

"Show of Force"

Timothy Snyder

The overall design of Trump's policy is clear enough: weaken the United States abroad to create an environment friendly to dictators, while using the American armed forces as an intimidation force to make dictatorship possible at home.

Whether this plan works depends upon how we see it, or rather, whether we choose not to see it. In the worst case, we choose not to notice this general shift, look away as our cities become militarized, and then pretend that we had no other choice but to give away our democracy.

Pretenses for this will be found. Lies about crime. Exploitation of acts of violence.

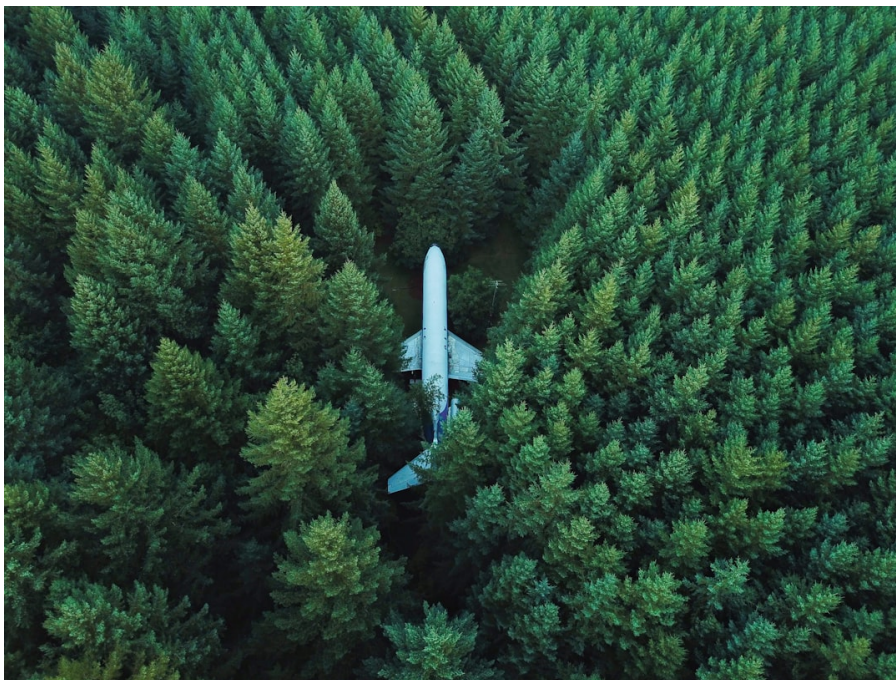
Let us not make the mistake of confusing the pretenses for the underlying policy.

The transition to authoritarianism in the United States depends upon us. In Trump's paradigm, this is all a show, and our role is to be bit players. We have been handed a script with no words and await our cue to do nothing.

The crucial term here, one that I feel like I am reading too often, is "show of force." That is how the deployments of National Guards (and Marines) in the United States have been (too frequently) described.

But what kind of force is it? And what kind of show? And how can we get beyond seeing it as a "show" in which we have no speaking part, in which we do not act?

We have to be watchful of our reflexive American militarism. It moves us, mindlessly, towards fascism.



These deployments are obviously illegal. And they are designed to spread terror. The legality of this is a matter for lawsuits and eventually the Supreme Court – one has to pursue this route, although this Court has little appetite for law, and much appetite for self-destruction, so hope is minimal.

What service members are being ordered to do is plainly wrong. It is a violation of American law,

regardless of how long it takes for that to be decided by this or perhaps some later Supreme Court. It is a violation of the long and rightly valued precedent that soldiers are not to be used for law enforcement. It traduces the basic point of having armed forces, which is that they are for the military defense of a country from attack.

The terror, though, is largely up to us. Do we choose to be terrorized?

There are those, such as undocumented workers, who have good reason to fear. And then there are those, many of the rest of us, who have an occasion to think and react creatively.

In the media, one has to be concerned about being coopted into the “show.” By definition soldiers are not defending the United States if they are loitering in its cities, and yet they get the benefit of patriotic symbolism. Illustrating a story about self-invasion with gravely handsome soldiers is not neutral. It is a step towards fascism. It helps to create the sense that, in the end, they were “just obeying orders” and being patriots.

These urban self-invasion deployments are a trap for for other service members. By sending troops to city after city, Trump is creating the statistical likelihood that something will happen – a suicide of a service member conflicted by an illegal and immoral mission, a friendly fire incident, the shooting of a protestor – that they can use to manufacture some greater crisis by lying about it. Or they can wait for their Russian friends to stage something, or for one right-wing person to shoot another, and then blame the opposition.

That is their way, and I suspect that that is their plan.

The only way to be prepared is to see the futures that come with passivity. If we do not communicate with our friends and family in the armed services about these risks, we are accomplices when they are used and abused to bring about authoritarianism. If we allow the “show of force” to impress us into passivity, then we are assisting aspiring dictators in a process that they cannot achieve on their own.

I wrote this during an air raid alert in Dnipro, Ukraine. I had scholarly work to do in Ukraine, and the history project that brought me to the country was not made easier by having some colleagues in active duty, and others kept sleepless by the missiles and drones. They all showed up, though.

I was not frightened by this and I mention it not to frighten you. On the contrary, I mention it to help us keep perspective.

Ukrainians are being invaded by Russia.

No one from the outside will invade us. We can only invade ourselves.

And whether that happens is up to us: whether we choose to see the overall logic, whether we choose to name things as we are, whether we choose to talk to one another, and whether we choose to go on with the work of citizenship, decency, and humanity.

[On resistance see On Tyranny](#)

[For positive solutions see On Freedom](#)

[On Trump and Russia, Road to Unfreedom](#)