

Is the U.S. heading into a dictatorship?

February 4, 2026 1:23 PM ET

Heard on [Fresh Air](#)

The Atlantic writer Robert Kagan says as Trump violates norms, laws and the Constitution, including his call to nationalize elections, "we're on the edge of the consolidation of dictatorship."

TERRY GROSS, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. My guest, Robert Kagan, used to describe Donald Trump as antiliberal. Then he upped it to authoritarian, and now Kagan says that Trump is getting close to becoming a dictator. Kagan writes, "President Trump has managed in just one year to destroy the American order that was and has weakened America's ability to protect its interests in the world that will be. Americans thought defending the liberal world order was too expensive. Wait until they start paying for what comes next," unquote.

We're going to talk about that and Trump's domestic violations of norms, laws and the Constitution, including the ICE immigration crackdowns in cities like Minneapolis. Kagan says some of the Trump administration policies are rooted in the history of Christian white supremacy.

Robert Kagan is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*, a former longtime *Washington Post* columnist, a former Republican and the author of many books. The paperback edition of his latest book is titled "Rebellion: Donald Trump And The Antiliberal Tradition In America." We recorded our interview yesterday.

Robert Kagan, welcome to FRESH AIR.

ROBERT KAGAN: Thank you.

GROSS: So you've recently said we're heading into a dictatorship, if we're not already in one. And you've described Trump over the years as antiliberal and then authoritarian, and now to moving in the direction of dictator or already maybe one. So what promoted him to would-be dictator or maybe already one for you?

KAGAN: Well, I started warning that he was threatening to be a dictator back in November '23. And so pretty much everything that's happened since then, I think, was predictable, and I foresaw it. But I have to say, certainly his actions, his administration's actions in the first year, in which they very rapidly sort of dismantled the federal bureaucracy, took over the Justice Department, took over the FBI, took over the CIA and then have created this brute squad, which is called ICE - these are the acts of a dictator, plain and simple.

GROSS: He still insists that the 2020 election was stolen from him. And so now he announced on Dan Bongino's podcast - and Bongino had been the No. 2 at the FBI in the Trump administration, but now is back to being a podcaster. So Trump said that he wants to federalize elections in at least 15 states and called for Republican officials to oversee those states' elections.

KAGAN: Yeah. No. I mean, look. I think we're already well into a dictatorship. It's just a question of whether he will go ahead and, you know, basically disrupt the '26 elections, which I think he's made it clear he has every intention of doing now. So I think that this should be a five-alarm fire for everybody. I - people, I think, are starting to figure out that the '26 elections are very much at risk and that his intention is to prevent the Democrats from taking the House or the Senate and that, you know, we are there now. You know, people are always talking about when this happens or if that happens. We're there, and I really think it's time for people to start taking that seriously.

GROSS: Just describe a little bit what nationalizing the elections would mean and what - like, asking Republican officials to oversee elections. First of all, the Constitution says that states regulate elections and oversee elections, right?

KAGAN: Right. I mean, it is the state's prerogative to decide how the elections are going to be conducted and how the votes are counted and all that kind of stuff. Yeah.

GROSS: And to have partisans overseeing it - like, how in the world can that be legal?

KAGAN: It's not. It's not legal. We've moved out of the realm of legality. Everything now is about power. It's about pure power. And, you know, the fact that the Republican Party has become the party of dictatorship - I think people really do need to focus on that. There's so much focus on Trump. And Trump, of course, is the driving force behind this, although he has other people who are also major figures, like Stephen Miller and, I think, Russell Vought. But even to suggest that Republicans should be overseeing elections - I must say, I'm surprised even to hear that coming out of the mouth of Donald Trump. It's such a blatant declaration of dictatorship, a one-party dictatorship, that it - I have to say, I'm even a little bit surprised that he put it that way.

GROSS: And meanwhile, in Fulton County, Georgia, the FBI has seized voting ballots and other documents related to voting. And Trump wants to do that in other states as well, including Minnesota, and this is to build a national voter file. What does that mean?

KAGAN: Well, again, it's clear that he has no intention of allowing the elections to play out and allow a Democratic victory. And I think it's important to understand his motives here. He knows perfectly well that, in effect, his presidency will be greatly diminished once the Democrats take either one or both of the Houses. He himself is saying right now that he'll be impeached, and that is why he wants to prevent the Democrats from taking power. And he now has at his disposal a huge, powerful - literally, the forces of power. What they would call in another country the power ministries - he is in full control of that. And, you know, I can imagine any number of scenarios in which he uses that power.

By the way, when he talks about the 2020 election being stolen from him, that's not just about 2020. That's about looking forward, too. He wants to set the predicate for the idea that elections are stolen, that he and the federal government and, I guess, the Republican Party have to step in. I can easily imagine them seizing the ballots in some of these districts that are heavily Democratic. That's not even counting the voter suppression that they will engage in in order to prevent nonwhite people from feeling like it's safe to vote. And if you put all that together, then you have the final end to American democracy. I think that's what we're staring at right now.

GROSS: Do you think what's happening in Minnesota with ICE is, in part, a way to scare people away from voting?

KAGAN: Yes. Absolutely, and I think it's been a big mistake. And I somewhat fault the media for basically treating this like it's an - and the Democratic Party, too, for that matter - treating this like it's an immigration and deportation and maybe even a crime issue, when it's clear and has been clear that the purpose of ICE is to create protests and riots of sufficient size to justify Trump, in his own mind, invoking the Insurrection Act and bringing in the regular military. It's clear that he wants to do that. And so Minnesota, in my view, has been a test run for the seizure of power, using these forces that he has brought under his control and created. This is not about immigration primarily. It's about white supremacy. It's about white Christian supremacy, but it's also about using the full force of the federal government effectively to nullify the voters' choices.

GROSS: Can you just briefly list a few of the other actions Trump has taken that have led you to call him a dictator? First of all, just he personally - I think he really is a textbook definition of a megalomaniac. There is never enough power for him. He wants to have power over everybody, including the world, by the way, not just the United States. So there's the clear sense that you get from him that the Constitution means nothing to him, that elections mean nothing to him and that the only thing that he seeks is his own power - and wealth. But I think the power is more important. So there's the personality of Trump. But then, of course, there's all the things that he did in his first year, which we've sort of gotten used to.

GROSS: First year of second term.

KAGAN: Second term, first year, second - 2025, which is the remarkable - and I got to say, it will go down in history as really a remarkable destruction of the government that - his turning the Justice Department into his personal legal weapon, his turning the CIA into his personal organization, his using the FBI to go after enemies and solidify his position in power. These are all textbook actions of a dictator. He doesn't want to allow any pluralism in this country. He doesn't want to allow any dissent, you know, the way they talk about protesters as domestic terrorists. That's Stalin territory that you're in. So, I mean, it's almost too - there are too many things to list, it seems to me, that make him really not a would-be dictator, but really a dictator at this point.

GROSS: There are certain personal characteristics, too, of Trump's that seem to fit with autocratic or dictators in other countries who have taken over. And I wonder if you think that narcissism, lack of empathy, lying, interested in money, corruption in the administration,

transactional - are those, like, typical characteristics of people who become autocrats or dictators?

KAGAN: They are. And obviously, there are parallels with other countries, but I think we need to recognize that this is very much an American - this is a homegrown dictatorship, if you will. I mean, the forces that are supporting Trump are very much an American phenomenon, this white Christian supremacy, that is - and the sort of status anxiety of white Christian and especially males. This is very much - it goes back, I would say, there have been - a significant portion of the American body politic has held these kinds of what I call antiliberal views, going back to the founding.

And Trump is very much an American. I mean, if you look at sort of how he came to, you know, have this power, it was by being a television personality, a kind of a phony billionaire. I mean, he's very much an American phenomenon. So I'm always a little wary of bringing in the examples from other countries because, in a way, it makes us feel like, well, those are in other countries. It couldn't happen here. And I think the belief that it couldn't happen here has been a real handicap for us in trying to prevent him from getting to where he is now going.

GROSS: Well, let's take a short break here, and then we'll talk some more. If you're just joining us, my guest is Robert Kagan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a contributing writer for The Atlantic and author of the book "Rebellion: Donald Trump And The Antiliberal Tradition In America." We'll be right back after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. Let's get back to my interview with Robert Kagan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, an author, mostly on foreign policy, and a contributing writer for The Atlantic. His latest article is titled "America Vs. The World." Our interview was recorded yesterday.

You write about how Trumpism relates to racism and white Christian supremacy. So how do you define white Christian supremacy?

KAGAN: Since the founding of the republic, there has always been a significant portion of the population that does not believe in the principles of the Declaration of Independence, does not believe that all men are created equal and does not believe that individual rights are more - you know, need to be protected from the state. Obviously, the slave-holding South did not believe in the fundamental principles of equality and the principles that are enunciated in the Declaration of Independence, and also the Reconstruction South. I mean, the Jim Crow South.

You know, as late as the 1950s and '60s, the federal government had to send troops into the South in order to enforce desegregation. So I don't know where we think all those people went. I think, you know, because we've been living predominantly liberal America since World War II, I think we thought those people had sort of, you know, crawled under rocks and we'd never see them again. But they're alive and well and running the Republican Party right now.

GROSS: How would what you describe as white Christian nationalism express itself during the writing of the Constitution? Now, we know that even, you know, Founding Fathers, like Thomas Jefferson, had slaves. So unless the enslaved people aren't really people, then all men are not created equal in the eyes of Founding Fathers, those who held slaves. But can you talk more about how you see white Christian nationalism expressing itself during the founding days and the writing of the Constitution?

KAGAN: Well, obviously, the Constitution was a big contradiction because on the one hand - and by the way, the founders were aware of the contradiction in a way that I think subsequent generations maybe sort of decided to forget about the contradiction. I mean, Thomas Jefferson was aware that he was a slaveholder, and yet he was fighting for the rights of all human beings. And he hoped that slavery - he wasn't prepared to get rid of his own slaves because obviously that would be a great economic setback for him, but he was hopeful that at some point, slavery would wash out, that it would just cease to be a phenomenon in the United States.

But the Constitution originally was a great compromise, a horrible compromise with slavery, which was a direct contradiction to the principles that undergirded the Constitution and were in the Bill of Rights, etc., etc. And that's why we had a civil war. But I think a lot of people may think that the Civil War sort of changed America so fundamentally that you could never, you know, return to that horrible compromise. And I think we've learned that that's not true, that there's this strain of people who regard themselves - you know, it's a question of, how do you define America? And there's always been a fight between those who define it as an idea, which is to say the idea of universal human rights, and those who wanted to define it and continue to want to define it as an ethnonreligious entity.

People talk about, today, heritage Americans or - how long have your people been here? - etc., etc., which is very contrary to the founders' view but which nevertheless has been a very powerful force in American life. And, you know, now you hear it straight out of the mouths of JD Vance and Stephen Miller. It's part of the propaganda, recruitment propaganda of ICE, you know, where they're saying, come defend our culture. Come defend our civilization. And we know what they're talking about, and they know what we're - the recruits also know what we're talking about.

GROSS: Before we move on to foreign policy, which is your real focus, I want to ask you what you're expecting now of the midterms and the presidential election.

KAGAN: Well, in the midterms, I fully expect Trump to use all the various levers of power that he controls as president to make sure that the Democrats cannot take power either in the House or in the Senate. He will use ICE, in my opinion, to cause disturbances, to frighten away not illegal voters, who generally don't come to the polls, but legal voters who are nevertheless nonwhite and know that they can be scooped up and sent off to Texas, etc. - that he is perfectly capable of declaring a state of emergency over the elections or invoking the Insurrection Act, of going into heavily Democratic districts and seizing the ballot boxes, as the FBI just did in Fulton County, and then saying, we're counting the votes. We'll let you know how it turns out. But somehow or other, a Democratic House is never seated.

And I think that that is, at this point, I would say, a likelihood. I don't know what Trump has to do other than stand on the roof of the White House, screaming that he has no intention of allowing a fair election in 2026, but that's basically where we are right now. And to me, the question is, who is going to stand up and prevent this from happening?

GROSS: Do you think the courts will?

KAGAN: I don't think the courts necessarily will. I mean, the various federal courts may, but the Supreme Court, I think, is - has demonstrated a willingness to let him do whatever he wants. And the minute a president moves into the national security realm and starts declaring national security reasons for why he has to do certain things, traditionally, the court has sort of backed off. I mean, the worst court decision of - certainly of the past 100 years was *Korematsu*, which was the internment of the Japanese, which the court felt like, well, the president's making a national security determination. What can we do? So, no, I don't think it'll be the courts.

I would like to think that some Republicans - it only takes four in the Senate - might stand up for democracy and preserving the American system, but I actually have no optimistic sense about that. So in some respects, I suppose it's going to be left to the American people, and we've seen a lot of brave American people in Minneapolis and elsewhere. But that's a pretty thin reed for our democracy to be hanging on.

GROSS: Do you think, if Trump does declare the Insurrection Act, that that would be the kind of, you know, emergency that would prevent the courts from stopping his action?

KAGAN: I worry about that, yes. And again, it's not the courts. I'm sure there are plenty of courts who would say, you know, this is not appropriate. But if it gets to the Supreme Court, I'm afraid there are some members of the court who are entirely in favor of the Trump dictatorship and others who are, you know, Republicans and in any case not - have proven unwilling to stand in Trump's way.

GROSS: OK. It's time for another break, so let me reintroduce you. If you're just joining us, my guest is Robert Kagan, a contributing writer for *The Atlantic*, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and author of the book "*Rebellion: Donald Trump And The Antiliberal Tradition In America*." We'll be back after a short break. I'm Terry Gross, and this is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF WAYNE HORVITZ & ZONY MASH'S "THE GIFT")

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. Let's get back to my interview with Robert Kagan about why he thinks Trump is on his way to becoming a dictator based on Trump's foreign and domestic policies, his violations of laws and the Constitution and his constant desire for more money and power. Kagan is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a former longtime Washington Post columnist, a former Republican, and the author of many books, including his latest - "*Rebellion: Donald Trump And The Antiliberal Tradition In America*." His latest article *The Atlantic* is titled "*America Vs. The World*."

So, let's talk about foreign policy, which is your area of expertise. Do you think that Trump has managed to end the NATO alliance without actually withdrawing from it, but by, like, insulting and defying NATO, wanting to buy Greenland, threatening Denmark and trying to make Canada the 51st state?

KAGAN: Yes. I've been telling my European friends that they need to understand that NATO is over. I used to just focus on the fact that Trump certainly has no commitment to our Article 5 security commitment to the allies. He's made that clear on numerous occasions. But as you say, and let's be clear about what happened in Greenland, we just had a situation where a number of European powers, our allies, were talking about sending troops to deter a potential act of American territorial aggression against a NATO ally. That's not a thing that goes unremembered. And I think that Europeans today, some of them can't imagine separating themselves from the United States. But I think increasingly, we're seeing Europeans regarding the United States correctly as among their adversaries. Europe now faces a situation where they really have a predatory empire to their east in the form of Russia, and a predatory empire toward the west in the form of the United States. And that leaves them in a very perilous situation.

GROSS: I want to quote you. You write, (reading) the Trump administration has told Europeans to be ready to take over their own defense by 2027 and suggests that allies and strategic partners, including Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, should pay the U.S. for protection. Trump has launched aggressive tariff wars against virtually all of America's allies. He has waged ideological and political warfare against European governments and explicitly threatened territorial aggression against two NATO allies - Canada and Denmark. If NATO ends because NATO literally ends or it just ends in the sense that it doesn't really function anymore without the U.S., what would the consequences be, do you think, for the world and for the U.S. in particular?

KAGAN: Well, I think that, you know, it's been so long since we lived in a genuinely multipolar world that I don't think people are ready for what that actually means.

GROSS: What do you mean by a multipolar world?

KAGAN: A multipolar world is one that is not the world we've lived in since World War II. The world we've lived in since World War II has been one where a very large number of once great powers like Britain, which ruled much of the world at one time, like France, which had a huge empire, like Germany, which was so powerful that it almost conquered Europe twice. During this period of what we call the American order, those countries have been peaceful. They have relied on the United States to provide their basic security, which means that they have essentially given up great power ambitions, including the demand for spheres of influence, including the demand for control of resources. All of those things have essentially been provided to them in the American order. If the United States is no longer playing that role, then they have to start dealing with the world without that protection, which, to my mind, means they will have to rearm. And then we will have a situation as we did in say, the 1920s where you have multiple great powers, not just Russia and China, but also perhaps Germany, perhaps Japan, perhaps India, are all great powers, all demanding spheres of influence, all competing for resources. It's a much more combative, brutal world, really. And I - in the essay that you're quoting from, I go back and look at the 19th century 'cause that was a multipolar world, and you even hear some Trump supporters

saying we could go back to something like that. And what people don't remember about the 19th century is that it was a century of almost constant warfare among great powers.

Every multipolar world we've ever seen is one in which there are multiple conflicts among great powers. And so just imagine every decade, there is some kind of war involving Russia, China, Japan, Germany, the United States. That is, by the way, the normal world. The world we've been living in, where the United States plays this unusual role, has been an aberration. But normal is not good from the point of view of conflict and disruption and economic calamity and all the things that come with a much more competitive multipolar system.

GROSS: I want to play an excerpt of a speech that Trump gave on January 21 in Davos. The World Economic Forum was held in Davos in January.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: The United States is treated very unfairly by NATO. I want to tell you that. And when you think about it, nobody can dispute it. We give so much, and we get so little in return. And I've been a critic of NATO for many years. And yet, I've done more to help NATO than any other president by far, than any other person. You wouldn't have NATO if I didn't get involved in my first term. The war with Ukraine is an example. We are thousands of miles away, separated by a giant ocean. It's a war that should have never started, and it wouldn't have started if the 2020 U.S. presidential election weren't rigged. It was a rigged election. Everybody now knows that. They found out. People will soon be prosecuted for what they did. It's probably breaking news, but it should be. It was a rigged election. Can't have rigged elections. You need strong borders, strong elections and ideally, a good press. I always say it. Strong borders, strong elections, free, fair elections and a fair media.

GROSS: What's your reaction to that?

KAGAN: Well, that's sort of everything in a nutshell about Trump. First of all, his description of an ideal, I guess, America is one where he controls the press, he controls the elections and is, in effect, a dictatorship. And making up this nonsense about the 2020 elections is all pursuant to consolidating power in that way. But he also has got, you know, incredible delusions of grandeur on the world stage as well. He is the one who is, in fact, destroying NATO, and yet he says that, you know, he's the one who fixed it.

I just think that when people heard that speech in Davos, when people in other countries heard that speech in Davos, I think they began to get a sense of just what we're dealing with here in the United States. And that's a big part of why you see countries like Canada now having to talk to China about trade deals, why everybody is scrambling to find alternative markets to the United States, which is not easy to do, and which is why you're going to see increasing anti-Americanism.

And this is the thing Americans need to understand. Trump is under the illusion that America is so powerful that it doesn't matter what anybody else in the world thinks, and that really is a delusion. A lot of American power has derived from the fact that much of the rest of the world,

not all - and I'm not saying that America's without flaws. It isn't. But much of the world has actually trusted the United States to hold to its basic bargain, which is to provide security without using its overwhelming power against its own allies. That trust is now gone.

GROSS: Also the example that we just heard of the Trump speech in Davos. So he's talking about NATO and how they've been unfair to us. And then he transitions to, it was a rigged election. Everybody knows that. And I think it's an example of mixing personal grievance with world affairs.

KAGAN: Yeah.

GROSS: And what's your reaction to the way Trump does that?

KAGAN: Well, again, there's nothing more important in Trump's world than Trump himself. And so everything is a function of him. And it would be one thing if he really were, let's say, an America First president in terms of foreign policy. It would be one thing if he really did intend to pull the United States back into the Western Hemisphere and let the rest of the world do whatever it's going to do. But, of course, that's not what he's doing because he is Donald Trump. He wants to be world emperor. He wants to be able to bomb Iran and bomb Syria and remove a dictator in Venezuela and change governments in Europe, etc. And so in a way, he's creating the worst of both worlds. It's really a recipe for foreign policy disaster.

GROSS: So nobody in the U.S. has prevented Trump from insisting that he needs and will get Greenland and that he intends on annexing Canada. I think he still intends that. I don't think he's withdrawn that, has he?

KAGAN: No. And I was sort of stunned, again, not to be critical of the American media, but when Trump said that he was, OK, maybe not going to invade Greenland, the media reported, OK, Trump rules out attack on Greenland. He hasn't ruled anything out, as you say. And Greenland has been an *idee fixe* for him for a long time, certainly going back to his first term. And I don't think we're done with his efforts to get Greenland. I think he thinks it's going to get on Mount Rushmore and that he'll be the great completer of American territorial acquisition. So I don't think he's given up on that at all. And, again, it's all about his glory. It is not about strategic issues, by the way. We could do anything we needed to do in Greenland with the full permission and cooperation of Denmark and NATO allies.

It's his personal glory that he's seeking. And, again, this is true domestically and internationally. Everything is about Trump, his power, his glory. It's not about American interests, and it's not about the interests of American democracy.

GROSS: Well, let's take another short break here, and then we'll talk some more. If you're just joining us, my guest is Robert Kagan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. He's an author and a contributing writer for The Atlantic. His latest article in The Atlantic is titled "America Vs. The World." We'll be back after a short break. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. Let's get back to my interview that I recorded yesterday with Robert Kagan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. He's an author and a contributing writer for The Atlantic. His latest article in The Atlantic is titled "America Vs. The World."

So you have been labeled in the past as a leader of the neoconservative movement. I know that's a word you don't particularly like. It's not a word that you coined. So what did people who called you a neoconservative mean? And how did you define yourself differently than the definition that was placed on you?

KAGAN: Well, there's so many - different people mean different things by neoconservative. Let me just start by saying what it is that I would characterize myself as believing, which is I believe that the founders' system, that the principles of the Declaration of Independence, that the belief in universal individual rights and, in particular, the protection of those rights against the state, is one of the greatest developments in the history of humanity, and I believe it is the right way for human beings to live. I also believe that ideas alone don't succeed just because they're the better idea and that they require power behind them if they are to succeed and that the United States, for all the many mistakes it has made - and I'm a historian of American foreign policy, and I'm acutely aware of those mistakes. I'm aware of the weaknesses and foibles of the American people. But nevertheless, if you look at what the United States has done since World War II, in the 80 years since then, the United States managed, in its various peculiar ways, to create a world in which democracy has flourished, in which prosperity is at historic levels compared to the whole breadth of human history, and in which wars among the great powers have been absent for 80 years. And that's a huge accomplishment. And I believe that, again, whatever the flaws of the United States, the world is better off with this kind of American leadership than it would be with any of the actual alternatives. There are utopian ideals about what the world can look like. But in terms of the real world, a world in which power is critical, I think the United States has played that role. To me, if I had to say what neoconservatism is, it's that. It's the marriage of American power and liberal democratic ideals.

GROSS: I want to quote something that you wrote.

(Reading) Trump has managed in just one year to destroy the American order that was, and he has weakened Americans' ability to protect its interests in the world that will be. If Americans thought defending the liberal world order was too expensive, wait until they start paying for what comes next.

What do you think is coming next?

KAGAN: Contrary to what Trump seems to think, we have benefited enormously from the vast number of alliances and strategic partners that we've had over the world. In my article, I cite a Chinese strategic thinker named Yan Xuetong who himself wrote at - about a decade ago that the great advantage that the United States had over China was not its wealth and was not its military capability, both of which China was capable of catching up to. It was this vast alliance structure and these vast number of strategic partners, which numbered, when he was counting, something like 50 around the world, compared to China, who has basically no reliable allies in the world. And the same is true of Russia.

That was an enormous advantage of the United States, and it was very much a source of American power above and beyond whatever our own material capabilities were. And if we move into a world where instead of having those allies, many of them become independent great powers with their own objectives that have nothing to do with us or are even hostile to us, which is possible, then on the one hand, we're living in a more dangerous world. And on the other hand, we have stripped ourselves of our strongest armor, in a way, by turning all of our allies against us.

GROSS: One of the things that Trump seems to want is to say, hey, you take care of your territory. Other countries, you take care of yours. I'm interested - you know, Trump is interested - in the Americas, the Western Hemisphere, our part of the Western Hemisphere, that he's going to be the leader of that and ignore the people across the oceans. Does that sound like the right interpretation?

KAGAN: Well, I mean, that is certainly what they have said. That's sort of what the national security strategy sounds like. And so that, if they were doing that, would be like, well, welcome back to America in the 19th - the late 19th century, you know? But in - but as I mentioned before, Trump's actual foreign policy is nothing like that. They are constantly sending administration officials to Europe, to the Munich Security Conference, to Davos, supporting opposition forces in Europe against the sitting governments. The Trump administration has been very active in supporting the AfD, which is a, you know, far-right, almost neo-Nazi party in Germany. They support the right wing in France. They support the right wing in U.K. in the form of Neil Farage.

And so they are meddling in the affairs of Europe very, very substantially, and the tariffs are hardly minding our own business. He is attempting to wield power over every nation in the world using these tariffs. They're not about economics. They're about power. Meanwhile, he's removing governments in Venezuela. He's bombing Iran and talking about removing the government in Iran. My point is that, you know, there were - there was a school of foreign policy which, theoretically, Trump was heading toward called restraint. And these are people who think that America should not be so involved in the world. But Trump is the opposite of restrained. He is, you know, really quite deeply involved in the affairs of countries all over the world, and he enjoys that.

GROSS: Well, let's take another short break here, and then we'll talk some more. If you're just joining us, my guest is Robert Kagan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. He's an author and a contributing writer for The Atlantic. His latest article in The Atlantic is titled "America Vs. The World." We'll be back after a short break. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF DON STIERNBERG'S "FEVER")

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. Let's get back to my interview with Robert Kagan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, an author mostly on foreign policy and a contributing writer for The Atlantic. His latest article is titled "America Vs. The World." Our interview was recorded yesterday.

So this might be a depressing answer to this question. But, you know, Martin Luther King said, the arc of history is long, but it bends towards justice. I don't think you believe that.

KAGAN: When Martin Luther King was saying those things, that did appear to be the story of the United States, right? I mean, we had moved from slavery to Jim Crow to the Civil Rights Movement. That was progress. Now, I happen to believe that that progress, especially for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s, was very much a consequence of actual events. It wasn't just the ideas. It was not just history bending in a certain direction. It was specifically the Great Depression and World War II, which basically vanquished a certain kind of antiliberal conservatism in the United States and led to 80 years of liberal ascendancy.

And that's what gave us the idea, and which I also share, that America was about progressing toward the perfection of its original intent - you know, the sort of perfection of the principles of the Declaration of Independence in a society that was deeply flawed. But now we see that it isn't always progress. There can be major steps backward, and that's what we're living through right now.

GROSS: In terms of the Civil Rights Movement - and it was also, like, very effective protests. It was television showing police fire-hosing...

KAGAN: Yeah.

GROSS: ...Protesters, dogs sicced on protesters. The whole world saw that.

KAGAN: Yeah.

GROSS: It was very hard to defend that. And you want to see Americans stand up for democracy. What actions would you like to see Americans take? How do individuals stand up for democracy?

KAGAN: Well, I mean, obviously, we see very brave people on the streets of Minneapolis and elsewhere in the country, where they are facing down this brute squad known as ICE. But I also would like to talk about the elite a little bit in America. I mean, I would say the Democratic Party is not doing everything it needs to be doing, even in its own naked self-interest, at this point.

The most shocking element of this has been, to me, the collapse of the elites - the universities that cut their deal with Trump, the legal firms that cut their deal with Trump. Corporate America has been absolutely shameful. We're so used to the idea that nobody in a position of actual power - whether you're a billionaire or a university president or a big law firm - we're so used to the idea these people just fold instead of standing up to Trump and showing the necessary courage. But that is what's needed. There is - we need to have courage and lack of selfishness up and down American society.

And one of the things that I've noticed in watching all this is just how difficult it is for people, human beings, to recognize that they are in - suddenly in a radically new situation. The desire for normalcy is so powerful. And, you know, you look back on other times when democracies have

been taken over by dictatorship, and you always say, how did they let that happen? As we're - as I'm living through it, I see how it happens. You know, we sort of discount all the things that are really quite different about the world and cling to normalcy as best we can. And I just think people need to understand we are not in Kansas anymore. We are living at the edge of the consolidation of dictatorship, and there's no more time for waiting.

GROSS: Do you think America will ever return to what, like, you've described as normal? Or do you think when things change, assuming they change, that we'll return to something different, but not what we had in the past?

KAGAN: Well, lots of people have been talking about this, and I think it's a very interesting question. You know, what the Trump administration has done to the federal bureaucracy and particularly, as I say, the power ministries - the FBI, the CIA and the Justice Department - is going to be very difficult to undo. I mean, are we going to - every time we have an election, are we going to fire everybody in the federal government because they were put in by a hostile force?

I do think that everybody in the government who served the Trump administration will have to go if the Democrats are able to win in 2028, but that is a different America. I mean, that is not an America - the America that we've known for 80 years. It's more like the America of, like, the Andrew Jackson period and, in many ways, worse 'cause I don't think Andrew Jackson was actually a would-be tyrant. So I think it's going to be very hard to put the pieces back together. I - there are instances in history. I don't think, you know - things aren't necessarily over. But I do think it's very hard to go back to what we were after all the destruction that Trump has wreaked, both domestically and internationally.

GROSS: Robert Kagan, thank you so much for talking with us.

KAGAN: Well, thank you.