

RING *the* ALARM BELLS

*The Ten Rules of Trump's
Authoritarian Playbook*

FROM THE OFFICE OF SENATOR JEFF MERKLEY



The Ten Rules of Trump's Authoritarian Playbook

RULE ONE: Fire the Referees

RULE TWO: Pack the Government with Loyalists

RULE THREE: Demonize the Enemy Within

RULE FOUR: Disregard Due Process

RULE FIVE: Silence Free Speech

RULE SIX: Steal Congress' Power of the Purse

RULE SEVEN: Abuse Government Authorities

RULE EIGHT: Weaponize the Justice System

RULE NINE: Use the Military to Suppress Dissent

RULE TEN: Rig the Next Election

Introduction

On October 21, 2025, I went to the U.S. Senate chamber to ring the alarm bells about President Trump's aggressive authoritarian takeover of our republic. I spoke through the night for over 22 hours.

I undertook this grueling exercise to convey that we are at the most perilous moment for our democracy since the Civil War.

Authoritarianism isn't down the street or around the corner — it is here right now.

People think of democracies dying at the hands of men with guns. But, in the modern era, they more often die at the hands of elected officials who erode the separation of powers to solidify a strongman state.

We now have all three ingredients of such a strongman state: a rubber-stamp Congress doing the President's bidding; a Supreme Court finding "invisible ink" in the Constitution to enhance the President's powers; and a power-hungry president behaving like a king, breaking the law and violating the checks and balances of our Constitution.

We've seen similar stories play out again and again over the last few decades, from Hungary to Venezuela to Turkey. Out of those experiences comes a well understood authoritarian playbook of how to destroy a democracy from within.

There are ten powerful rules in the authoritarian playbook. Trump and his team are aggressively executing all ten. It is essential to understand and interrupt those efforts before authoritarian power becomes entrenched. That will require robust citizen action and an unmistakable rejection of authoritarianism at the next election. Both are essential to restore and revitalize our democracy.

Our mission is clear: Let's save our "We, The People" republic!

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Jeff A. Merkley". The signature is stylized with a large "J" and "M".

Oregon's Senator Jeff Merkley

RULE ONE: Fire the Referees

The first rule in the authoritarian playbook is to **fire the referees**, the independent federal officials whose job is to protect the public from corruption, waste, political interference, self-dealing, and fraud.

These referees include the career attorneys at the Department of Justice responsible for pursuing nonpartisan “Equal Justice Under Law,” Inspectors General (IGs) at federal agencies, and members of independent boards and commissions.

The carnage at the Department of Justice has tallied more than 200 career attorneys, including prosecutors working on January 6 related cases.

On his fourth day back in office, Trump fired 17 IGs from major Cabinet departments and key agencies. Many have been replaced by Acting IGs loyal to Trump. This profoundly undermines a check on misconduct within the executive branch. The result is a public and a Congress that are less informed and a government that is far less transparent and accountable.

Trump also fired key leaders from a dozen independent agencies and commissions ranging from the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which protects workers’ rights, to the Consumer Products Safety Commission. The NLRB was left without a quorum and unable to operate for most of 2025. On December 18, the Senate confirmed Trump’s nominees on a party line vote, installing an anti-worker partisan Board majority.

The job of government referees is to identify corruption or incompetence, protecting taxpayer dollars and improving public trust in our institutions. But Trump fired the referees.

RULE TWO: Pack the Government with Loyalists

The second rule in the authoritarian playbook is to **pack the government with loyalists**. When the Founders wrote the Constitution, they included the “Advice and Consent” clause requiring the Senate to approve major Presidential appointments. As Alexander Hamilton wrote in Federalist Paper No. 76, this clause was intended “to prevent the appointment of unfit characters”.

Authoritarian presidents, however, care less about someone’s qualifications or character and more about their loyalty. Thus, it is the Senate’s responsibility to guard against unqualified nominees and insist on competent managers for government departments. But when the Senate becomes a rubberstamp, our republic loses that safeguard – and we have lost it under Trump. *Here are three examples:*

- Pete Hegseth was confirmed as Secretary of Defense despite a history of alcohol abuse at work and in uniform; credible accusations of sexual and domestic abuse; and a complete lack of experience managing a large organization.
- Tulsi Gabbard was confirmed as the Director of National Intelligence despite having no intelligence experience, a history of spreading Russian misinformation, and echoing Kremlin talking points related to Putin’s war against Ukraine. In addition, there were serious concerns about her judgement, including her decision to meet with former Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad.
- Kash Patel was confirmed as the Director of the FBI despite having no previous leadership experience in law enforcement and a history of statements saying he wanted to use the bureau to go after Trump’s political enemies.

And there have been many more. Until this year, nominees have always been considered on an individual basis. But, in September 2025, Senate Republicans changed the rules to allow the confirmation of large groups of Trump’s nominees with a single vote.

On October 6, 2025, 107 nominees were confirmed at once. With nominees voted on as a group, it is very easy for Trump to install unqualified loyalists into important positions.

RULE THREE: Demonize the Enemy Within

The third rule in the authoritarian playbook is to identify and **demonize an “enemy within.”** The goal is to divide “us” and “them” so a chief executive can use the power of the state to punish his enemies and tighten his authoritarian grip.

As Germany descended into an authoritarian state in the 1930s, the Nazis targeted numerous groups, including people of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ people, ethnic groups like the Roma and Sinti, and, of course, Jewish people.

Here in the U.S., Trump has targeted immigrants, saying that they are “poisoning the blood of our country.” He has described immigrants from Latin America as “rapists” and “murderers” and Somali immigrants as “garbage”, while saying the U.S. should admit more immigrants from countries like Denmark and Norway. And he slashed the number of refugees the U.S. admits while creating a special refugee fast track for white South Africans.

Trump has also massively increased the power and resources of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, which began terrorizing communities by targeting people based on the color of their skin or their accent. Trump said he would prioritize the deportation of immigrants who have committed violent acts, but only 5 percent of those arrested have a violent criminal conviction. Even U.S. citizens have been detained or arrested by ICE.

In addition, Trump has taken other executive actions targeting minorities, including scrubbing government webpages containing information and resources for LGBTQ Americans and firing prominent Black public servants, such as General CQ Brown, Jr., who served as Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Military libraries have removed books on slavery, segregation, and civil rights. Department of Defense officials deleted webpages honoring a Black Medal of Honor recipient, Navajo Code Talkers, Black women’s history, a Japanese-American Army regiment, and even a page about Jackie Robinson before they reversed course following public pressure.

RULE FOUR: Disregard Due Process

The fourth rule in the authoritarian playbook is to ***disregard due process***.

Due process is the guardian of our freedoms. While it may sound like a fancy legal term, it is the foundation of our justice system that protects all of us from being locked up by the whims of a strongman.

In a republic, people have rights – to an attorney, to a fair trial with evidence and debate, to a jury of their peers, to appeals, and to hold law enforcement accountable if officers violate their rights.

Democratic republics don't have secret police. But now masked federal agents are stalking our streets, brutally arresting people, and disappearing them out of state or out of the country before they can contact a lawyer or family members. Many have been wrongly arrested but don't have a chance to defend themselves because their right to due process has been disregarded.

In a prominent case, ICE arrested Kilmar Abrego Garcia – who had legal status to live and work in the United States – while he was driving his five-year-old son home in March 2025. ICE then whisked him away without due process to a notoriously brutal prison in El Salvador. The Supreme Court ruled 9-0 in April 2025 that Trump must facilitate Abrego Garcia's return, but Trump defied the Court for two months before returning him to the U.S. The Trump administration imprisoned him twice more, before courts secured his freedom in December.

In another case, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents arrested and detained Oregon businesswoman Jackie Merlos in June along with her four young children. She is in the U.S. legally and her children are U.S. citizens. ICE held her children for two weeks and Jackie for three months despite no charges being filed against her.

These are just two examples among thousands – including cases in which U.S. citizens were detained – in which the Trump administration has deliberately disregarded due process.

RULE FIVE: Silence Free Speech

The fifth rule in the authoritarian playbook is to intimidate or ***silence free speech***.

Benjamin Franklin wrote that: *“Whoever would overthrow the liberty of the nation must begin by subduing the freeness of speech.”*

Shortly after taking office, Secretary of State Marco Rubio started using a 1950s “Red Scare” law to revoke visas for students for expressing their opinions on foreign affairs. He testified that he had deported at least 300 people. This is extraordinary. The law had never been used before – even during the Red Scare – to deport individuals for exercising free speech in America.

The students included Mahmoud Khalil of Columbia University and Rumeysa Ozturk of Tufts University, who were targeted for protesting the Israel-Gaza war – a chilling use of government power to punish people for their personal opinions.

Trump has also sought to intimidate the press. As a candidate, he sued CBS News over its editing of an interview with then-Vice President Kamala Harris and threatened, if elected, to revoke CBS’s broadcast license. Legal experts largely considered the lawsuit to be without merit. But once Trump won election, CBS felt compelled to settle – its parent company Paramount needed government approval for a proposed merger – and paid Trump \$16 million.

Similarly, ABC News paid Trump \$15 million to settle a lawsuit Trump filed because a commentator said Trump had been found liable for “rape” when technically he had been found liable for “sexual assault.”

Only a few months later, following Trump’s criticisms of late-night hosts Stephen Colbert and Jimmy Kimmel, the networks acted to remove them. CBS cancelled Colbert’s show. ABC suspended Kimmel, but reinstated him after citizens protested by cancelling their subscriptions to the streaming service operated by Disney, ABC’s owner.

Trump also slashed funding for public broadcasting, including PBS and NPR, as well as Voice of America, which was created to counter propaganda from authoritarian governments during the Second World War.

RULE SIX: Steal Congress' Power of the Purse

The sixth rule in the authoritarian playbook is to ***steal the power of the purse.***

The Founders were clear in Article I of the U.S. Constitution: the power to decide government spending belongs to Congress, not the President. But Trump has repeatedly violated the Constitution and ignored Congress by dismantling federal agencies and killing programs by slow walking, freezing, or impounding funds.

The difference between a republic and an authoritarian state can be summed up this way: in a republic, the Congress, representing citizens from all parts of the country, decides which programs to fund and how much to spend on them, in order to serve the needs of the whole nation. Under an authoritarian state, the president alone decides on his whims, often to reward allies or punish opponents.

That is exactly what Trump has done. The President and his team have cancelled grants, killed programs, and frozen federal funds. Trump and Elon Musk shut down the U.S. Agency for International Development, triggering the death of hundreds of thousands of people around the world. Similarly, Trump defunded the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, which protects people from scams and has returned more than \$21 billion to consumers since it was created in 2011. And Trump cancelled billions of dollars for renewable energy programs in blue states, including nearly \$500 million in grants for Oregon.

When President Nixon tried to cancel programs or impound funds, the U.S. Supreme Court reacted powerfully, noting that our Constitution invests the power of the purse in the hands of Congress, not the President. The current Supreme Court, however, has failed to defend this constitutional separation of powers.

Every time you hear the President or a member of his administration say that they cancelled a program because “it didn’t align with our priorities,” you are hearing authoritarian rule in action.

RULE SEVEN: Abuse Government Services

The seventh rule in the authoritarian playbook is to ***abuse government services***.

Every day, the federal government provides administrative services to citizens. These services – such as licenses, permits, merger approvals, and security clearances – are generally provided in a nonpartisan fashion. But since returning to office, Trump has repeatedly abused power over those services to influence or manipulate institutions, like networks, law firms, and universities.

For example, the federal government has used its authority to approve or deny corporate mergers and broadcast licenses to pressure networks to change their programming to please Trump.

Trump has also cancelled national security clearances for major law firms to punish them for their past associations with individuals or cases that threatened his power, and to dissuade them from using their skills in new lawsuits, while forcing them to provide billions of dollars of pro bono work for causes favored by the President. And it is working. Reuters reported in July 2025 that big law firms have sharply reduced the number of lawsuits against the federal government.

Trump has also sought to control how universities teach classes and handle student protests. In this case, the government's weapon is research grants. Trump withheld billions of dollars in competitive federal research funding from universities to force them to operate as the President, rather than the universities' leadership, prefer. In October 2025, the White House even sent letters to universities urging them to "pledge support for President Trump's political agenda to help ensure access to research funds."

Trump has abused other powers, too. He has abused his emergency powers to impose tariffs, a power that the Constitution gives to Congress. He has abused public resources by hanging massive banners with photos of his face off federal buildings, by posting political propaganda on nonpartisan federal websites during the shutdown, by planning to use public resources to mint a coin featuring his own face, and by tearing down the East Wing of the White House without permits.

RULE EIGHT: Weaponize the Justice System

The eighth rule in the authoritarian playbook is to **weaponize the justice system** to punish opponents and reward supporters.

Before Trump returned to office, the Supreme Court found “invisible ink” in the Constitution saying that the President is above the law. That is, he is permitted to commit crimes without consequences if the crimes are done as an act of the federal government. Combined with the president’s pardon power, that effectively puts the entire Executive Branch and Trump loyalists beyond the reach of the law.

Trump has also appointed loyalist attorneys to the Department of Justice and pushed them to prosecute his political enemies. *Some of those individuals include:*

- Former FBI Director James Comey, who investigated potential connections between Trump’s 2016 campaign and Russia;
- New York State Attorney General Letitia James, who successfully prosecuted the Trump Organization for fraud;
- Trump’s former National Security Advisor John Bolton, who said that he doesn’t believe Trump is fit for office or able to carry out his job; and
- California Senator Adam Schiff, who led impeachment proceedings against Trump while a member of the U.S. House of Representatives.

In addition, Trump has pardoned nearly 1,600 people connected to the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6 that resulted in the death of 5 police officers and injuries to more than 150 officers.

He pardoned the billionaire founder of the cryptocurrency exchange Binance, which has business ties to the Trump family cryptocurrency company World Liberty Financial. And he pardoned Juan Orlando Hernandez, the former president of Honduras, a drug kingpin who organized a narcotics superhighway into the U.S. that delivered an estimated 400 tons of cocaine, devastating American families.

Trump is abusing his government authorities to punish his enemies and reward those loyal to him.

RULE NINE: Use the Military to Suppress Dissent

The ninth rule in the authoritarian playbook is to ***use the military to suppress dissent.***

Trump has utilized “Title 10” of the U.S. statutes to federalize the National Guard and send troops into Los Angeles, Chicago, and Portland, Oregon. And he used a separate authority to send National Guard troops into Washington, D.C.

That law says that the president can only do this if there is a “rebellion” or “invasion” or if regular forces are insufficient “to execute the laws of the United States.” But district judges ruled that none of those standards were met in Portland or Chicago. In fact, a district judge in Oregon found that Trump’s argument was “untethered to the facts”. The Supreme Court has now upheld those lower court decisions.

But that is not the end of the story. There is another law available to the President: The Insurrection Act. It is similar to Title 10 in that it empowers a president to deploy U.S. military troops and federalize National Guard units to address civil disorder, insurrection, or rebellion. But, unlike Title 10, this Act provides great deference to the President’s judgment as to whether there is a rebellion or an obstruction that prevents enforcement of the laws.

Presidents have been very reluctant to invoke the Insurrection Act, recognizing that the Founders greatly feared the possibility of a military force being used against the nation’s own citizens to suppress dissent to support an authoritarian executive.

But President Trump has talked about using the Insurrection Act to address crime and protests both as a president and as a candidate. He has described civil disturbances as the “enemy from within” and told a special meeting of American senior military officers in September 2025 that American cities will be their “training grounds.”

Trump’s plan is simple: he wants the power to be able to use the military to suppress protests and dissent. This is a dangerous threat to our rights and freedom.

RULE TEN: Rig the Next Election

The tenth rule in the authoritarian playbook is to ***rig the next election***.

This is the most dangerous rule of all. If an authoritarian president can rig the next election, it creates the possibility of forming an entrenched strongman authoritarian state amidst the trappings of a democratic republic.

Trump is pursuing three strategies to rig the next election.

First, he is trying to consolidate states' voter registration files into a national database to make the files easier to manipulate. Individual states already have purged voter files of selected names to influence the next election. Trump's strategy elevates that tactic to the national level.

Second, he is urging states to gerrymander the boundaries of congressional districts to increase the number of Republicans elected to the House of Representatives. Four states – Texas, Missouri, Ohio, and North Carolina – have already done so with an anticipated gain of about 8 House seats. California has responded to “fight fire with fire” with a redistricting plan that could gain Democrats about 5 House seats.

Trump's goal may be aided by the Supreme Court, which is reviewing a case that would gut Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act that allows challenges to congressional maps that are racially discriminatory. If Section 2 is struck down, it could enable states to draw up to 19 new congressional districts that favor Republican candidates.

Third, Trump is trying to kill vote by mail to make it easier to manipulate voting. On Election Day, authorities can decrease turnout in places where they want to suppress votes by moving polling places, understaffing them, providing broken voting machines, and intimidating people waiting in line to vote.

Standing Up to Authoritarianism

Trump's campaign to create a strongman state didn't happen by accident.

After Trump lost the 2020 election, his former Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Russell Vought, went to work. Vought is an adamant advocate of the Unitary Executive, a philosophy that grants much more power to the president and undermines the checks and balances designed in the Constitution to constrain the president's powers.

Vought and his team developed a detailed road map of how to expand the American president's power. He became a lead architect of Project 2025 organized by the Heritage Foundation. He is now back at OMB implementing that vision.

The effort to create a presidency with supercharged authoritarian powers has progressed an astounding distance during Trump's first year in office. This poses an enormous threat to our democratic republic dedicated to government by and for the people.

But there are two powerful ways to stop the entrenchment of an authoritarian state. The first is robust, peaceful citizen action. The second is an overwhelming rejection of supporters of a strongman state at the next election.

If you want to get involved and help save our republic, I have three suggestions:

1. Get off the couch.
2. Fiercely hold your elected representatives accountable.
3. Join affinity groups.

Being angry and frustrated alone is depressing and discouraging, but being angry and organized is energizing and effective!

There is no time to waste, and no action is too small. We must push back against this authoritarian takeover – today, tomorrow, and every day until the next election.

Let's ring the alarm bells loud and clear. Together, let's save our republic!



www.merkley.senate.gov