

GUEST ESSAY

Fear Comes to America

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Mr. Kendall was the secretary of the Air Force in the Biden administration.

Like the fog in Carl Sandburg’s poem, fear has come on little cat feet, seeping silently into various parts of American society. It sits, looking over not just harbor and city, but all of America. I have seen and been affected by this fear over the past several months. It has seeped into our military, our civil service, universities, law firms, C-suites and the leadership of nonprofit organizations.

It wasn’t always this way. During George W. Bush’s presidency, I worked with a number of organizations that opposed his administration’s torture program — euphemistically called “enhanced interrogation” — that was employed by the C.I.A. against suspected terrorists after 9/11. After President Barack Obama signed an executive order ending the program, my colleagues and I held a small party to celebrate. At that party, I remarked that we should be grateful for the fact that we lived in a nation where we could publicly oppose the policies of our government without fear of what that government might do to us. We didn’t worry about being arbitrarily arrested or investigated, having any government funding for our organizations cut off, or being personally and viciously attacked on social media and in the press.

I cannot make that statement today. President Trump does not accept dissent and is using fear to try to suppress it.

Let’s start with our military and civil service, communities with which I have had a lifetime of experience and maintain close contact. The fear in the Pentagon today is palpable. The firings of general officers without cause have sent a chilling message to everyone in uniform. I served through several changes in political leadership as an Army officer and later as a Defense Department civilian. Both the targeted removals of

senior military leaders and the mass firings of members of our federal civil service that are taking place are unprecedented and clearly designed to eliminate dissent, replace professionals with political loyalists and create a climate of fear.

Next, the lawyers, another community that I am part of. The Trump administration is attempting to coerce major law firms into refusing to represent clients whom it disfavors and to represent clients it favors. Among the many lawyers I know, this is widely seen as a direct assault on the foundation of our legal system. But for many of those lawyers, fear of losing work that requires access to government buildings, including courts, is a strong motivator. A few law firms have fought back, but some have been anxious enough about the threatened loss of business or access that they have cut “deals” with the administration.

Recently, I spoke to a group of graduate students and professors at Harvard. All were concerned about the effect of the administration’s unmistakable attacks on academic freedom and freedom of speech on campus. While Harvard as an institution has the resources and will to fight back, the loss of funding for research and the fear of interrupted studies are very real for the faculty and students there and elsewhere.

The administration has threatened prosecutions against former government officials and private citizens. It has threatened companies with the loss of government contracts and threatened nonprofit organizations across the country with cuts to funding. This climate of menace and apprehension extends to companies’ willingness to employ or associate with those who criticize Mr. Trump or his administration. I am one of those people.

Since I left the government in January, I have been told by several organizations that they either couldn’t openly employ me, hold my security clearances or otherwise be associated with someone visibly criticizing the administration. In one instance, I was told that a nonprofit that had asked me to serve as a distinguished fellow withdrew that offer because its senior leadership felt I had become too partisan. One corporate chief executive told me I had become toxic for writing and speaking about the administration’s abuses of power. I expected some of these responses, but it’s disappointing to experience, nonetheless. I have lost count of how many of my fellow national security professionals have told me they are grateful that I have spoken out, but in the same breath say they are afraid to do the same.

Mr. Trump’s use of fear as a weapon has been most pronounced with undocumented immigrants and communities of immigrants more broadly. Certainly, Americans strongly support deporting undocumented immigrants who are violent criminals. But the Trump administration has terrorized immigrants from all walks of life, including those in the United States legally. A few years ago, I represented a woman seeking asylum because she had been persecuted by members of her government. When an

immigration judge granted her the right to remain in the United States indefinitely, the assumption was that she was finally safe. Now she must live in fear once again.

All these institutions and communities are a source of American strength. Indeed, they make America great. But now they are all, to varying degrees, under attack and experiencing a new sense of trepidation. Fear is the universal tool of authoritarians, and it is a clear sign that our democracy is in danger that so many Americans now have reason to fear their government. Fear has come to our country, and unlike Sandburg's fog, it isn't moving on any time soon.

Frank Kendall was the secretary of the Air Force in the Biden administration.

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