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This is what autocracy looks like

The question now is whether Americans who hate tyranny can be roused to respond

Since Donald Trump was elected again, I've feared one scenario above all others: that he'd call out the military against people protesting his mass deportations, putting America on the road to martial law. Even in my more outlandish imaginings, however, I thought that he'd need more of a pretext to put troops on the streets of an American city – against the wishes of its mayor and governor – than the relatively small protests that broke out in Los Angeles last week.

In a post-reality environment, it turns out, the president didn't need to wait for a crisis to launch an authoritarian crackdown. Instead, he can simply invent one.

It's true that some of those protesting Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids in Los Angeles have been violent; on Sunday one man was arrested for allegedly tossing a Molotov cocktail at a police officer, and another was accused of driving a motorcycle into a line of cops. Such violence should be condemned both because it's immoral and because it's wildly counterproductive; each burning Waymo or smashed storefront is an in-kind gift to the administration.

But the idea that Trump needed to put soldiers on the streets of the city because riots were spinning out of control is pure fantasy. 'Today, demonstrations across the city of Los Angeles remained peaceful, and we commend all those who exercised their First Amendment rights responsibly', said a statement issued by the Los Angeles Police Department on Saturday evening. That was the same day Trump overrode Gov. Gavin Newsom and federalized California's National Guard, under a rarely used law meant to deal with 'rebellion or danger of a rebellion against the authority of the government of the United States.'

Then, on Monday, with thousands of National Guard troops deployed to the city, the administration said it was also sending 700 Marines. The Los Angeles police don't seem to want the Marines there; in a statement, Police Chief Jim McDonnell said, 'The arrival of federal military forces in

Los Angeles – absent clear coordination – presents a significant logistical and operational challenge for those of us charged with safeguarding this city.' But for Trump, safeguarding the city was never the point.

Wanting a spectacle

It's important to understand that for this administration, protests needn't be violent to be considered an illegitimate uprising. The presidential memorandum calling out the National Guard refers to both violent acts *and* any protests that 'inhibit' law enforcement. That definition would seem to include peaceful demonstrations around the site of ICE raids. In May, for example, armed federal agents stormed two popular Italian restaurants in San Diego looking for workers in the country illegally; they handcuffed staff members and took four people into custody. As they did so, an outraged crowd gathered outside, chanting 'shame' and for a time blocking the agents from leaving. Under Trump's order, the military could target these people as insurrectionists.

The administration, after all, has every reason to want to intimidate those who might take part in civil disobedience. Violent protests play into its hands; peaceful ones threaten the absurd narrative it's trying to bludgeon America into accepting. Just look at the lengths to which it's going to silence David Huerta, president of the Service Employees International Union of California. Last week, Huerta was arrested after sitting on a sidewalk and blocking a gate while protesting an immigration raid at a work site in Los Angeles. While he was being detained, he was knocked to the ground, resulting in his hospitalisation. On Monday, the Justice Department charged him with 'conspiracy to impede an officer', a felony that carries a maximum prison term of six years.

Trump also, on Monday, called for the arrest of Newsom. If you saw all this in any other country – soldiers sent to crush dissent, union leaders arrested, opposition politicians threatened – it would be clear that autocracy had arrived. The question, now, is whether Americans who hate tyranny can be roused to respond.

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Many people have speculated that the confrontation in Los Angeles will play into Trump's hands, allowing him to pose as a champion of law and order bringing criminal mobs to heel. Maybe they're right; Trump is a master demagogue with a gift for creating the scenes of conflict his supporters crave. We now know that Dr Phil was on the ground with ICE during the raids that set off the Los Angeles

unrest, filming a prime-time special. The administration appeared to want a spectacle.

Public opinion, however, isn't set in stone, which is why it's important for everyone who has a platform – politicians, veterans, cultural and religious leaders – to denounce the administration's authoritarian overreach. Administration officials like Stephen Miller are pushing the idea that Los Angeles is 'occupied territory', as evidenced by the foreign flags some protesters are carrying. Americans who still have hope for democracy should be saying, as loudly and as often as they can, that this is an insultingly stupid lie to justify a dictatorial power grab. Maybe it will turn out that the truth is no match for right-wing propaganda, but if that's the case, we were already lost.

It's worth remembering that in 2020, when Trump went to St John's Church for a photo op after US Park Police and Secret Service officers had tear-gassed protesters, he was widely condemned by both religious leaders and former high-ranking military officers, forcing the administration onto the defensive. A poll conducted a little later found that two-thirds of Americans blamed him for increasing racial tensions. It is not a given that disorder favours Trump, especially when it's clear that he's the one instigating it. But there need to be strong voices countering his blunt fictions.

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Yes, America has lurched to the right since Trump's first term, and he can get away with abuses now that would have set off mass outrage then. Plenty of Democrats, burned by the backlash against Black Lives Matter and large-scale illegal immigration, would rather not have a fight over disorder in Los Angeles. 'For months, Democrats scarred by the politics of the issue sought to sidestep President Donald Trump's immigration wars — focusing instead on the economy, tariffs or, in the case of deportations, due process concerns', reported Politico.

But there's no sidestepping a president deploying the military in an American city based on ludicrous falsehoods about a foreign invasion. Indeed, it's hard to think of a clearer signpost on the road to dictatorship. This Saturday, on Trump's birthday, he's planning a giant military parade in Washington, ostensibly to celebrate the Army's 250th anniversary. Tanks have been photographed *en route* to the city, the Lincoln Memorial standing tragically in the background, like an image from some

Hollywood dystopia.

On that day, there will be demonstrations all over the country under the rubric 'No Kings.' I desperately hope that Trump's attempt to quash protest ends up fuelling it. Those who want to live in a free country may be scared, but they shouldn't be cowed.

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