

## **An Autocracy of Dunces**

*di Paul Krugman*

If America still had a fully functioning democracy, Donald Trump’s speech Tuesday to the assembled generals would have ended his presidency. Trump treated the event like a political rally and was clearly taken aback by the refusal of the audience to applaud or laugh at his jokes. Delivering a nakedly partisan speech to a mandated assembly of military officers was a gross violation of the [Hatch Act](#). The content — telling the officers to be ready to use force against U.S. citizens — was clearly an impeachable offense. In an earlier era, Trump’s incoherent ranting would have paved the way for his immediate removal from office under the [25<sup>th</sup> Amendment](#).

But how did this happen?

It’s clear that the decision to summon top officers from around the world to receive a lecture about “warrior ethos” from a man who installed a [makeup studio](#) at the Pentagon was made by Pete Hegseth. It confirmed publicly what is being whispered within the military, and presumably among our allies and enemies: that Hegseth is an [abject incompetent](#) who isn’t remotely up to the job. And this toe-curling performance is a reflection of his underlying panic.

It’s yet another example of Trump being undone by his even more chaotic minions – RFK Jr. and [vaccines](#), Peter Navarro and his “Liberation Day” tariffs, [Bill Pulte’s](#) scurrilous use of private mortgage information (which implicated his own family) and Brendan Carr’s own-goal from going after Jimmy Kimmel. I could go on, but I think the point is made.

Back in August I wrote about “[hackification](#),” invoking what I dubbed Arendt’s Law. As I noted, Hannah Arendt argued that authoritarian regimes don’t want competent people, who might sometimes take a stand on principle. They prefer crackpots and fools whose lack of intelligence and creativity is still the best guarantee of their loyalty.

My case in point in that post was E.J. Antoni, the chief economist at the Heritage Foundation, who Trump was trying to install as head of the Bureau of Labor Statistics after firing the previous Commissioner because he didn't like the numbers the agency was reporting.

While there are many competent conservative economists, Antoni isn't one of them. He is, instead, stunningly, [Stephen-Moore-level incompetent](#), with a toxic history on social media. Trump's choice of Antoni proved Arendt's dictum: crackpots and fools are likely to be more loyal than people who actually know something.

The same logic surely explains the appointment of the hapless Hegseth.

Hackification is also an important factor in the government shutdown. Democrats have made their willingness to supply the extra votes needed to keep the government open contingent on an extension of the Biden-era expansion of health insurance subsidies, which will expire at the end of this year.

It's good ground for them, politically: More than 24 million Americans get health coverage through the Affordable Care Act marketplaces, almost all of them subsidized. And if the subsidies are allowed to expire, many families will face a disastrous financial hit:

**ACA Marketplace Enrollees Will Pay More for Benchmark Coverage if Enhanced Tax Credits Expire**



Required Contribution Percentages With and Without Enhanced Tax Credits for a Family of Four

Individual **Family of Four**

Household income	Premium Payment, % of income (annual amount)		Dollar Increase
	Enhanced Tax Credits	2026 Tax Credits	
\$40,000 (124% FPL)	0% (\$0)	2.1% (\$840)	\$840
\$45,000 (140% FPL)	0% (\$0)	3.6% (\$1,607)	\$1,607
\$55,000 (171% FPL)	0.8% (\$462)	5.2% (\$2,866)	\$2,404
\$75,000 (233% FPL)	3.3% (\$2,498)	7.8% (\$5,865)	\$3,368
\$90,000 (280% FPL)	5.2% (\$4,680)	9.4% (\$8,415)	\$3,735
\$110,000 (342% FPL)	7.1% (\$7,755)	10% (\$10,956)	\$3,201
\$130,000 (404% FPL)	8.5% (\$11,050)	No tax credit	Varies

Source: [KFF](#)

The political puzzle is why Republicans didn't see this coming. The One Big Beautiful Bill carefully and cynically delays big cuts to Medicaid until after the midterms. Why didn't it include a similarly cynical delay to the looming premium apocalypse?

Well, Chuck Schumer, who met with Trump Monday, said that the president appeared to be "[not aware](#)" of the impact of expiring subsidies. I just had a conversation with Jonathan Cohn, which will be posted on Saturday, and we agreed that many Republicans, like Trump, simply weren't aware of the issue. Who would tell them? As far as I can tell there are no competent health analysts working either for Trump or for Republicans in Congress.

So let me return to my opening point: America is no longer a fully functioning democracy. In the good old days of Richard Nixon, the Republican Party had the conscience and backbone to stand up to Nixon's attempt at autocracy. William Rehnquist, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, recused himself from *US vs Nixon* because of his close prior association with Watergate conspirators? Can you imagine Alito or Thomas having any such sense of fairness and duty?

But like all authoritarian regimes, America's autocracy is being run by malevolent incompetents. And while our hallowed institutions are utterly failing to rise to the occasion, the sheer incompetence of these hacks is generating pushback that may yet save us.

While it is likely that the top ranks of the US military skew right politically, all of us – liberals included – should applaud their stony reception of Hegseth and Trump. Likewise, while business leaders are also likely to skew right politically, we all should applaud their pushback over tariffs, the [appointment of E.J. Antoni](#), and the [attempt to fire Lisa Cook](#). And let's give special thanks to the many Disney subscribers who [canceled](#) after the abortive attempt to fire Jimmy Kimmel.

Many innocent people — above all, federal employees — will be hurt by the government shutdown. But Democrats needed to take a stand, to show that they will try to hold Republicans accountable for their assault on the welfare of Americans, and Republican incompetence gave them good ground for doing so.

In a perverse way, we can be grateful that Trump and his minions are so incompetent, because that is forcing the dormant parts of our country to push back. Let's just hope that the pushback is strong enough and fast enough to save us all.