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Trump's ominous ICE security state

The nation of immigrants' shift to mass deportation is among the most shocking turns in US history

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They say the cruelty is the point.

Inspecting cages that would spark outrage were zoos to put apes in them, Donald Trump last week expressed delight with Florida's new deportee camp.

The instantly dubbed "Alligator Alcatraz" was "so professional, so well done", he said. "We're going to teach them how to run away from an alligator if they escape prison." Lest there be ambiguity, the White House posted a picture of Trump flanked by alligators wearing caps with the ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency) logo declaring: "Make America safe again!"

The nation of immigrants' shift to mass deportation is among the most anticipated turns in US history. Trump has for years compared undocumented migrants to animals. During the 2024 campaign, he even claimed that Haitians living in a small town in Ohio were eating other people's pets. Now he is planning a nationwide apparatus of camps that can incarcerate 116,000 deportees at a time and process a

apparatus of camps that can accommodate 10,000 deportees at a time and process a million people a year. The Supreme Court last month removed lower courts' ability to put stays on Trump's actions, which means ICE agents can snatch pretty much whomever they like off the streets.

Welcome — or rather, not welcome — to America 2025. Joe Biden used to say that if you want to know a country's values, study its budget. The “big, beautiful bill” that Trump signed into law on July 4 cannot be misread.

The law slashes spending on healthcare, education, clean energy, food assistance, medical research and disease prevention. The same bill lifts ICE's budget to an estimated \$37.5bn a year. That is higher than Italy's entire defence budget and just below Canada's. ICE will now double the number of agents in the field. What Washington is set to spend on detention centres alone is greater than the USAID budget that was gutted earlier this year.

Though there is nothing glacial about it, Trump is ushering in America's ICE age. He has catapulted ICE into America's best-funded law enforcement agency — and increasingly beyond accountability. The agency's in-house watchdog was scrapped earlier this year. For the time being, the lower courts can do little to rein it in. The Supreme Court last year gave Trump sweeping immunity from “official” acts he takes as president. That makes ICE Trump's de facto private army — his security state within the state.

Most checks on Trump's power are wilting. Congress is providing no oversight. Indeed, the body is modelling constitutional demise. Lisa Murkowski, the Republican senator least aligned with Trump, said the bill was bad for America after having just voted for it. She hoped that the House of Representatives would water it down. It did not. Earlier this year, Murkowski admitted: “We're all afraid . . . I'm oftentimes very anxious myself about using my voice because retaliation is real.” Her fear enabled Trump's bill to pass by one vote. The land of the free is also the home of the brave, says “The Star-Spangled Banner”. If a US senator is too scared to oppose Trump, what could she expect of others?

As it happens, the streets are alive with Americans with far less to lose than Murkowski. They see a US president assuming kingly powers to declare whole categories of people as “alien enemies” under a French revolutionary-era law. A large majority of those detained by ICE have no criminal record. The agency has bluntly refused to comply with another law that gives members of Congress at-will access to its detention centres. Lawmakers must now provide 72 hours’ notice. Theoretically, lower courts could insist that ICE follow the law. They could also instruct ICE agents to remove their face masks and show their IDs. But the Supreme Court has told Trump he can ignore such rulings.

The only realistic block to Trump’s untrammelled power is thus the same nine-judge court that has already given him multiple green lights.

The Supreme Court is set to hear Trump’s objection to the 14th Amendment that declared anyone born on US soil to be a citizen. Trump has been musing openly about revoking the citizenship of naturalised Americans, including Zohran Mamdani, the Uganda-born American who last month swept the New York Democratic mayoral primary.

The court is also evaluating challenges to Trump’s declared right to impose tariffs at will, usurp Congress’s power of the purse, deem anyone he sees fit as “anti-national” and use emergency powers to put troops on the streets. It is a fair bet that Trump will either get his way or exploit the court’s silence. On almost every petition to date, the Supreme Court has ceded to his lawyers.

But the most fateful challenge concerns Trump’s power to decide who is a US citizen.

Should he win that case, America could no longer be counted as a democracy. It took years for Viktor Orbán to consolidate strongman rule in Hungary. Trump is trying to pull off an equivalent system-change within months. Perhaps speed will be his undoing.

In the meantime, how would the US military react in clashes with protesters? Would

the Supreme Court turn a blind eye to blood on the streets? Is there any category of person whom Trump could not put in a cage? That we do not know the answers to any of these questions is alarming.

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