

Opinion | Trump's Lies Have a Purpose

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You're reading the David French newsletter. Reflections on law and culture, war and peace, and the deeper trends that define and divide America.

It's important to know exactly what is happening in our country. President Trump suffered a setback in Minneapolis. His larger project proceeds apace, however, and it's creating a parallel MAGA reality that is laying the foundation for a further escalation of state violence.

Here's how the process works. First, federal officers (mainly from ICE and the Border Patrol) engage in [extraordinarily aggressive](#) and [lawless conduct](#), including *initiating* physical contact with protesters or members of the public.

And they're not limiting their aggression to criminal illegal immigrants, the "worst of the worst." They're detaining people who have been [granted lawful status](#), they've [swept up citizens](#) in the dragnet and they're [claiming the authority](#) to enter people's homes without judicial warrants granting them a right to search.

Second, as many people ([including me](#)) have noted, when a confrontation occurs, the administration and its allies in Congress immediately release statements blaming the victims, often using the strongest possible language — calling them "domestic terrorists" or "seditionists."

Think of the dreadful things they've said about Renee Good and Alex Pretti, two Minnesota residents who were gunned down by federal agents on the streets of Minneapolis. Kristi Noem accused Good of committing an act of "[domestic terrorism](#)." Vice President JD Vance called her actions "[classic terrorism](#)." President Trump [said](#) she "violently, willfully, and viciously ran over the ICE Officer."

None of those statements are remotely supported by the available evidence.

The administration's slander of Pretti may have been even worse. Gregory Bovino, then still serving in Minnesota in his capacity as Border Patrol commander at large, [said](#) Pretti (who had a valid firearms permit and was carrying a gun but did not appear to touch it, much less brandish it) looked like he was attempting "to do maximum damage and massacre law enforcement." Noem accused him, too, of "[domestic terrorism](#)," and Stephen Miller called him "[an assassin](#)" who "tried to murder federal agents." Vance reposted Miller's slanderous accusation.

Again, none of those claims were supported by any meaningful evidence.

The administration makes these statements before there's any investigation and sometimes before they've even had an opportunity to review all the publicly available evidence, including cellphone videos. If the

encounter isn't fatal, they'll often file criminal charges and [put out](#) news releases trumpeting their prosecution.

You get the feeling that if they could charge the dead with crimes, they'd do so, with glee.

Third, when members of the media try to carefully report the facts and call into question the administration's account, then that's a fresh outrage. To MAGA, contrary media accounts are yet another example of the activist [legacy media lying and spinning](#).

Finally, when the criminal cases come before the court, the administration often can't support its claims, and the cases are dismissed again and again. Adverse legal rulings anger MAGA even more — now the judges are also engaged in a form of "[legal insurrection](#)" or [nullification](#) of federal law.

Protests make MAGA mad. Journalism makes MAGA mad. Accountability makes MAGA mad. And the anger keeps building until a single sentence starts to spread across the length and breadth of Trump's base: "[Invoke](#) the [Insurrection Act](#)."

Viewed through one prism, this pattern is a form of political suicide. [As the polling demonstrates](#), many Americans who thought they were voting for better border controls and tougher immigration restrictions are unhappy with Trump's aggression.

Voters don't like the sight of masked officers dragging people out of homes and stores and cars. They don't like the hype videos on social media in which ICE and the Border Patrol cosplay as low-rent versions of SEAL Team 6.

They don't like it when the administration lies and slanders the very people that it hurts and kills, and they get especially angry when cellphone video immediately debunks the administration's spin.

And to the extent that they pay attention to court proceedings, they definitely don't like it when the administration is caught lying and defies court orders.

For example, on Wednesday, Patrick Schiltz, the chief judge for the U.S. District Court of Minnesota, issued a remarkable order that cataloged a total of 96 court orders that he said ICE had violated in 74 different cases. "ICE has likely violated more court orders in January 2026," [the judge wrote](#), "than some federal agencies have violated in their entire existence."

Schiltz's order came on the heels of yet another scathing ruling from a federal court. Earlier this month, after the fatal shooting of Renee Good, I wrote about the U.S. District Court judge Sara Ellis's [233-page opinion](#) that meticulously and carefully exposed a host of lies from the Trump administration — lies it was using to justify its tactics on the streets of Chicago.

At each and every step along the way, the administration is squandering whatever good will it had and increasing the chances of a blue wave in the midterms.

The problem, however, is that the administration is playing a different game. It's not trying to win hearts and minds, but rather impose its will.

In September 2020, I [published a book](#) that argued that American divisions were growing so profound that

we risked our national union. I did not think a national divorce was imminent, nor did I think we were drifting toward a civil war like the one we endured from 1861 to 1865, but instead that we were on a dangerous path. There were disturbing parallels between the 1850s and our nation today.

What made a minority faction of American politics decide to break the Union? Obviously, the defense of slavery was ultimately incompatible with the American creed. The nation was on course for a collision between its rising abolitionism and the tenacious forces of slave power, who saw the South's "peculiar institution" as central to its prosperity and identity.

But why were Southerners so eager to secede in 1860 and 1861? Part of the answer lies with the Southern press. After the December 1859 execution of John Brown, the violent Northern abolitionist who had raided the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry in an effort to trigger a large-scale slave rebellion, the partisan Southern press amplified the voices of Northerners who admired Brown — even if they admired only his cause, not his tactics — and used those words to intensify latent fear and anger in the white Southern public.

James McPherson, in his magnificent single-volume history of the Civil War, "[Battle Cry of Freedom](#): The Civil War Era," sets the stage vividly.

A publication called De Bow's Review wrote that the North "has sanctioned and applauded theft, murder, treason." A Baltimore newspaper questioned whether the South could "live under a government, the majority of whose subjects or citizens regard John Brown as a martyr and a Christian hero."

As McPherson wrote, historians have compared the "paroxysm of anger" that seized the South in 1859 and 1860 to the "Great Fear" in France in 1789 when French peasants believed the king's forces were bent on slaughtering them.

You can see the same dynamic in play in the MAGA movement today. It is gripped by its own "paroxysm of anger." When undocumented immigrants commit a violent crime, the news blankets right-wing media. We know from the 2024 election that the right will traffic in the wildest lies about immigrant communities, including indulging the fantasy that Haitian immigrants were eating household pets in Springfield, Ohio. Words like "invasion" are omnipresent in right-wing media.

Against that backdrop, from MAGA's viewpoint, the rest of the country's response to the deaths of Good and Pretti looks a lot like the North's response to the execution of John Brown. Good and Pretti didn't have blood on their hands like Brown, but in the eyes of the MAGA right, they're dangerous criminals who are responsible for their own deaths.

They are guilty of impeding officers. They are guilty of resisting arrest. Pretti is guilty of bringing a gun to a protest (an odd thing for the right to object to, given its [own penchant for armed protest](#)). They are guilty of protecting vicious and violent criminal immigrants.

The right's echo chamber is so powerful and so hermetically sealed that even serious conservatives can fall for the administration's disinformation.

On Monday, a Chicago woman named Marimar Martinez [filed a motion](#) in federal court asking for relief from a protective order to allow her to share information about her encounter with the Border Patrol with the

public.

A Border Patrol agent shot Martinez multiple times on Oct. 4, 2025, and the Trump administration initially claimed that she'd either "[rammed](#)" Border Patrol agents or helped "[box in](#)" Border Patrol agents with "approximately 10 vehicles." The Trump administration filed criminal charges against her, only to later ask the court to dismiss the charges, with prejudice (meaning that they can't be filed again).

Much of the evidence in the case, however, remains under seal. And why would Martinez want all the evidence disclosed? Perhaps because the administration [still describes her as a domestic terrorist](#) on the Department of Homeland Security website?

Also, and equally disturbing, Justice Samuel Alito repeated the administration's false account of the encounter in his dissenting opinion in *Trump v. Illinois*, the Supreme Court's recent decision blocking the Trump administration's National Guard deployment to Illinois.

"In a widely publicized event on Oct. 4," [Alito wrote](#), "a federal vehicle carrying Border Patrol agents was boxed in on a public road by 10 civilian vehicles, and two of those vehicles rammed the government vehicle. As the agents exited their vehicle, one of the civilian vehicles was driven directly at an agent, forcing the agent to fire in self-defense."

If that is correct, then why did the Department of Justice ask to dismiss the case, with prejudice?

I don't think for a moment that Alito would knowingly repeat false information, but it is difficult to discern the truth when you're exposed to a blizzard of lies — especially when those lies are coming from an institution, the Department of Justice, that has long demonstrated such integrity that judges have granted it a "[presumption of regularity](#)," that is, the presumption that federal law enforcement is operating honestly and lawfully.

It no longer deserves any such presumption. In fact, the Trump administration lies with such regularity and brazenness that one should presume that it's being dishonest until we can see with our own eyes the evidence that supports its account.

Trump seems to be [backing down](#) in Minnesota — to some degree. Bovino, the Border Patrol commander who had been in charge of the Minnesota operation, has been recalled from Minnesota and apparently blocked from posting on social media.

The president sent his border czar, Tom Homan, to the state. Trump has even softened his tone toward the governor of Minnesota, Tim Walz, and the mayor of Minneapolis, Jacob Frey — at least temporarily. On Wednesday, Trump indicated that Frey was "[playing with fire](#)" if he refused to enforce federal immigration laws.

Homan is an immigration hawk, but he's not as aggressive and pugilistic as Noem, and the two have [reportedly clashed](#) over Noem's preference for showy, military-style enforcement operations.

But there is a difference between a change of heart and a tactical retreat. As of this writing, Miller's post accusing Pretti of being an assassin is still up. Vance's retweet of Miller's post is still up. On Tuesday, a

homeland security spokesman pointedly [refused to back away](#) from calling Pretti a domestic terrorist during an interview with Dana Perino on Fox News.

It was only this past Sunday that Miller [claimed](#) that Democrats, “after losing an election, launched an armed resistance to stop the federal government from reversing the invasion.”

And then, as if on cue, Miller attacked the judiciary again just as I was finalizing this newsletter. A federal court in Minneapolis [issued an order](#) blocking the administration from arresting or detaining refugees who are legally in the United States, which prompted Miller to [post on X](#), “The judicial sabotage of democracy is unending.”

Do not mistake crisis management for real reform, and don’t believe for a second that MAGA’s fury is easing. It is not chastened by footage showing that Pretti was pepper-sprayed without justification, never reached for his weapon and was riddled with bullets after he was disarmed.

Nor is it chastened by footage showing that the officer who killed Renee Good was already out of harm’s way when he fired the first shot, or by footage showing that he created much of the danger by unwisely walking directly in front of a running car in a chaotic and confused situation. Nor is it chastened by the sound of someone close enough to be heard calling Good a “[fucking bitch](#)” right after she was shot and killed in front of her horrified partner.

And if you think MAGA believes that its fury and rage will cripple its ongoing bid for ever-greater power, think of the lesson it took after Jan. 6: Trump could trigger what amounted to an attempted coup and still return to the Oval Office.

So it doesn’t believe the polls. It doesn’t believe the media. It doesn’t believe the courts. In Trump it still trusts, and it’ll remain under his spell when someone else dies and the whole cycle starts over again.

Some other things I did

[On Monday](#), we published a round-table conversation with my colleagues Michelle Goldberg, Lydia Polgreen and Matthew Rose. We talked about the killing of Alex Pretti, and we talked about how to reform ICE:

I like the idea of getting aggressive and specific in response. Take off their masks. End their immunities. Limit their jurisdiction. Restrain their tactics. All of this can be done through legislation without inhibiting humane immigration enforcement. And if it’s done correctly, legislative reform can lead to greater accountability across the whole of government.

[On Sunday](#), I wrote about the way in which the culture war is poisoning higher education. It’s turning colleges into engines of activism, and when activism is more important than inquiry, it can have a pernicious effect:

Over time, this mind-set results in a startling ideological monoculture, in which almost everyone around you is broadly in your ideological camp. When almost every smart person you know agrees with you to some

important degree, then it's very easy to slide to the conclusion that your opponents aren't just wrong but potentially even stupid or evil.

And who wants stupid or evil people on campus?

The best colleges, by contrast, take the opposite approach. They don't teach you to double down on your convictions but rather to approach the world with a spirit of curiosity. It's not that curious people shouldn't have convictions; but their convictions should be tempered by humility.

Finally, [on Saturday](#), we published a fun conversation with my colleagues Emily Bazelon and Aaron Retica. We discussed the oral arguments in *Trump v. Cook* in which Lisa Cook, a member of the Federal Reserve's Board of Governors, is fighting to keep her job after Trump tried to fire her. The argument featured a traditional conservative, Paul Clement, arguing against the Trump administration, and the traditional conservative is going to win:

But there's another thing that was very interesting, and I don't think enough people have noticed this. The advocate for Lisa Cook was Paul Clement. This is significant because what you had was a fight between the archetype of MAGA legal philosophy in the solicitor general — probably the best advocate for MAGA legal philosophy in America is the current solicitor general, John Sauer — against not just any conservative attorney, but a guy who would be at the Council of Elrond of originalism.

I mean, this is a guy who is the archetype of the conservative attorney. So, you had MAGA law versus classical conservatism, quite frankly, in that fight. What Clement was able to do was to ping all of Justice Roberts's and Barrett's and Kavanaugh's and Gorsuch's originalism — set off all of their originalism bells — and he was able to do that fluently.

It was fascinating to listen to the argument because as it went on, I felt like Clement was getting so much more confident. It was like: Oh, I win through door No. 1. But if you don't like door No. 1, door No. 2 is fabulous, as well. I win through door No. 2.

Rarely have I left an oral argument or listened to an oral argument and emerged from it thinking that the outcome was more clear than this one.

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