

PROJECT SYNDICATE – 27 GENNAIO 2026

The Political Logic of Trump's Violent Lawlessness

di Timothy Snyder

The moral horror of ICE and Border Patrol agents executing US citizen observers is enough to denounce the Trump administration's campaign of cruelty in Minnesota. But it is also important to recognize how it reflects the political logic of turning an entire country into a lawless border zone.

TORONTO – The moral horror wrought by US President Donald Trump's second administration is incontrovertible. The [execution](#) of Alex Pretti, a 37-year-old intensive-care-unit nurse and US citizen, by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Border Patrol agents on the streets of Minneapolis, Minnesota, was recorded from all angles by brave observers and [seen](#) by people around the world. It follows the [public killing](#) of Renée Nicole Good, a 37-year-old Minneapolis mother and fellow US citizen, earlier this month, and an untold number of unseen [deaths](#) and [disappearances](#) in American concentration camps like “Alligator Alcatraz.”

Given this, the radical has become the pragmatic. Trump, and everyone else responsible for these outrages, should be impeached and convicted. ICE should be disbanded, as should its parent agency, the Department of Homeland Security. And the people who have killed – both publicly and privately – should be [investigated](#) and hauled before judges and juries.

But the logic of the killings is as important as the killings themselves. While a truth in itself, the moral horror is also a sign of the administration's lies and lawlessness, a political logic known from 20th-century [Soviet and Nazi totalitarian regimes](#), and from attempts to replace the rule of law with personal tyranny.

In a constitutional regime like the United States, the law applies everywhere and at all times. In a republic like America, it applies to everyone. For that logic of law to be undone, the aspiring tyrant looks for cracks in the system that can be pried open.

One of these cracks is the border, where the country ends. Because the law ends there, too, an obvious move for the tyrant is to [turn the whole country](#) into a border, where [no rules apply](#). Joseph Stalin did this in the 1930s, with border zones and deportations preceding the Great Terror. Hitler did it, too, in 1938, with [immigration raids](#) that targeted undocumented Jews and forced them to flee the country.

Trump, by his own admission and that of his cabinet members, is [following the same playbook](#). He is using ICE, nominally a border authority, to enforce his own whims on a US state of his choosing – a Democratic Party stronghold with [deep-rooted civic idealism](#). It is not legal to attack a city over [its politics](#), or to flood its streets with federal agents to [gain information](#) about a state’s voters.

The border becomes the pretext to undo the law everywhere, at all times, and against anyone. It is the crack that can be opened. The wedge is the lies, which begin as clichés and memes that the government pounds into our heads, and which the media repeat, mindlessly or with malice.

One of these clichés is “law enforcement,” which is uttered over and over like an incantation. “Law enforcement” is not a noun like “table” or “house”; it is not a fixed thing. It is an action, a process that Americans have a right to see and judge for themselves. People enforcing the law do not wear masks, nor do they trespass, assault, batter, and kill at will. Public executions carried out by Trump’s goons do a great disservice to the local, state, and federal authorities whose job is to police effectively, particularly when such state terror is defined as “law enforcement.”

The lies continue as provocative inversions, or what I called “dangerous words” in my book [On Tyranny](#). In this case, the Trump administration is using “terrorist” and “extremist” – terms long favored by tyrants – to defame those killed by their policies. Their “messaging” reflects what Hannah Arendt [called](#) “the banality of evil” – or, as [Václav Havel put it](#), the evil of banality. Words turn into reality with the collaboration of those who hear them.

In this sense, those who actively lie are complicit in the killings in Minnesota and any more to come. But those in the media who choose to treat propaganda as the story, who begin from lies rather than from events, are also complicit. The border is the crack, the lies are the wedge, and the people who accept those lies are opening it wider.

Words matter, whether uttered first or repeated. They create an atmosphere, they normalize – or they do not. We must choose to see, to call things by their proper names, to condemn people who lie.

Behind the moral horror of these public executions is a political logic. The two are connected. Those who resist the Trump administration's lawlessness and the lies understand this. In Minneapolis and many other places, they are doing right – and giving the endangered American republic its best chance of survival.