

# Land War or Self-Terrorism?

Trump's Likely Next Step



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In certain ways, the autumn of 2025 in the United States has recalled the autumn of 1938 in Nazi Germany.

The mass deportation of undocumented people was one of Hitler's largest coercive policies before the war. That fall, the German police and SS rounded up Jews who lacked German citizenship and dumped them on the Polish side of the German-Polish border. This set off a chain of events which can give us a useful perspective on where we are now. A family was deported; a provoked refugee took revenge; the government organized a pogrom and re-organized its police; the Second World War followed.

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The family was the Grynszpans. The father and mother had moved to Germany in 1911 from the Russian Empire. Their children were born in Germany, spoke German, and saw themselves as Germans. The Grynszpans had sent their son Herschel to study in Paris. He faced a series of disappointments in his documentation, including the loss of his citizenship. Denied permanent residence in France in August 1938, he was hiding in an attic to avoid deportation when a postcard from his sister arrived: "everything is finished for us." Herschel Grynszpan took revenge. On November 7, 1938, he walked into the German embassy in Paris and shot the diplomat Ernst vom Rath. A policy of mass deportation had led to a reaction that, although

and conflated the actions of one person with the responsibility of a group.

Hitler allowed Goebbels to plan a nationwide pogrom: [Kristallnacht](#). On November 9, 1938, the SA and the SS and the Hitler youth, joined by many other Germans, destroyed Jewish businesses, burned Jewish books, desecrated Torah scrolls, and invaded Jewish homes. Some 91 Jews were killed and hundreds died by suicide. Tens of thousands of Jewish men were sent to concentration camps.

Nine decades later, no one could know in advance the details of what would happen when the Trump administration made the deportation of the undocumented its basic policy, and deploy the National Guard into Los Angeles and Washington DC, adding the provocation that such places should be seen as “training grounds for our military” and “war zones.”

But it was predictable that there would be some consequence, and now two national guard troops patrolling in Washington have been tragically shot; one has died. The accused is a refugee; a onetime participant in the US war in Afghanistan. Like Grynszpan, he is someone who experienced trauma and dehumanization.

Having fought and killed for a foreign government in his own country, the assassin had reason to expect some sort of shelter after he was evacuated from Afghanistan to the United States. It appears he faced a series of disappointments. Here was his experience, eerily similar to Grynszpan's, as [reported](#) in the *New York Times*: “The volunteer said it was unclear what exactly triggered the change, but sensed part of it was his frustrations with the uncertainty of America's immigration process, the volunteer said. His family feared being deported to Afghanistan as his application for a Special Immigrant Visa dragged on.” This is not an excuse for his horrible act. It is a fact that is necessary to understand the overall structure of the moment.

It was foreseeable that Trump will seek to exploit such violence. He announced his intention to target “Third World countries,” blamed all American problems on migrants, and called Somalis “garbage.” Trump has

expressed the desire to deport millions of people and to denaturalize -- take away citizenship from -- citizens whose values he disapproves or whom he deems incompatible with "Western civilization." Life will be made even harder for non-citizens in the United States.

What comes next? For the Nazis, the deportation and the pogrom of autumn 1938 were steps towards creating a centralised national police agency. In the US, something similar [is unfolding](#) with ICE: tasked initially to carry out deportations, it has taken on espionage roles, provoked citizens in the cities, and then is reinforced by soldiers of the National Guard. In these respects it is becoming something like a national police force, with ideological propaganda and connection to part of the armed services.

In one way, mass deportations and a national pogrom advanced the Nazi regime change. But this kind of instability was unpopular inside Germany -- much as ICE raids are [unpopular](#) in US cities. The radical next steps were only possible under cover of war. That would be the classic next step in the regime change, the easy way to eliminate the [internal enemy](#) by identifying him with an external enemy. For Trump, a war with Venezuela (or someone) would be the next logical move in domestic politics.

It is not hard to see that Trump understands this, given all the militaristic talk and the murder of civilians in the Caribbean, including survivors killed in [obvious violation](#) of the law.

But does he have the option that traditional fascists had? The United States has the most impressive military forces in the history of the world. But using that fact to political advantage is very difficult. Trump may understand the limitations, or at least some of them.

Fundamental limitations are his own. Trump knows nothing about war, and neither does his cabinet. The people in charge of the power ministries are there to subvert them within the United States, not to engage in any serious operations beyond it. The battleships-and-chin-ups doctrine, championed by Trump and his defence secretary, is useless in the modern battlespace.

Hegseth is currently in the midst of a scandal for having communicated war plans during a military operation to a US reporter. The special emissaries Trump uses instead of diplomats may know something about profiting from war, but that is not at all the same thing as starting and winning one.

And then there is another practical issue. CIA director John Radcliffe told Fox that the refugee and many others should never have been allowed to come to the United States. On the surface this might appear to have been simply one more bit of xenophobia. But it actually has a deep strategic significance.

To have a chance of making a political difference, the US war would have to be a land invasion. And the CIA director's [statement](#) has made that prospect more remote. It is very hard to occupy land without [local collaborators](#), and people will not collaborate with you if they are certain, in advance, that you will later leave and let them be killed. And that CIA has delivered that certainty. But the assassin was in the United States because he was a multiply-vetted US collaborator during the Afghan wars. If locals who cooperate with American military interventions will never be admitted to the United States, then the American armed and intelligence services can expect very little collaboration in Venezuela or anywhere else. It almost seems that Ratcliffe was trying to make an invasion impossible.

An American invasion force would also face two more problems generated by this administration. President Trump and especially Secretary Hegseth treat the law of war with contempt. If the present naval sinkings of boats do become the first stage in a larger war, then the United States will have initiated hostilities by killing civilians. Hegseth's idea seems to be that the laws of war only favor the weaker side, but this is not really the case. If all bets are truly off, as Hegseth implies, or if the world is just a balance of power where law does not much matter, as the new National Security Strategy indicates, then it is hard to say what prevents countries attacked by the United States from resorting to any sort of violence they choose. This might not win them the war, but it might preclude a quick, clean victory.

And then there is also the issue of allies. To be sure, the United States in

wartime usually can help its allies far more than they help it. But there is nevertheless good reason to go to war with allies on your side: they make a war into a cause; they can give advice; they share intelligence; and not at all rarely they provide a useful system or bit of logistical support. In a land invasion of Venezuela (or any country, really), this administration would be proceeding without allies. This might not deter the Trump crew from starting a war, but it will make it harder for them to finish it.

There is also a glaring problem of ideology. For decades the United States has justified foreign invasions in the name of democracy (for better or for worse, usually for worse). Nicolás Maduro lost an election (in 2024) and stayed in power. But however one adjudges past American interventions, now we are in a new situation: Trump does not even pretend to like democracy. The way that Trump and Maduro describe their domestic opponents is practically identical. Maduro does the things that Trump fantasizes about on social media. The Venezuelan [grass-roots](#) democracy movement is very impressive. But the awkwardness is palpable: Trump opposes civil society at home and portrays it as part of an international conspiracy — just as Maduro does.

To be sure, a patient strategy of pressure could help Venezuelans begin a [democratic transition](#) themselves. Yet there is no sign that the Trump administration is preparing for the security and economic support that a new democratic government would need. [On the contrary](#), it has eliminated the relevant agencies and mocked that sort of action in its National Security Strategy. Let us imagine anyway that Maduro concedes that he lost the last election, and Venezuela does move towards a new government — that would be an excellent thing in itself, to be celebrated. But it would not at all amount to the kind glorious military victory that Trump would need for regime change at home

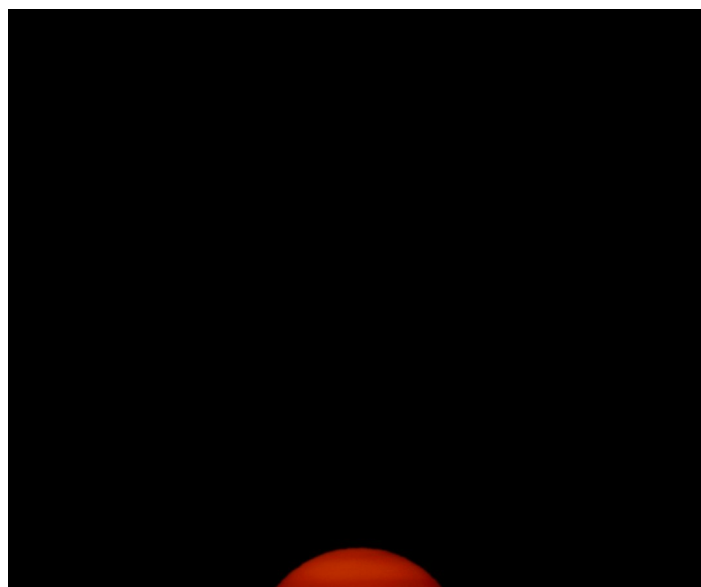
To summarize the logic. If we follow the logic of 1938 to 1939, Trump needs a victorious land war to complete authoritarian regime change at home. But if he tried to fight such a war he would very likely experience a series of humiliations. If he talked about why he was fighting such a war he would get

lost in a tangle: supporting democracy in Venezuela by force while opposing it in America by force is not a position that makes sense or would generate popularity. It is certainly possible that American pressure will serve as an element of a campaign that will cause Maduro to leave. But that outcome, desirable in itself, will have zero political effect in the United States.

In short, whatever actually happens in Venezuela, it will not bring Trump the political magic of a quick land war, like Hitler's in Poland in 1939 or France in 1940. So as we hover amidst the striking similarities to autumn 1938, we might see a difference. The Trump people might be stuck. The Nazis saw the limitations of violence within their own country, and advanced their atrocities by fighting a foreign war.

Without that option, this administration will likely fall back into a cycle of needing (and therefore generating) violence at home. The autumn of 1938, or the autumn of 2025, must be conjured up over and over again. The sequence of weakness, provocation and violence must continue until it works.

Its way forward to regime change is what we might call *self-terrorism*. By this I have in mind a new path to authoritarian regime change, one in which incompetence and dysfunctionality are retooled as a weird and bloody political opportunity. In other words, some of the factors that make a successful foreign war unlikely push towards the strategy of inviting turmoil into the United States and then seeking to use it.





Self-terrorism means dropping one's guard, provoking others inside and outside one's own country, waiting for the act of terror, and then exploiting it. The Trump administration has indeed removed barriers to terrorism, thereby creating the conditions for attacks on and within the United States. The resulting violence against one's own people, can then be used as a pretext to further oppress them. The FBI is gutted and demoralised, its agents away on irrelevant border missions, its counterterrorism capacity diminished. Homeland Security no longer keeps up its database on domestic terrorism. The Department of Defense has disbanded its relevant digital service. Cyber defense as such has essentially been abandoned. The US has been [made](#) vulnerable.

If the idea of self-terrorism seems far-fetched, consider some simple tests.

How does the Trump administration react to political killings and domestic terrorism? Does it revive the agencies meant to stop it? No, it does not. Does it speak of fictional conspiracies and blame whole groups, thereby provoking further turmoil and creating a pretext for oppressing Americans? Yes, it does. Does it invite violent responses by escalating the militarization of cities -- deploying more troops to DC and also deploying new troops to another city,



New Orleans? Yes, it does. As the Trump administration uses the horrible attack on troops in Washington to accelerate creeping authoritarianism, we have a terrible confirmation as to why those men and women were deployed in the first place.

Self-terrorism need not work. We can be alert to the use of the undocumented as an emotional key to a politics of us and them. We can be aware that special forces initially tasked with deportation can evolve into a racial police organization on a national scale. We can see that the opportunistic exploitation of violence is a predictable part of this brand of politics.

The past never repeats, but it does instruct -- and it instructs everyone. The people who want authoritarianism in America know that seizing on the emotions around political belonging can lead to turmoil and regime change. And the people who want democracy in America can see the pattern and halt. Simply being aware of all this is a big part of success. The last few chapters of [On Tyranny](#) dwell on these situations.

Aspiring American authoritarians will only win if they are allowed to do so. None of this has to happen. Both of these terrible possibilities, land war and self-terrorism, are signs of weakness rather than strength. They can be prevented, but only if we name them, and use their horror as the first step to describe something much better.

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Johan 8h

Thank you for this powerful piece!

Self-terrorism is not strength, it's weakness weaponized. Gutting the FBI, abandoning cyber defense, and militarizing cities isn't protection, it's sabotage of the nation's own guardrails.

The Trump administration thrives on provoking violence, then exploiting it to tighten authoritarian control. That's not governance, it's a deliberate cycle of cruelty: dismantle defenses, wait for blood, then use the chaos as justification to oppress.

The most pathetic part is how predictable it all is. Authoritarians don't need foreign enemies when they can manufacture domestic ones. And the people who enable this: politicians, institutions, sycophants; prove that money and power matter more to them than democracy or dignity.

Naming this pattern is the first step to breaking it. My goal is to talk about this more in n pieces too.

—Johan

Professor of Behavioral Economics & Applied Cognitive Theory  
Former Foreign Service Officer

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Mark Nemhauser 8h

Professor Snyder, thank you so much for your insight and your calling out this administration for the weak pitiful group of people they are

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