

Donald Trump, Our “Dear Leader”

-Bill Sims, Aug 2025

This past week President Trump held a three-hour cabinet meeting, basically a lovefest, in which cabinet members took turns layering praise upon tribute upon adulation on the President. The note taking about all that the President said was manifest. Frankly it reminded me of tableaux of Kim Jong Un, followed by his minions, with their little notebooks and pencils.

Giant portraits of President Trump are beginning to drape government buildings, most recently at the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Labor. That reminded me of my first of many visits to The People’s Republic of China in the mid-1970s, as the Cultural Revolution was winding down. I arrived at the Beijing Airport in the dead of night, a relatively small airport at that time, and the only light other than the small runway lights was a large spotlight shining on a giant draped image of Mao Zedong. I spent over a month there on that trip, and one of my enduring memories is that of the everpresent giant drapes, murals and pictures of Chairman Mao, everywhere, creating permanent imprints on peoples’ minds, citizens and visitors alike. Ditto “Dear Leader” Kim Jong Un.

At that effusive cabinet meeting, Labor Secretary Lori Chavez-Remer encouraged Trump to stop by her offices to see his portrait displayed outside the building, saying, "Mr. President, I invite you to see your big beautiful face on a banner in front of the Department of Labor because you are really the transformational president..."

Garrett Graff, author, Pulitzer Prize finalist, and former editor of Washingtonian Magazine recently made the following observation.

“The United States, just months before its 250th birthday as the world’s leading democracy, has tipped over the edge into authoritarianism... I think many Americans wrongly believe there would be one clear unambiguous moment where we go from ‘democracy’ to ‘authoritarianism’. Instead, this is exactly how it happens – a blurring here, a norm destroyed there, a presidential diktat unchallenged. Then you wake up one morning and our country is different.”

There is the notion that while democracy sleeps, authoritarianism creeps. That fabled warning is, unfortunately, a muted alarm. Undemocratic practices mount slowly, become normalized, slip past oversight, and are dismissed as, “Oh, he’s just joking.” But the roster of retribution of those deemed disloyal, or those who have had the temerity to discount his political playbook is mounting to historic levels.

The President has tenaciously sought absolute control over the agencies of government, including the castration of Congress. The roster of control is growing, day-by-day: the Center for Disease Control; Health and Human Services; the Federal Reserve; the Justice Department; the Internal Revenue Service; the Office of Management and Budget; State National Guard Units; the Department of Homeland Security; the Department of Defense; National Intelligence; the FBI; FEMA; the Department of Agriculture; the Education Department; the Department of Labor; the Smithsonian Museums; the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts; the District of

Columbia; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.(CDC), and writ large, the gerrymandered districts of red states... maximizing executive control over these traditionally quasi-independent institutions.

A president typically appoints highly competent people to run these agencies, seeking their advice in developing policy related to their fields of expertise, hopefully aligned with the health, wellbeing, and security of the nation. What we are witnessing is an upside down orchestration of what is normal, where the President tells his cabinet what he wants, expects them to find ways, willy-nilly, to effect his orders or be subject to intimidation and or dismissal. In other words, an exercise in puppeteering.

The Wall Street Journal warns that the President is “charging ahead unchecked... frequently riffing on authoritarianism and ignoring caution from advisors.” The President himself said on camera this past week in the Oval Office, “I have the right to do anything I want to do. I’m the president of the United States... but I’m not a dictator.”

Miles Taylor served in Trump’s first administration, in the Department of Homeland Security, and voted for him. He said recently on the PBS NewsHour, “When I came into that administration, and I saw with what regularity the president cooked up ideas that were so obviously illegal on their face, that made me and a lot of other people very, very worried... His top adviser is calling the Democratic Party a domestic extremist organization. That's really, really scary language.

And we're increasingly seeing those other counterterrorism and national security tools of the federal government turned against political adversaries. And that has me worried about where this could go... He said he was going to be America's retribution. He said he was going to lock people up. He said he was going to deploy the troops. He said he was going to go after his political enemies”

“And all along, people in national security circles said he's joking, it's an exaggeration. His own people went to the microphones and said he's joking. He's not joking. He's moving forward with these plans, closely reflecting the plans outlined in the ultra-conservative Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025. These plans are autocratic in nature, and we really need America to wake up to that, because whether you're a Democrat or a Republican, we don't want this precedent to be set for how presidential power is used in the future.”

In the U.S., in the mid-19th century, there was a political party called the “Know Nothing Party.” It was a “nativist” party that changed its name after 10 years of critical reviews, to the National American Party. It was a secretive movement, vigorously anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, and opposed to anyone holding political office who was not born in the United States. Members of the Know Nothing Party had to sign a secret oath that required members to say, “I know nothing” when questioned about the organization’s details. When President Trump was asked about his alleged connection to the 900-page Project 2025 manifesto, he claimed to know “nothing.” How many times have we heard, “I don’t know anything about that organization... I don’t know that person, never met them... never read it and no nothing about it”?

Trump has said he was just joking about running again in 2028, yet pictures show the President showing visiting foreign leaders hats saying “Trump 2028” in his personal gift shop in the White House, or that he was going to be a dictator, “I’d be a dictator on day one.” As reported in The Atlantic, “During a town hall in Iowa, Fox News’s Sean Hannity tossed Trump what ought to have been a softball question. “Under no circumstances, you are promising America tonight, you would never abuse power as retribution against anybody?” Hannity asked. “Except for day one,” Trump replied.

Anne Applebaum, a noted Pulitzer Prize winner-historian has written a great deal about Communism and the development of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe (Autocracy Inc. – Doubleday). She cites behavioral scientist Karen Stenner, who has written about “an authoritarian predisposition, a personality type that is bothered by complexity and is especially enraged by disagreement. Trump has made himself into the spokesperson for precisely these American authoritarians.”

Equally compelling is a reflection by Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese/Myanmar politician-diplomat, democracy icon, and Nobel Peace Prize winner who was overthrown by a military coup in 2021. She said prophetically, “It is often in the name of cultural integrity, as well as social stability, and national security, that democratic reforms based on human rights are resisted by authoritarian regimes.”

Have we, like “Alice in Wonderland,” fallen into the rabbit hole? Is our proud American democracy bending its knee to another tyrannical “Dear Leader,” leading us down a bizarre, surreal path into purgatory?