



By: Timothy Snyder

America's federalism is a bulwark for Trump's show of force



In the nine months since Donald Trump's return to the White House, the overall goals of his agenda have become clear enough: weaken the United States abroad to create an environment friendly to dictators, while using the US government and armed forces to establish a dictatorship at home. Will it work?

The success of Trump's plan depends on how we see it, or rather, whether we choose not to see it.

In the worst case, Americans choose not to notice, look away as their neighbors and coworkers are swept up in immigration raids and their cities become militarized, and then pretend that they had no other choice but to abandon **democracy**.

Pretexts will be found. They already are, most obviously in the drumbeat of lies about urban **crime** and – as we have seen in the aftermath of the murder of the right-wing activist Charlie Kirk – the selective exploitation of political violence.

Let us not make the mistake of confusing pretexts for the underlying policies. Whether the transition to authoritarianism in the US succeeds depends on us.

In Trump's paradigm, this is all a reality show, and we are merely inconsequential extras, without lines, forever in the background.

Show of force

Call it a "show of force." That is how the deployments of National Guard troops (and Marines) in US cities 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 role to play?

The military deployments are obviously illegal and designed to intimidate. Even if the current Supreme Court's maximal **deference** to Trump means lawsuits will have minimal impact, what soldiers are being ordered to do plainly

violates the long and rightly valued precedent that the military is not to be used for law enforcement.

Many of us, both citizens and especially elected officials at the state level, have an obligation to think and react creatively

Deploying troops for that purpose traduces the rationale for maintaining armed forces, which is to defend a country from attack.

The intimidation, though, is largely up to us. Do we choose to be intimidated?

Many people, such as undocumented workers – or those who merely look like they fit that **profile** – have good reason to be fearful and lie low.

But many of us, both citizens and especially elected officials at the state level, have an obligation to think and react creatively.

Refusing to be co-opted into the "show"

For starters, that means refusing to be co-opted into the "show." The risk is that our reflexive militarism moves us, mindlessly, towards fascism. Soldiers get the benefit of patriotic symbolism. But if they are loitering in US cities, they are not defending the country.

Using gravely handsome soldiers to illustrate news reports about self-invasion is not a neutral editorial choice.

On the contrary, it promotes the perception that, in the end, soldiers were simply "obeying orders" and carrying out their patriotic duty.

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In fact, these urban deployments are the political equivalent of a lit fuse. By sending troops to city after city, the Trump administration is creating the statistical likelihood of an incident – a service member's suicide, a friendly-fire incident, the shooting of a protester – that can be used to manufacture some greater crisis.

Preventing this outcome requires seeing where passivity leads. If we do not communicate with our friends and family in the armed services about the risks, we are accomplices to their being used and abused in the service of authoritarianism.

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No one is invading America

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

I mention this to help us keep perspective. Ukraine is being invaded by Russia. No one is invading America. We can only invade ourselves.



Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker's rejection of a deployment of National Guard troops in Chicago forced Trump to back down

And whether that happens depends on whether we choose to see the overall logic, call things what they are, talk to one another, and get on with the work of defending democracy, decency, and humane values.

The question, of course, is whether civil courage can be channeled into effective democratic resistance.

America's federalist system offers grounds for hope. After Congress enacted civil-rights legislation in the 1960s to dismantle the South's racist Jim Crow political order, the Republican Party embraced "states' rights" as a rallying cry and strategy for resisting federal authority.

Now the tables have turned: Republicans fully support Trump's use of federal power against universities, media outlets, law firms, and cities, whereas Democratic state governments are becoming an anti-authoritarian bulwark.

For example, Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker's **rejection** of a deployment of National Guard troops in Chicago forced Trump to back down (at least for now).

This refusal to implement federal government policy, sometimes called "soft secession," sets the stage for a standoff between state governments and the Trump administration on issues ranging from the conduct of **elections** to public **health** and even climate **change**.

The fate of America's democracy – if not of America itself – may depend on the outcome.

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