

The Weekend Essay Life & Arts

The struggle for Los Angeles

Pulitzer-winning novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen
on the 'migrant invasion' that wasn't — and

the real meaning of America's second-biggest city

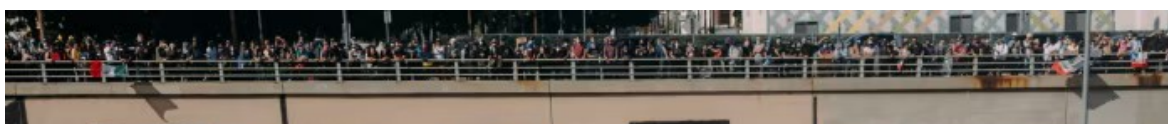
Viet Thanh Nguyen

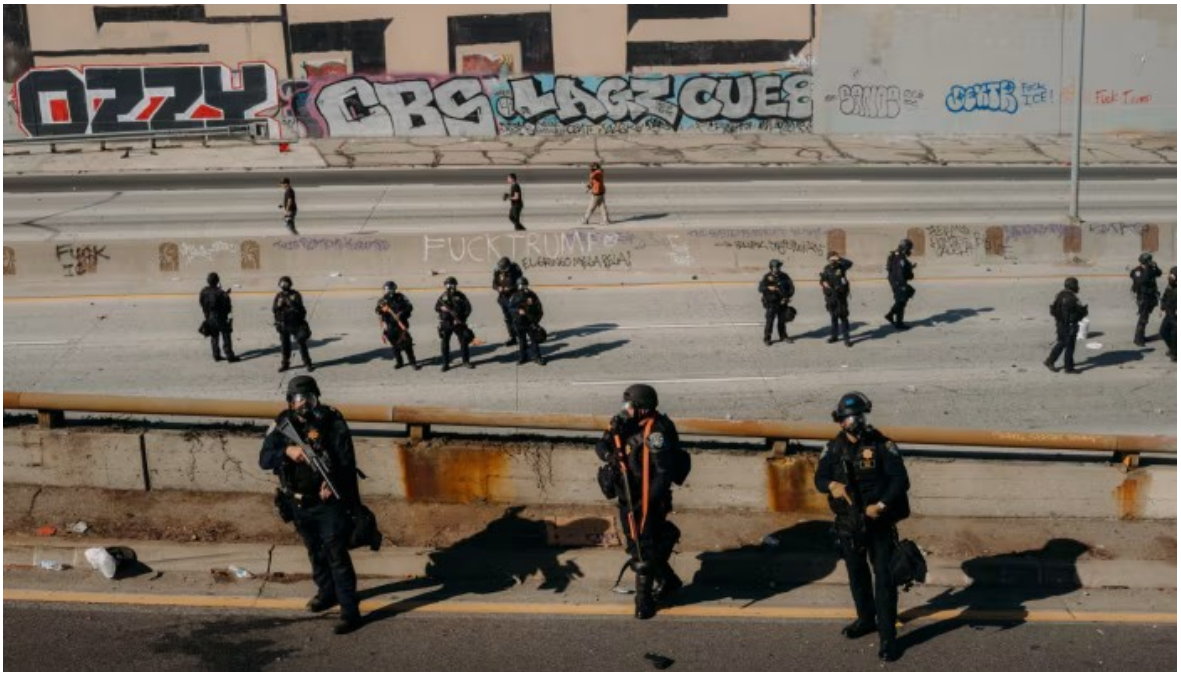
Published JUN 14 2025

I was sitting on a beach in Malibu when the news arrived via social media. The temperature was cool and breezy, the sky a clear, unsmogged blue, the kind of propaganda-perfect moment that has lured tourists, dreamers and settlers to Los Angeles for decades. My five-year-old daughter was building a sandcastle, my 11-year-old son was running in the surf, and up and down the sands on this Saturday afternoon white people, Black people, Latinos and Asians frolicked, an idyllic panorama sure to provoke Donald Trump, who, looking on it from afar, would have turned a shade of sickly green similar to the Grinch's as he gazed down on the love and joy of the peaceful community of Whoville.

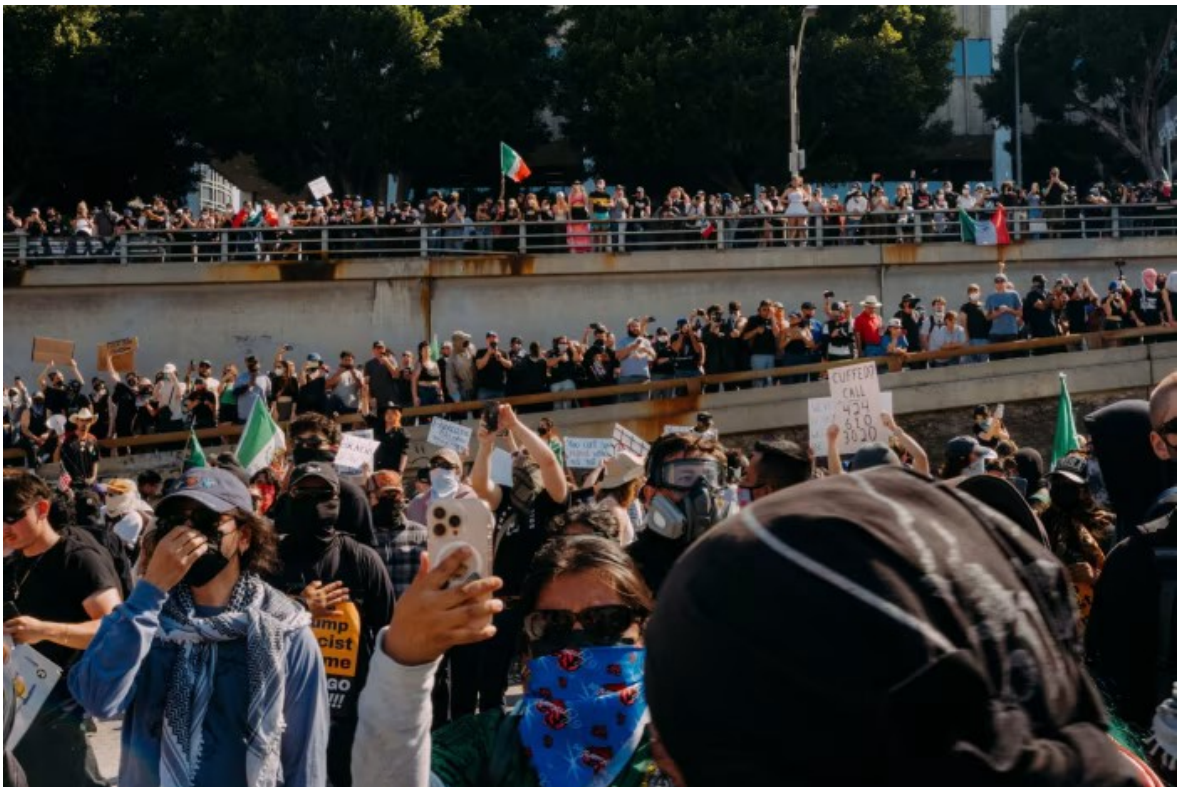
I know Trump was thinking of [California](#), his nightmare state, because militarised agents of ICE, the FBI and other elements of the Repressive State Apparatus had arrived in the Fashion District of LA wearing camouflage uniforms and battle armour, riding on armoured cars and dramatising on a local scale the well-worn American custom of invading a foreign city inhabited by non-white people. Now the news on social media was that the border patrol had raided a Home Depot in Paramount, a majority-Latino part of greater LA I had never visited.

These agents of the state had been dispatched by Trump in order to “liberate” LA from a “migrant invasion” of brown people from Mexico, El Salvador, Venezuela and many more countries south of the border. I wondered if I, a refugee from Viet Nam who came when he was four years of age, was a part of this migrant invasion, with the likely answer being “yes”, although of the second rank rather than the first. There were highly visible Asian Americans in the Trump administration after all, from Kash Patel heading the FBI to Usha Vance being the Second Lady. But Asian Americans have also been deported in substantial numbers, because Asians are also seen by many in the west as an alien presence, as well as an economic and competitive threat.





California Highway Patrol officers on a downtown freeway pass on June 8... © Daniel Terna



...after a crowd of protesters had gathered there © Daniel Terna

My people, the Vietnamese, had already taken over portions of Orange County, an hour away, and renamed it Little Saigon. Not LA, but close enough. San Gabriel Valley in the eastern part of LA County is essentially an Asian suburb, and just a little bit south is Little India in Artesia. The city of Los Angeles itself has Little Tokyo, Koreatown, Little Ethiopia, Little Bangladesh, Chinatown, Thai Town and Little Armenia, with even more Armenians in neighbouring Glendale, where they comprise 40 per cent of the population. But the winner for the best name of an

comprise 40 per cent of the population. But the winner for the best name of an ethnic enclave? Tehrangeles in Westwood, formed by Iranian refugees and their descendants.

The Republican party, fervent defender of states' rights, cheered a state being violated by the federal government

In these vibrant neighbourhoods, the cultures and histories of LA, California and the United States remix with the seeds of diasporas, oftentimes brought by wars and calamities in which the United States played a part. This hybrid mixture of languages and customs, cuisines and ideas, energy and ambition, fuels the country for its global

challenges.

But that is not how Trump perceives LA and the state of California, which loom in his imagination as a *bête noire*, a dark and twisted fantasy that he shares with his acolyte Stephen Miller, who hails from nearby Santa Monica. Miller is part of a conservative minority in the state that is disenchanted by diversity. His campaign to recapture LA and pacify the US should be taken seriously, for he is deputy chief of staff for policy and homeland security adviser, but it is also hard to take him seriously, for he has the qualities of a comic book villain, as does his master, Trump.

Neither Trump nor Miller would merit a Shakespearean tragedy, unlike political figures like the Californian Richard Nixon and his genocidal immigrant national security adviser, Henry Kissinger. Kissinger was at least an intellectual, his brutal vision of the bifurcated world based on some kind of learning, even if it did lead to mass atrocities such as the carpet bombing of Cambodia that helped bring the Khmer Rouge to power, and providing support for the Guatemalan state's war on Maya people; while Nixon, as coarse as he could be, possessed the elements of a conscience and a sense of shame, as evidenced by his choice to resign rather than be impeached.





Demonstrators take cover behind a makeshift barrier of street furniture and traffic signs © Daniel Terna



California Highway Patrol officers in riot gear in the downtown area on June 8 © Daniel Terna

Trump is all coarseness and no shame, and can one be a protagonist in a tragedy without shame or dignity? His role in a Shakespearean tragedy would be that of a crucial but supporting character, Iago, who induces the hero's downfall. In this case, Trump's victim is the US, a country as divided by its history and conscience as any Shakespearean king, vulnerable to being brought down by its own delusions, the most primal one concerning its perpetual innocence. Its long history of terrible violence is matched by an equal ability to forget its violence, leaving the US periodically astonished as to how it finds itself in yet another war or occupying yet another country. If that innocence leads the nation to repeatedly inflict tragedies on others, it also renders it ripe for a tragic fall.

Trump, cynical, self-serving and professing his innocence of any crimes, even the ones for which he has been convicted, stands ready to help in that fall. He hates that version of the US represented by LA and California, populated by immigrants

and the cultural elite, and seeks to eradicate it, leaving only the other version, the red-hatted nation of Make America Great Again, where the supposedly genuine Americans live. This plot to separate the conjoined twins of the American self cannot succeed, for the US without LA and California and all they embody will die.



Driving past one of the protests © Daniel Terna



Officers above a pedestrian bridge to a shopping mall during the protests © Daniel Terna

Officers above a pedestrian bridge to a shopping mall during the protests © Daniel Ferra

What would live on would be a country bearing the name of the United States but with little of its hopefulness and possibility, benefits certainly never distributed equally to all its people over the centuries and yet, despite their sometimes illusory qualities, powerful in their persuasion. The bard of this American democracy was Walt Whitman, but poetry is lost on Trump, master of the razzle-dazzle, the hocus-pocus, the loud and empty spectacle. No lyricism or persuasion for him, only the twisting of arms, and the punishing with either humiliation or the kingly act of banishment, aimed at those courtiers who have fallen out of his favour and, more horribly, the hundreds caught up in his mania for spectacular deportation.

If Trump does not merit a Shakespearean tragedy, he does deserve a reality show or an appearance in a superhero movie, with Miller as a two-dimensional henchman whose utterances belong in comic-book speech bubbles. Undermining the official rhetoric that deportation is directed against criminals, Miller revealed the truth in a meeting with top-ranking ICE officers, whom he “eviscerated” for not deporting enough. “Stephen Miller wants everybody arrested,” said one witness. “Why aren’t you at Home Depot? Why aren’t you at 7-Eleven?” “Everybody” seems to mean anybody who looks like an undocumented immigrant, that is to say, definitely brown, but also African and Asian.

Trump may be a New Yorker by birth and a Floridian by choice, but he is also a kind of Angeleno by temperament

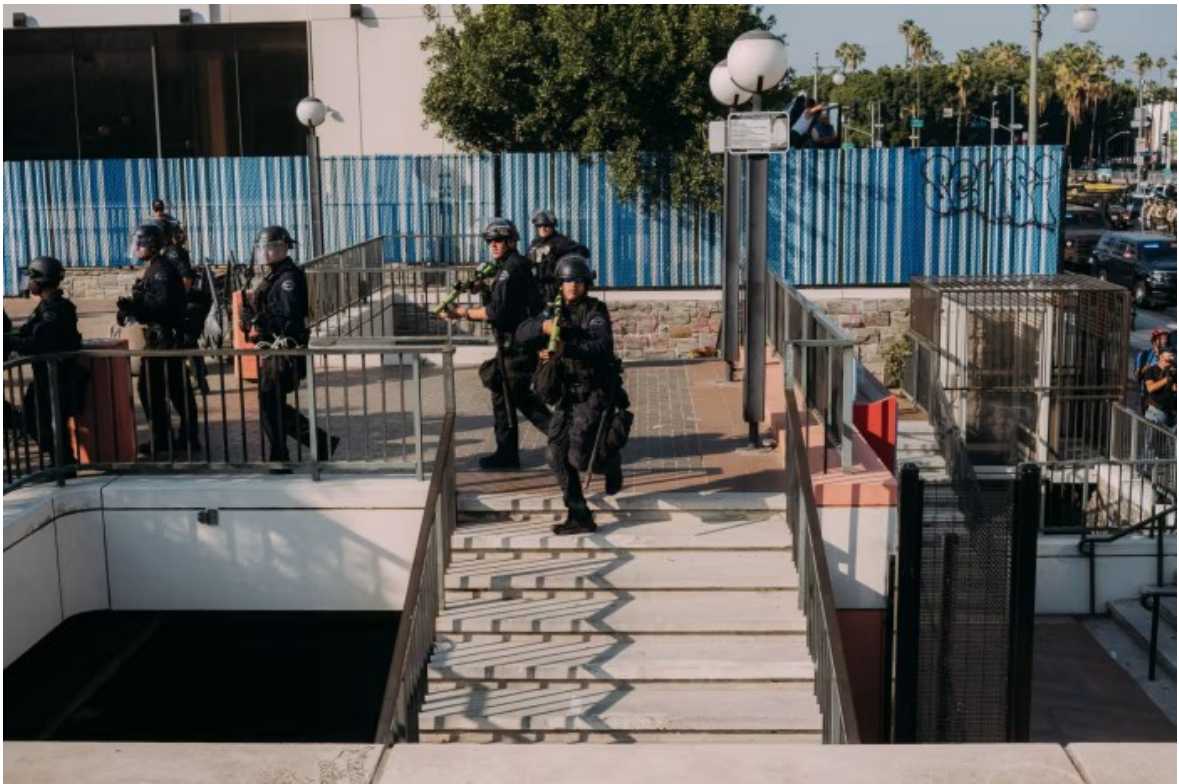
People watching LA from afar might believe the city was aflame with protests and overrun by migrants, but they may not realise how peaceable the city was amid its vastness. Driving home from Malibu to my home in Pasadena, a ride of more than an hour in good traffic, I experienced anew the scale of LA, a city with 3.9mn people and a

county with more than 9.7mn residents. The city is 469 square miles, the county 4,060, with the protests occurring in a few small areas. There was a disjuncture between how LA was mostly quiet, even if the protests were real and urgent, and the mainstream news showing ranks of LAPD and militarised Feds firing tear gas and rubber bullets at shouting protesters as if these scenes were overwhelming the city.





Traffic at a standstill after protesters gathered on a freeway on June 8 © Daniel Terna



LAPD officers outside the Federal Building on June 9 © Daniel Terna

A crisis flared in LA, but not one created by protesters. Most of the crisis was manufactured by the Trump administration, characterising the protesters as “rioters” when most were peaceful, according to many witnesses. But Miller, with another villainous speech bubble, depicted the protests as “an organised insurrection against the laws and sovereignty of the United States”. The rhetoric was Orwellian, for there had been an actual insurrection on January 6 where a much larger crowd of protesters stormed the Capitol, beat policemen, took over Senate chambers and waved the Confederate flag, a far more threatening symbol

Senate chambers and waved the Confederate flag, a far more threatening symbol than a Mexican flag, for it was the Confederates, not the Mexicans, who sought to destroy the Union.

In Orwell's 1984, *"The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command."* The people of LA, with their eyes and ears, could see the lie uttered by Kristi Noem, secretary of homeland security, who said of Los Angeles and its people that "They're not a city of immigrants, they're a city of criminals." This was yet another attempt by the Trump administration to accuse its opponents of what Trump or his people have done, given that Trump remains the only president convicted of a felony. Meanwhile, the Republican party, fervent defender of states' rights, cheered a state being violated by the federal government; the same party, fundamentalist defender of the right to bear arms against tyranny, applauded the deployment of armed forces against ordinary citizens.

How the protests in Los Angeles unfolded

Friday June 6

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents raid several sites in Los Angeles, including a Home Depot store and an apparel manufacturing business, taking dozens of people into custody. Protesters gather outside the Metropolitan detention centre and the federal building in downtown Los Angeles.

Los Angeles Police Department officers are called in. They arrest more than 100 people, fire tear gas into the crowd and order them to disperse.

Saturday June 7

In Paramount, about 16 miles from downtown LA, rumours of immigration raids at a Home Depot spark fresh protests. By the afternoon demonstrators are blocking the streets in downtown LA. The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department orders them to disperse.

President Donald Trump orders 2,000 National Guard troops to LA despite the objections of the California governor, Gavin Newsom, and the LA mayor, Karen Bass.

Sunday June 8

By mid-morning hundreds of National Guard and California State Guard troops are positioned around the city. They deploy tear gas and try to clear crowds. The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department orders them to disperse.

Later protesters block the 10 Freeway (San Diego to Los Angeles) highway for a time. Police fire tear gas near the LA Federal Courthouse. Protesters throw paint and spray paints and set off fireworks. A Waymo driverless car is damaged.

Let it be said that Democrats bore responsibility here, too, for the rise of the militarised police was a direct outcome of a bipartisan forever war that saw a surplus of American military weaponry returned to US police departments. Democratic presidents also oversaw vast programmes of deportation, with Obama dispatching more than [3mn](#) and Biden [more than 4mn](#). They both outpaced Trump, who deported slightly fewer than Obama in his first term and significantly fewer than Biden in his second term so far. What makes Trump different is his willingness to turn deportation into a theatre of cruelty and, for some spectators, an entertainment. But is Democratic civil deportation any better than Republican

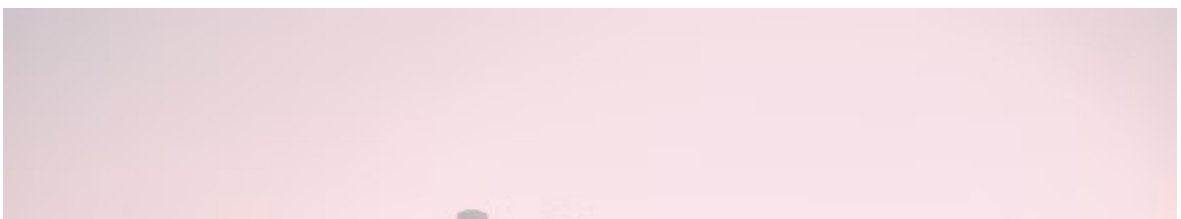
uncivil deportation? Are Democratic drone strikes better than Republican drone strikes?

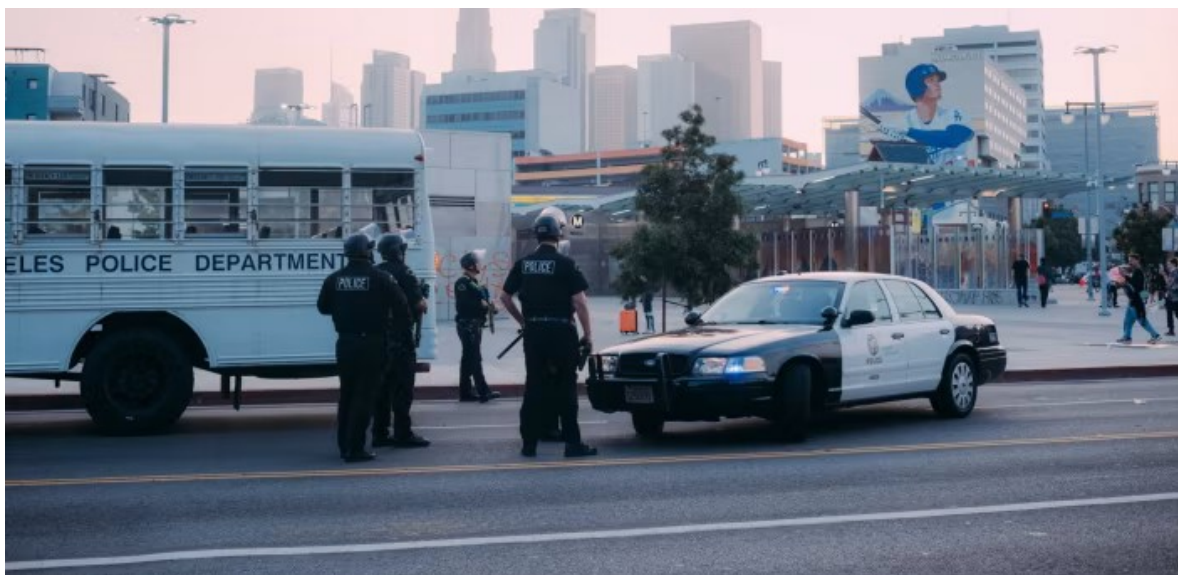
The Democratic party did not protest Democratic deportations, and if that was complicity, it is widespread among Americans in general, who more or less tolerate the war machinery so long as their party controls the cockpit. LA and Hollywood are not exempt from the complicity, because if any city exemplifies the Society of the Spectacle in which Trump excels, it is LA, where the entertainment industry merges with soft power propaganda for the purposes of supporting the war machine (see both *Top Gun* movies) and for mining the tabloids (see the OJ Simpson car chase and trial).

LA gifted the world the reality show and the people who know how to exploit it, and we are all the worse off, corrupted by the mindless, manipulative pseudo-reality that produced Trump via *The Apprentice* and which he in turn now oversees as a master of media. Trump may be a New Yorker by birth and a Floridian by choice, but he is also a kind of Angeleno by temperament, the one who lives for influencing and who loves to swim in the shallow, polluted waters of social media.

The Hollywood sign reminded me of living under the glare of the spectacle, and perhaps that was why I took my children on a hike to see it as the National Guard arrived on Sunday. I felt a bit guilty, not being present for the protests as I would have if I was not the sole caregiver that weekend. I had attended many protests, marches and rallies, beginning with my student days at Berkeley and continuing over the years in LA, from immigrant and women's rights to Black Lives Matter and Free Palestine.

I brought my children to some of these events, but never when I feared there might be violence. The threat of violence hung over the city this weekend, but it came much more from the police than from the protesters, some of whom set fire to Waymo autonomous taxis but none of whom shot journalists with rubber bullets or fired into a "largely peaceful crowd" in what The Nation called a "police riot". On my social media, the witnesses to and participants in the protests said the dominant mood was nonviolent and joyful. My children enjoyed their weekend. LA was not burning.





LAPD officers on the streets of Little Tokyo, having dispersed demonstrators © Daniel Terna



A man rests at a bus shelter during the June 8 demonstrations © Daniel Terna

Neither was the Madleen, the ship carrying a dozen international activists, including Greta Thunberg, towards Gaza with the intent to deliver aid. If it was bewildering to hear about apocalyptic LA while Angelenos mostly went about their lives, it had been completely disjunctive for months to watch Palestinian social media broadcast horror after horror inflicted by Israel while life continued in the US, the chief supplier of Israel's weapons and political support.

I could hardly enjoy my children without thinking of how children in Gaza were being bombed and starved, just as I could hardly hold my children without seeing

other children being ripped from the arms of those immigrant parents whom Trump has [called](#) “animals” and “not human”. There are echoes here of the language used by the former Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant when he referred to “human animals”; whether he meant Hamas or Gazans in general may be debatable, but Israel has in practice dehumanised all Palestinians.

As one protester said of the effects of being tear-gassed, it ‘tasted like fascism’

[Israel intercepted the Madleen](#) and detained its activists, but did not risk violence of the kind seen in 2010 when nine were killed in a raid on another aid ship attempting to reach Gaza. The Madleen’s activists made their point. As for the protesters of LA, Trump, conjuring an invasion by immigrants that

did not exist, called on 700 US Marines to invade LA. In Trump’s fever dream, the City of Angels appeared to be Fallujah-on-the-Pacific, with the forces of the US turned against the subversive enemy within. But [Trump’s deployment of the military](#) on American streets may yet prove to be imperial hubris, given the failures of American wars in Viet Nam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

“It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it,” an American major supposedly said of Ben Tre in Viet Nam, and the destruction of the US as a [“city upon a hill”](#), meant to inspire the world, may be the consequence of Trump’s hallucinatory plan to defend it against imagined threats. If any other country did what the US is doing now — snatching people off the streets, deporting people without due process, suppressing campus protests, attempting to [control universities](#), erasing the memory of an insurrection, deploying the military to quell protesters, holding a military parade to glorify a president — the US would be calling it dictatorial. As one protester said of the effects of being tear-gassed, it “tasted like fascism”.

If hope is to be found, it lies in the juxtaposition of the Madleen heading for Gaza and the residents of LA who rushed to defend their immigrant neighbours. In both cases, concerned people resisted abuses of power. Solidarity animated these activists, with mutual aid the outcome. Authoritarians fear these qualities among the people, for authoritarians seek to divide and conquer. If anything emerges clearly from the smog of misinformation hanging over LA, it is that we will need much more mutual aid and solidarity in order for our country to survive this reality-show version of a tragedy.

Viet Thanh Nguyen is a professor of English and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. His novel [‘The Sympathizer’](#) won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction



Viet Thanh Nguyen has Lunch with the FT

The Pulitzer winner on [leaving Vietnam as a child](#), [subverting the immigrant memoir — and why he believes in a borderless world](#)

Find out about our latest stories first — follow FT Weekend on [Instagram](#), [Bluesky](#) and [X](#), and [sign up](#) to receive the FT Weekend newsletter every Saturday morning

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2025. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

Life & Arts

US politics & policy

FT Edit

US society

Los Angeles