

Opinion **US politics & policy**

America's accelerating exit from itself

After the Kirk murder, Trump is pulverising the country's founding principles with astonishing ease

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Charlie Kirk's widow, Erika, hugs Donald Trump at a memorial event. While she told the crowd she forgave her husband's killer, the US president said he hated his enemies © Julia Demaree Nikhinson/AP

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Freedom is the freedom to say two plus two equals four, said George Orwell. By that standard, the US is hurtling towards unfreedom. Those who point out that the late Charlie Kirk was a Christian nationalist provocateur risk their jobs or worse. The official line is that the appalling murder of Kirk made him a martyr to God and American liberty. Dissenters to such hyperbole risk being branded as terrorists. In the post-Kirk world, two plus two equals five.

Orwell is erroneously quoted as having said that at a time of universal deceit, truth-telling is a revolutionary act. Here is the truth about Kirk. He believed that the US Civil Rights Act was a mistake, that leading African-American women, including Michelle Obama, lacked “brain processing power”, that Joe Biden should be jailed or even killed for his presidential sins and that the US should have public executions. Readers can guess for themselves what Kirk thought of women's place in society.

Under America's First Amendment, pretty much all speech is protected by law. That is

as it should be. Shouting “fire” in a crowded theatre endangers the lives of others. Booing the stage performance or claiming the tickets were a rip-off does not. Those who called out Kirk’s toxicity were as American as apple pie. As was Kirk. The right to say what you want dates to the country’s founding. Nobody should be prosecuted, let alone killed, for being obnoxious.

A few months before the 250th anniversary of the declaration of independence, Donald Trump is pulverising the country’s founding principles with astonishing ease. His war on speech is no drill. Late-night comedians are being targeted. Corporations like Paramount are meekly submitting to his will. Ivy League presidents and globally renowned law firms act as though the First Amendment no longer holds. Outspoken business leaders have suddenly lost their tongues. Since they have the most to lose, those with power and wealth are among the softest targets.

Trump misses no opportunity to punish dissent, and Kirk’s assassination is his biggest so far. Last week he claimed that 97 per cent of network coverage of him was negative and should be illegal. The federal state’s vast powers are being used to pursue private vendettas. Officials have been forced to take polygraphs to test their loyalties. FBI agents who investigated Trump have been fired. Morale at US spy agencies has never been lower. Trump has publicly instructed the US attorney-general to prosecute three named opponents.

That his economic ratings are in freefall should be a source of alarm not complacency. Less than a year after Trump was elected, the separation of powers is not working. Congress is irrelevant. The Supreme Court is quiescent. The media is punch drunk. Democrats are fragmented. Independent federal agencies are losing autonomy. The markets are high on the AI gold rush, crypto deregulation and the prospect of a return to easy money. Stephen Miller, Trump’s most influential domestic adviser — prime minister to Trump’s king — calls the Democratic party a domestic extremist organisation and wants to suspend America’s constitutional *habeas corpus* right to due process. He is a true American autocrat.

It has been widely observed that the speed of America's democratic slide surpasses that of other "elective autocracies" such as Narendra Modi's India and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey. But that understates Trump's impatience. Others have shifted to authoritarianism with relatively fast-growing economies, which makes it easier to sustain public support. Trump's trade war and his "big beautiful [budget] bill" will rob most Americans of income growth. The idea that the disaffected middle will therefore clip Trump's wings in next year's midterm elections is quixotic. Having silenced most institutional dissent within his first nine months, what could Trump accomplish in the next 14?

At the huge religious revival-style memorial for Kirk in Arizona on Sunday, his widow, Erika, struck a courageous note of dissent from the dominant spirit of vengeance. In the spirit of the Christian gospels, she forgave her husband's killer. Speaking straight afterwards, Trump corrected her. He could not forgive his enemies, he said. Indeed, he hated them. Trump's wrath produced cheers from tens of thousands of "Christians" in the stadium. To put it in terms churchgoers would understand, Trump's America is swapping the New Testament for the Old.

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