

# The Guardian

## 'Words of a dictator': Trump's threat to deploy military raises spectre of fascism

**The president suggested the US could use troops against Americans - true to the instincts of a man surrounded by sycophants**

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**David Smith in Washington**

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“When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross,” goes an oft-quoted line of uncertain origin.

On Monday evening, Donald Trump, with four US flags behind him, threatened to send in the military against the American people, then crossed the road to pose for a photo outside a historic church while clutching a Bible.

He was only able to get there after heavily armed police and horse-mounted national guardsmen fired teargas and rubber bullets to chase away peaceful protesters and journalists.

The shocking split-screen moment probably left millions of Americans shaken, frightened and outraged. Comparisons to dictators, fashionable during Trump's political ascent, have fallen out of favour in recent years. Now they might be in for a comeback. Certainly top Democrats did not hold back.

Ron Wyden, a Democratic senator for Oregon, tweeted: “The fascist speech Donald Trump just delivered verged on a declaration of war against American citizens. I fear for our country tonight and will not stop defending America against Trump's assault.”

Kamala Harris, a Democratic senator for California, told the MSNBC network: “These are not the words of a president. They are the words of a dictator.”

Trump's speech sowed fear and uncertainty, not least because of its vagueness. Legally, he would have to invoke the 1807 Insurrection Act for active-duty troops to conduct law enforcement on US soil, but he does not appear to have done so yet.

It is possible that, for now, he is using it as a threat to force the hand of state governors to call up more troops from the national guard, just as he used the Defense Production Act to push companies to manufacture ventilators for people with coronavirus.

Politically, he would face intense criticism from Democrats but he probably assumes that, as ever, Republicans will remain in lockstep with him. There were few signs of dissent on Monday night

from within his own party.

The alarming development ended days of speculation over how the president, already overwhelmed by the coronavirus pandemic, might respond to the most widespread civil unrest in America in more than half a century.

Media reports suggested heated debates among White House officials over whether Trump should deliver an Oval Office address. In the end, there was a familiar winner: Trump himself.

The choreography of his remarks in the White House Rose Garden and protesters being roughed up just outside was a made-for-television moment around the time of the evening news. Trump remains a reality-TV impresario.

The darkness of his tone was also true to his instincts. His authoritarian tendencies include a love of military parades, putting his name on buildings, hiring family members, staging populist rallies, berating the media and threatening to “lock up” political opponents. He thrives on conflict.

It was clear that those advising a moderate course had lost. On Sunday the Axios website reported that advisers inside and outside the White House pleaded with him to curb divisive outbursts that threatened to hurt him at the ballot box with independent voters and suburban women.

The Axios report named Hope Hicks, a longtime aide who returned to the White House in February from the Fox Corporation, as expressing concern about a tweet in the early hours of Friday in which Trump used a historically loaded phrase: “When the looting starts, the shooting starts.”

Hicks reports to Jared Kushner, senior adviser to Trump and husband of his daughter Ivanka. The couple are thought to be among those urging the president to exercise restraint.

“It’s Jared Kushner but probably it’s Jared channelling his wife, who doesn’t want to give her father bad news or challenge her father, so she’s making Jared do it,” said Rich Galen, former press secretary to Dan Quayle, an ex-vice-president.

But there was a fundamental problem, Galen added. “You can’t tell the president anything because he won’t listen and, even if he pretends to listen, he’ll just go off and do what he wants anyway.”

Earlier in his presidency, Trump was surrounded by military figures, including chief of staff John Kelly and national security adviser HR McMaster, who might have found ways to thwart his strongman posture. Now such guardrails are gone and the president’s inner circle is compliant.

Chris Whipple, author of *The Gatekeepers: How the White House Chiefs of Staff Define Every Presidency*, said: “This is someone who has never empowered anyone to tell him what he does not want to hear and the result is a complete failure of leadership. It’s clear that he no longer has a functioning White House chief of staff.”

“There is no one who can walk into the Oval Office, close the door and tell him hard truths ... He has the presidency he’s always wanted, which is a presidency of enablers and sycophants and people who will not dare to tell him what he needs to hear, and so we’re seeing the results,” Whipple said.

Influenced by Fox News, Trump is free to be himself purely and, for many observers, there could be nothing more alarming in the current crisis.

If he can go this far, how much further can he go?

Joe Lockhart, a former White House press secretary, tweeted on Monday night: “I lived through MLK and Bobby being assassinated, our cities burning, Watergate, 9/11 and other national tragedies. I’ve never been so frightened for our country as I am tonight. Trump has to go now.”

## America faces an epic choice ...

... in the coming year, and the results will define the country for a generation. These are perilous times. Over the last three years, much of what the Guardian holds dear has been threatened - democracy, civility, truth.

Science and reason are in a battle with conjecture and instinct to determine public policy in this time of a pandemic. Partisanship and economic interests are playing their part, too. Meanwhile, misinformation and falsehoods are routine. At a time like this, an independent news organisation that fights for data over dogma, and fact over fake, is not just optional. It is essential.

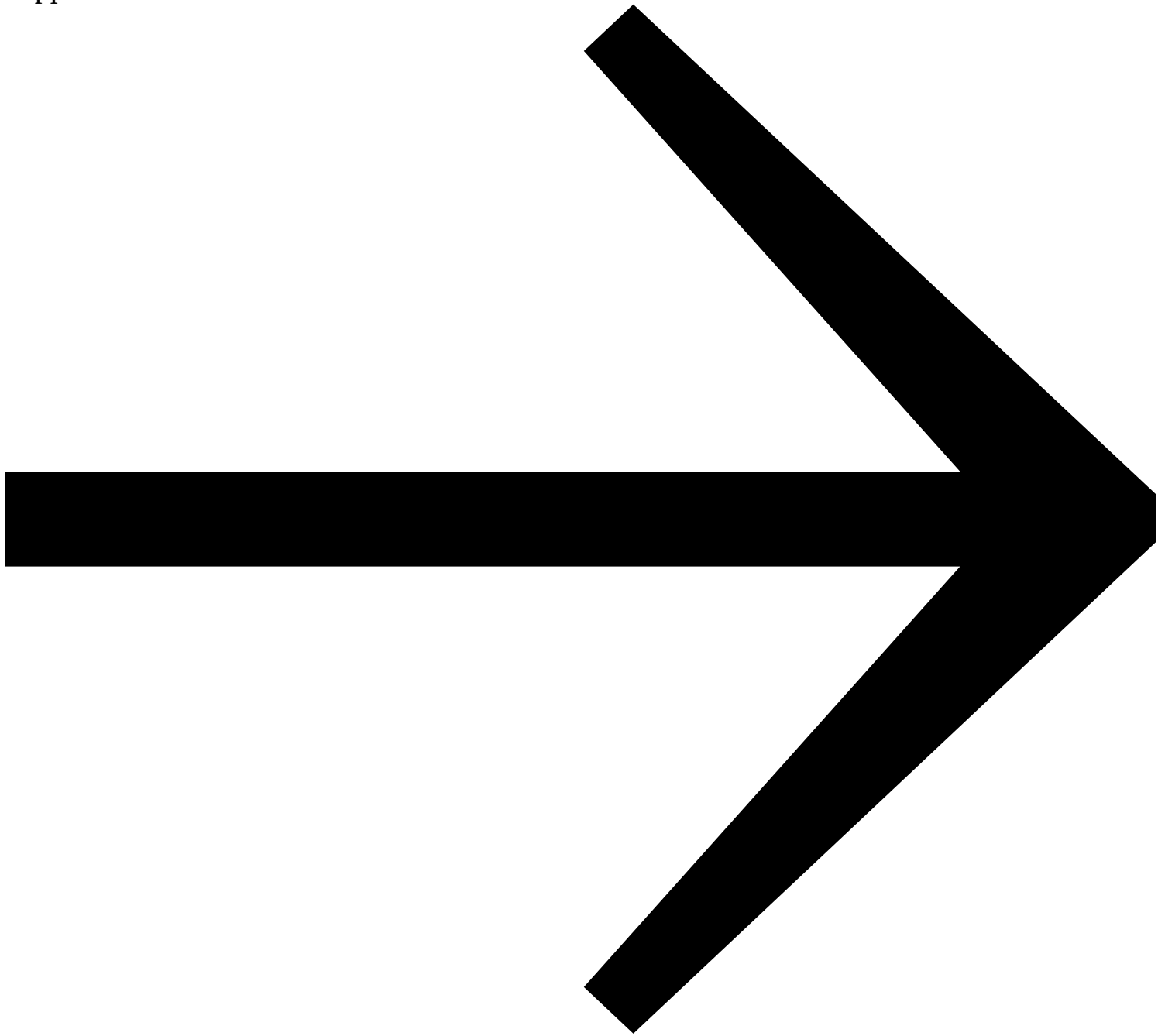
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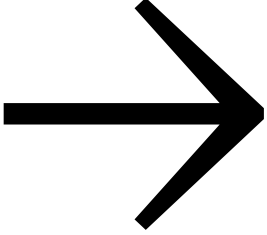
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