies. The guard locked the door behind me.”

What do you think of that?

Another trigger for alarm is Trump’s close relationship with tech oligarchs, many of whom donated to and attended his inauguration. Tesla and SpaceX head Elon Musk’s so-called “department of government efficiency” (Doge) has been taking a chainsaw to the federal bureaucracy, firing thousands of workers in indiscriminate ways that have been challenged in court. Musk’s X regularly parrots pro-Trump propaganda. Jeff Bezos, owner of Amazon and the Washington Post, recently ordered that the newspaper narrow the topics covered by its opinion section to personal liberties and the free market. Several star reporters and columnists have quit in recent months. Trump has escalated attacks on media outlets whose coverage he dislikes, including barring them from workspaces and events. He has filed lawsuits against media outlets and falsely claimed the flagship series 60 Minutes admitted guilt regarding a lawsuit.

His appointee to head the Federal Communications Commission is investigating PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) and NPR (National Public Radio). Last weekend, the Trump administration put almost the entire staff of Voice of America – which began broadcasting in 1942 to combat Nazi propaganda – on leave and ended grants to Radio Free Asia and other media with similar news programming.

Why does this stuff about the media matter so much?

Trump’s moves in the foreign policy arena hold up a mirror to his domestic vision. He has rattled longtime allies in Europe over whether the US remains committed to Nato and has sided with Russia in talks to end the war in Ukraine. He even called the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a “dictator” and berated him in the Oval Office. Trump has long shown an affinity for autocrats such as Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping of China and Kim Jong-un of North Korea and his actions have been compared with those of Viktor Orbán in consolidating power in Hungary, including remaking the judiciary, gaming elections and cracking down on media and civic organisations. At the Center for American

Progress thinktank in Washington this week, JB Pritzker, the Democratic governor of Illinois, told the Guardian: “If you haven’t already read about Orbán in Hungary, go read about what he did steadily, not that slowly, to put the noose around that country. Donald Trump admires Orbán and I believe he and his team have learned from that and are replicating that.”

What do you know about Orban? There are some readings about Hungary/Orban on Moodle

The courts are potentially the last line of defence. Federal judges have blocked dozens of Trump’s initiatives, including attempts to eliminate agencies, end birthright citizenship and freeze federal funding. This week, a judge found that Doge likely violated the constitution “in multiple ways” with its dismantling of the development agency USAID. Jamie Raskin, a Democratic representative from Maryland, noted that Democrats and their allies have filed more than 125 cases against various attacks on the rule of law and obtained more than 40 temporary restraining orders and preliminary injunctions. “We’re in the fight of our lives,” he told the Guardian. “This is not a two-week, two-month or even two-year fight that we’re in. This is going to take us many years to defeat the forces of authoritarian reaction, and the Democrats are rising to the occasion.”

“If you look at the way democratic societies responded to fascism a century ago, it just takes time for people to realign and refocus and mobilise a concerted and unified response. Are we there yet? No. But are we going to be in a place where we can stand together and defeat authoritarianism in our country? Yes, we are going to get there.”

Norm Eisen, a lawyer and founder of State Democracy Defenders Action, has brought successful cases that stopped Trump targeting thousands of FBI employees and blocked Musk’s access to sensitive data at the treasury department. He said: “It’s a mistake to count us out. We have so surprised ourselves and the world over and over again in our history and there is cause for hope here when you see the furious legal pushback by lawyers. “There is reason for hope but nobody knows. Will we go the way of Brazil, Poland, Czech Republic, where I was ambassador, all of which pushed out autocratic regimes in recent years? Or will we go the way of Hungary and Turkey, which failed to oust autocrats? It remains to be seen but I, at least, am hopeful.”

Are you hopeful?

This is an edited version of the article – the full thing is on Moodle