

Surveillance in Trump's America

Torin Monahan

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Résumé de l'article

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Torin Monahan¹

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA
torin.monahan@unc.edu

Abstract

This paper sketches some of the key dangers presented by the second Trump presidency. We are witnessing a mainstreaming of far-right positions with profound implications both for government and the constitution of society. This moment is marked by censorship and self-censorship of the media, surveillance and punishment of immigrant communities, attacks on higher education, throttled scientific research, a war on gender, the evisceration of government agencies, reduced checks on disinformation or hate speech, and threats to international security. The Trump model of governance builds on hate to breed instability and chaos. These are the dynamics we must confront and disarm.

Introduction

The month before President Trump's second inauguration, a news reporter in Denver, Colorado, was followed for forty miles by an angry white man yelling, "Are you even a U.S. citizen? This is Trump's America now! I'm a Marine and I took an oath to protect this country from people like you!" (Slevin 2024). Seemingly emboldened by Trump's recent election victory, this assailant took it upon himself to enforce Trump's white supremacist, anti-media agenda by targeting a reporter of Pacific Islander descent. Upon reaching the news station, the reporter raced from his news vehicle to the entrance, only to be chased, tackled, and put into a headlock by the attacker who proceeded to choke him. Fellow media workers were able to intervene to save the man, and the attacker was arrested for assault, harassment, and hate crimes (Sinton, Aley, and Alvarado 2025).

This event is in many ways a disturbing harbinger of the storm on the horizon. It is not incidental that journalists, the so-called Fourth Estate, find themselves subject to vitriol and violence for doing the job of speaking truth to power. Media suppression and control are hallmarks of dictatorships (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum n.d.), as is shutting down or censoring public communication channels such as the internet or social media platforms (Akbari 2022; Gohdes 2024; Keremoğlu and Weidmann 2020). Trump's repeated claims of reporters, or of any of his critics, as being "enemies of the people" echoes the words of dictators like Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, who similarly targeted the media to sow uncertainty about the truth (Kalb 2018). Media self-censorship is also on full display now that Trump is in office, where major news outlets, perhaps fearing lawsuits or other retaliation, are refraining from naming Elon Musk's Nazi salute at Trump's post-inauguration rally for what it was (Molloy 2025) or are throttling editorial critiques of Trump's Cabinet nominees (Baragona 2024). Censorship is a form of surveillance: "it surveils the

¹ This editorial was written in my capacity as co-Editor-in-Chief of *Surveillance & Society*. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, *Surveillance & Society*, or the Surveillance Studies Network.

expressed and, by extension, regulates the not-yet-expressed” (Zhang and Barr 2021). The attack on the Denver news reporter further shows the blurring of boundaries between the state’s supposed monopoly on (racial) violence and the actions of self-deputized militia members or other vigilantes, where the overlaps activate conditions of ambiguity and vulnerability (Brayne, Lageson, and Levy 2024; Monahan 2022b; Reeves 2017; Walby and Joshua 2021).²

Although it may be too soon to fully grasp the scope and scale of surveillance in “Trump’s America,” as of this writing (in early March 2025), there are many indicators of where things are heading. In this editorial, I will sketch some of the key surveillance dangers, as I see them, in the hopes of drawing scholarly and activist attention to areas in need of critical attention. If dissent is fundamental to surveillance studies, as David Murakami Wood and I have argued (Monahan and Wood 2022), then the coming months and years will be a test of the field’s capacity to interrogate and contest injustices in the US and beyond.

Surveilling and Punishing Immigrant Communities

The accelerated assault on immigrant communities in the US should not be a surprise to anyone. After all, this was Trump’s primary campaign promise: to “carry out the largest domestic deportation operation in American history” (ACLU 2024). His goal of deporting up to twenty-one million people (Tait 2023)³ depends heavily on integrating a surveillance and policing apparatus throughout society. This includes targeting people accessing healthcare, attending school, going to work, or gathering at places of worship. It also includes conducting raids on people’s homes and forcibly separating parents from their children. Because undocumented immigrant communities strategically access public services to which they are legally entitled (e.g., schooling or healthcare for their children) (Asad 2023), Trump’s executive order allowing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to access these places punitively deprives people of their rights and terrorizes families, which can be seen, for instance, with children fearing for their parents picking them up from school (Singh 2025).⁴ Not restricted to law enforcement alone, ICE also established a tip hotline for people to report suspected undocumented immigrants or criminals (Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2024), but early reports suggest that it was too overwhelmed with tips for investigators to keep up, leading some to speculate that many people were jamming the system by reporting Elon Musk (O’Rourke 2025).

Alongside mass deportations, the Trump administration has also sought to strip “birthright citizenship” from children born of undocumented immigrants. Given that this right is enshrined in the US Constitution via the Fourteenth Amendment, this order is unlikely to survive legal scrutiny, but it nonetheless signals (or whistles loudly) to white nationalists that Trump, like them, equates citizenship with whiteness and is willing to demonize nonwhites and blame them for economic or other insecurities. This move is an exercise in symbolic violence as well, conveying to immigrant communities that they are not only vulnerable but also illegitimate—that they are unworthy of citizenship or, in many instances, even humane treatment. After all, in Trump’s words, they are “animals” who are “poisoning the blood of our country” (ACLU 2024). Surveillance operates here through the notion of policed identities, where legal recognition and belonging

² In case there were any doubt of this partnership between right-wing militias and the state, Trump’s pardoning of the January 6, 2021, insurrectionists makes these allegiances clear (Richer, Kunzelman, and Khalil 2025). See also the volume *Media and January 6th* for critiques of the role of media, platforms, and social media in the attempted coup of the US government (White et al. 2024).

³ Since there are only an estimated 11.7 million undocumented immigrants in the US (Warren 2024), this inflated number is likely designed to stoke further outrage from Trump’s base. Alternatively, it could mean that he also intends to deport naturalized citizens, green-card holders, or others to meet this goal.

⁴ These activities do not rely solely on ICE agents. The Trump administration also envisions cooperation from state and local police (and perhaps even the National Guard) who are deputized to do immigration work.

may be revoked based on racist criteria (Monahan 2017, 2021), and through the implied invitation to white “patriots” to terrorize anyone who does not fit their expectations of normative white citizenship.

Another locus of immigrant surveillance will be the border. This will include ramping up walls and barriers; cameras, sensors, and drones; and personnel, including the possibility of sending 250,000 troops to patrol the US-Mexico border (ACLU 2024). Even if many border surveillance towers and other digital equipment often simply do not work (Boyce 2016; Maass 2024), other than working to enrich the private security industry, the overall hardening of certain border locations has historically driven migrants to more dangerous points of passage, leading to increased deaths (Rubio-Goldsmith et al. 2007).⁵ Detention centers and camps will likely multiply to contain migrants, particularly when their countries of origin will not accept their return. Such spaces have been exposed as overcrowded, unsanitary, and unsafe prisons, despite the euphemism of their official label as “immigrant detention facilities” (Lanard 2021). Now that some migrants have been sent to the infamous Guantanamo Bay Naval Station, which housed and tortured detainees during the War on Terror (Center for Constitutional Rights 2012), the Trump administration is embracing the idea of stripping immigrants’ rights and humanity (Lopez 2025). Relatedly, mechanisms for legal asylum for humanitarian or other reasons have ground to a halt. The Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agency has ceased supporting its CBP One app, which “previously allowed undocumented aliens to submit advance information and schedule appointments” for asylum review (Customs and Border Protection 2025), even if, by all accounts, the system was a technical and logistical disaster (Kocher 2023). The message from the Trump administration is one of complete lack of concern or care for the plight of others.

Surveillance at Universities

Borders are typically thought of in spatial terms as clearly demarcated boundaries between nation states. Surveillance studies scholars have shown how misleading this characterization can be, for “the border is everywhere” where it is enacted (Monahan and Wood 2018: 121). Traveler screening systems, for instance, algorithmically scrutinize and sort passengers well before they ever reach an airport or immigration officer (Amoore 2013; Magnet 2011; Salter 2004). In the current milieu, university campuses also function as borderzones where everyone is surveilled and foreign or immigrant students are subject to deportation.

The Trump administration has signaled that ICE raids on university and college campuses would now be permitted, leading to heightened risk for the roughly 400,000 undocumented higher-education students throughout the country (Stahl 2025). Many universities, including my own, are circulating tip sheets on what to do should ICE agents arrive and demand access to students. ICE agents may also be seeking student records to identify international or undocumented students (Undocumented Student Resource Center 2025), which could be a practice that runs afoul of the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (Stahl 2025). There have also been reports of people impersonating ICE agents and asking for access to minoritized students (Weissman 2025), which raises threats that white-nationalist vigilantes may take it upon themselves to abduct or harm students, faculty, or staff seen—in their eyes—as not belonging. This situation creates ambiguity and fear, which is its intention. It also enfoldes universities into what Josh Scannell (2021) has called “the carceral surround,” an expansive governing logic premised on racialized policing and state power. In the fog of uncertainty, some universities are further activating their existing links to the surveillance state by promising full cooperation with law enforcement, while others are seeking ways to protect their students while still complying with the law (Stahl 2025).

There are also moves to criminalize dissent on college campuses. For instance, another recent executive order purports to combat anti-Semitism on campuses by targeting those engaging in protest. International

⁵ Historically, border fortification efforts have also produced the *opposite* of their intended effect: “Rather than prevent people from entering the country, the added security simply dissuaded them from leaving” because they feared they could not return later if they did so (Asad 2023: 28–29).

students participating in pro-Palestinian protests are threatened with special reprisals of having their visas revoked and being expelled (The White House 2025a). Taking advantage of the full range of surveillance systems deployed during pro-Palestinian protests last year (e.g., CCTV, key-card tracking, email monitoring), authorities could also gain access to information on who participated in such events and punish them retroactively. In Trump's words, "We will find you, and we will deport you" (The White House 2025c). This move is part of a larger culture-war attack aimed at censoring free speech and curricula about racial inequities and oppression. Professors have likewise been caught up in these actions by having their lectures recorded and their social media posts monitored, leading to investigations, right-wing media attacks, and terminations (Lennard 2024).⁶

Although certainly not restricted to institutions of higher education, related attacks on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs have become something of a witch hunt. Programs are being dismantled, websites scrubbed, and staff reassigned or terminated. It bears mentioning that many of the so-called DEI programs at universities have been around for decades under different names, many creating vital opportunities and support structures for underrepresented groups. From this vantage point, blowback against DEI is not simply a response to recent gains made for racial justice; instead, it represents a broader and deeper revanchism in support of a system of white supremacy.

These efforts extend to curricula as well, such that many institutions are now prohibiting required courses in "diversity" topics. The State of Florida has gone so far as to disqualify basic courses in sociology, such as Principles of Sociology, from counting toward general education requirements (Hartocollis 2024). In their place, universities are told to offer so-called "factual" history courses and courses celebrating Western civilization (Hartocollis 2024; Killian 2024). Florida has also passed legislation allowing students to record professors' lectures and report them for bias (University of Florida n.d.). As Zane Willard (2024: 1) describes it, this places faculty in a tenuous position of being "ambivalent subjects who [must] negotiate their critical values and job security while managing the *white* emotions of students, parents, and administrators." Self-censorship is one response, as faculty and departments move to protect themselves in an increasingly hostile climate (Golden 2023). Another recent executive order adds fuel to this fire by mandating anti-DEI policies for non-profit institutions receiving federal funding (The White House 2025b). Many universities have responded by immediately suspending "all general education requirements and major-specific requirements mandating completion of course credits related to diversity, equity, and inclusion" (University Communications 2025). At my institution, this could include *hundreds* of courses on topics as disparate as Identity and Sexuality, Global Health, Language and Power, The Labor Force, or State and Local Politics. Surveillance of compliance is expected, and programs across the country are struggling to figure out how to meet their educational obligations to students without becoming targets of right-wing attacks.

Dismantling the Research Enterprise

On January 27, 2025, a funding freeze went into effect for all grants and loans issued by the US federal government (Vaeth 2025). This was part of an orchestrated "pause" on funding intended to give the Trump administration time to assess which grants and loans aligned with its ideological interests (Kozlov and Garisto 2025). It was also an illegal impoundment of funds, in violation of a law put into place after President Nixon abused the authority of the executive office by withholding funding Congress approved for the Clean Water Act (Madel 2012). While the funding freeze on federal grants was partially lifted after a federal judge

⁶ The Trump administration has already singled out Columbia University for an especially punitive response of being stripped of \$400 million in grant funding for its supposed tolerance of protesters (Svrluga, Meckler, and Natanson 2025), which are cuts that will harm faculty, researchers, staff, and students, not to mention scientific research.

blocked the move (Milman and Betts 2025), uncertainty remains and steep cuts are projected for the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and other agencies.

As with the policing of DEI at institutions of higher education, grant agencies and researchers are being subjected to similar forms of surveillance with respect to their funding priorities and research projects. Research studies on the environment, infectious disease, sex and sexuality, or race and ethnicity are likely to be unfunded and unsupported for the foreseeable future. At the National Science Foundation, for instance, staff have been instructed to search through proposals for any objectionable terms (e.g., “institutional,” “historically,” “socioeconomic,” “women,” “ethnicity,” “disability”) and to flag such proposals, most likely to be removed from consideration (Johnson, Dance, and Achenbach 2025). Layered onto these screenings are projected cuts of more than 50% for NSF and steep reductions in the indirect costs that NIH will provide to universities and other research sites (Buntz 2025; Knott and Palmer 2025).⁷ These actions signal an official embrace of an anti-science agenda. They will afford discrimination against researchers pursuing most forms of science, will hinder collaborative research globally, and will generate a knowledge and evidence vacuum that allows rapacious climate- and health-destroying industries to advance without meaningful scientific pushback.

The War on Gender

We are entering a new phase in the aggressive attack on gender roles and identities that do not align with ultra-conservative Christian beliefs. Whether with control over women’s bodies or with violence against gender-nonconforming individuals, this phase is animated by a religious position that perversely views tolerance for others as persecution of Christians. Steeped in conspiracy theories and bigotry, such white Christian nationalism embraces narratives of victimization and marginalization, especially at the hands of the state.⁸ As one Dallas pastor and avid Trump supporter explains: “You sound like a hysterical maniac if you say the government’s coming after us. But I believe they are.... It happened in Nazi Germany. They didn’t put six million Jews in the crematorium immediately.... It was a slow process of marginalization, isolation, and then the ‘final solution.’ I think you’re seeing that happen in America” (Alberta 2023).⁹ The Trump administration has leaned into this now-mainstream position through executive orders ostensibly designed to protect Christians from persecution and harmonize the state with regressive religious values, especially with respect to the policing of women’s and gender-nonconforming bodies. Policing and persecuting others is viewed as the route to protecting conservative Christians. This is the era of white Christian nationalism.

Without question, this position views women as reproductive vessels and understands their normative role as being mothers and submissive wives (Bassett 2024). As Vice President JD Vance puts it: “*Our people* aren’t having enough children to replace themselves. That should bother us.... I think we have to go to war against the anti-child ideology that exists in our country” (Licon 2024, emphasis added). The meaning of the term “our people” should be clear: good, *white* Christian evangelicals and far-right conservatives like

⁷ The move to cap NIH’s indirect rate at 15% was temporarily blocked by a federal judge on February 11, 2025 (Glenza 2025).

⁸ Trump actively feeds into this Christian persecution complex, for instance by proposing the creation of a task force within the Department of Justice to eradicate “anti-Christian bias” throughout government and society (Madhani 2025).

⁹ This is an instance of what Jessie Barton Hronešová and Daniel Kreiss (2024) have called “hijacked victimhood.” It “present[s] dominant groups as in danger, as current or future victims, and in need of protection... from oppressive forces consisting of—or indirectly representing—marginalized and subaltern groups” (Hronešová and Kreiss 2024: 717).

Vance.¹⁰ One of the proposed mechanisms for generating more white births is to levy higher taxes against adults without children (Licon 2024). Another approach, which appeared in a directive from Department of Transportation Secretary, Sean Duffy, is to give preferential treatment for federal grants to “communities with marriage and birth rates higher than the national average” (Regan 2025). Restricting access to birth control is also on the agenda. As an early warning sign, the Department of Health and Human Services has recently removed language from its website about pharmacists’ obligation to dispense birth control (Regan 2025). But perhaps white Christian nationalists’ most desired way to achieve their patriarchal dreams is to criminalize abortion and surveil and police women into compliance.

In the post-Dobbs moment in the US, nineteen states have passed abortion bans or have restricted abortion access to earlier than the viability standard set in *Roe v. Wade* (McCann and Walker 2025). For instance, the states of Florida, Georgia, Iowa, and South Carolina have passed six-week bans, which could be well before most women are even aware they were pregnant (McCann and Walker 2025). To ensure enforcement, this has led to increased surveillance of women and those assisting them with reproductive care. As Jolynn Dellinger and Stephanie K. Pell (2024) explain: “Whether abortion laws target providers, aiders and abettors, or women themselves, the criminalization of abortion necessarily involves the surveillance of women. Women’s bodies are often the so-called scene of the crime, and their personal data will, more likely than not, be evidence of the crime.” Data trails become evidence in this environment: internet searches, period tracker apps, social media posts, text messages, phone and car GPS locations, credit card transactions, and more. For instance, Facebook messages were subpoenaed by police investigators to prosecute a mother who purchased abortifacients online to assist her daughter with terminating her pregnancy (Sanderford 2022). Now that 63% of abortions in the US are occurring with medication that can be shipped across state lines (Dellinger and Pell 2024), surveillance efforts and legal challenges are intensifying. Tip hotlines have also been established for people to report on those they suspect of having illegal abortions (Rahman 2021). The effects of abortion bans and restrictions are felt unevenly too, as one might imagine, with minoritized, economically insecure, and transgender and nonbinary people more likely to have difficulty accessing adequate care (Robbins, Goodman, and Klein 2023).

In the broader war on gender, the Trump administration is dedicated to the complete erasure of trans-personhood. This can be seen in the wave of executive orders denying the existence of more than two genders and scaling back any federal protections for gender-nonconforming people, whether in healthcare, education, workplaces, the military, or in prisons and immigration detention facilities (Advocates for Trans Equality 2025). A particular target of Trump’s attack on “gender ideology” (Kurtzleben 2025) is the provision of gender-affirming healthcare, especially for minors, but his actions also “ban transgender women from participating in sports, end recognition of nonbinary people by the federal government, and direct the Department of Defense to target trans military members” (Carson-Holt 2025). These moves draw upon a pernicious moral panic about the supposed vulnerability of cisgender women and girls to trans women (e.g., in bathrooms or locker rooms), when, in actuality, trans people—and especially minoritized trans people—are the ones who are routinely harassed, attacked, and killed (Human Rights Watch 2021). Nonetheless, the anti-trans conservative backlash latches onto media representations of LGBTQ+ people to catalyze narratives of insecurity and to justify the surveillance and exclusion of gender nonconformity (Fischer 2019).

The policing of trans-personhood is an enactment of state violence. For the roughly two million transgender adults in the US (Kurtzleben 2025), it is the symbolic violence of being told that one’s identity is invalid or illegal. As Lisa Jean Moore and Paisley Currah (2015: 63) explain, “identity documents do not so much confirm identity as produce and authorize it legally.” So when passports or birth certificates codify false

¹⁰ This is clearly an articulation of the “great replacement theory” that posits that white, ethnically homogenous populations are becoming a demographic minority, particularly because of immigration, and that their (and the nation’s) values are under threat because of such demographic shifts (Ekman 2022).

gender identities, as is now required for new or renewed documents, they also rhetorically assert that one does not count, at least not on their own terms, in the eyes of the state.¹¹ We will also likely see an increase in structural and social violence, as people are denied work, access to restrooms, participation on sports teams, and restrictions in other areas of public life. Finally, these moves signal physical or existential violence, whether in the form of denied gender-affirming care (Carson-Holt 2025), through an increase in related self-harm or suicide attempts (Simmons-Duffin 2024), or through attacks on transgender people. Just this February, 2025, five individuals were arrested in New York for torturing and killing a twenty-four-year-old trans man, Sam Nordquist, whom they held and subjected to “prolonged physical and psychological abuse” for more than a month before his death (Guardian staff 2025). Anti-trans rhetoric and legal actions by Trump are implicated in such horrific acts of violence. On this front of the war on gender, surveillance serves a privileged mechanism for exposing and eradicating gender nonconformity, for targeting people viewed as fundamentally deceptive because of their gender differences (see also Beauchamp 2019; Magnet and Rodgers 2012).

Demolishing Government

Under the zealous direction of Elon Musk, the extra-legal Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) is engaged in nothing less than the full-scale evisceration of government.¹² Beyond the cruelty of mass layoffs, illegal impoundment of federal funds, and deprivation of life-saving food assistance and healthcare for the most needy, there are deeply troubling surveillance implications of DOGE’s actions. DOGE’s infiltration of government databases represents “the largest data breach in US history” (Brodkin 2025). Musk is neither an elected official nor a Senate-confirmed appointee (Bates 2025), and DOGE is essentially a loose collection of young hackers, not a Congressionally approved agency.¹³ Yet, they have gained access to the databases of the US Treasury and tax information on everyone in the country.¹⁴ They have acquired access to the Treasury’s ACH Network, which manages financial transactions for the entire government, including incredibly sensitive payments to defense contractors and spies in foreign countries (Bates 2025).¹⁵ They have also secured access to the Office of Personnel Management’s federal human resources databases, which includes detailed and potentially compromising information on every federal employee, as well as on former and prospective employees: health records, personnel reviews, social security numbers, biometrics, addresses, birth dates, and more (Bates 2025; Citron 2025). Additionally, DOGE reportedly tapped into the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) system, which contains details on most commercial and savings bank deposits in the country (Bates 2025). Access to these systems by Musk and his team contravenes the Privacy Act of 1974, which requires proper vetting of individuals and congressional authorization for collecting, using, or sharing personal data. As Danielle Citron (2025) writes: “No one—not even special government employees—should access agency ‘systems of records’ without proper

¹¹ This applies not only to transgender people but also to intersex and non-binary people who now cannot receive passports without a binary gender designation. The implications are the potential outing of those individuals when being screened, inconsistencies across their identity documents, and even the forfeiture of passports, as those who submitted passports for renewal are currently not receiving new ones or the return of their old ones (Diaz 2025).

¹² Reducing or cutting government services to the point of failure is part of the design. As Kevin De Liban and Alice Marwick (2024) explain: “DOGE is part of a larger political project to wither the government itself. Diminishing the ability to perform basic governmental tasks will lead to decreased public trust, in turn justifying further cuts and inviting the expansion of the private sphere.”

¹³ This being said, DOGE has now taken over the previously established US Digital Service (Sullivan 2025), most likely to provide some legal cover for its actions.

¹⁴ DOGE has obtained access to tax refunds and is pushing to obtain access to all tax returns as well (Gleckman 2025).

¹⁵ Before a court intervention, at least one of Musk’s team members had “write” access to these systems, meaning that he could have diverted funds anywhere (Tait 2025).

authorization under the Privacy Act of 1974. Nothing suggests that Musk or his employees have such authority.”

The release of any of these data, whether intentional or not, could have dangerous implications for national security. This has already occurred too, with DOGE illegally posting to its website classified information about staffing at a US intelligence agency, the National Reconnaissance Office (Bendery 2025). It is not hard to imagine scenarios where such sensitive data on government employees or others could be sold or given to foreign adversaries—or to newfound “allies” such as Russia. Many working in government agencies are keenly aware of such risks as well and are doing what they can to minimize damage. For instance, in response to one of Musk’s recent directives for all federal employees to provide bullet point summaries of their weekly accomplishments or face termination, some agencies advised their staff to “assume that what you write will be read by malign foreign actors and tailor your response accordingly” (Alper et al. 2025).

Under Musk’s ambit, surveillance further manifests in the targeting of specific employees or programs for elimination. Apart from mass terminations of probationary workers across the country (Crampton et al. 2025), we are seeing

mass suspensions and projected firings of career civil servants whose work touched diversity or equity initiatives. Mass suspensions and projected firings of career civil servants whose work involves foreign aid. Retaliatory firings of career civil servants involved in investigations or prosecutions of Trump and the January Sixth insurrectionists, with the threat of mass firings to come. Mass firings of Inspectors General without following the statutory process of providing Congress 30 days’ notice and specific reasons for the firings. (Bagenstos 2025)

On one hand, these actions are designed to punish those whose work does not align with an ideology of white supremacy or those who are not unflaggingly loyal to Trump. On the other hand, such terminations are intended to gut any possible bureaucratic checks on Trump’s authority moving forward.

As for the elimination of government programs, there has been substantial attention given to the hatcheting of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) (Knickmeyer, Lee, and Sherman 2025), but DOGE’s use of artificial intelligence (AI) to scour agency data for cuts presents a host of additional dangers. Much of the information in government databases is sensitive, ranging from private details about federal student aid recipients in Department of Education databases, to information about whistleblowers in Department of Labor databases, to patients’ personal health information in Department of Health and Human Services databases (Sainato 2025). As Musk is deploying Microsoft’s cloud-based Azure AI system to analyze these data, he is also introducing vulnerabilities: “Feeding sensitive data into AI software puts it into the possession of a system’s operator, increasing the chances it will be leaked or swept up in cyberattacks. AI can also make errors, for example hallucinating incorrect information when summarizing data” (Natanson et al. 2025). This weaponization of AI is also ideologically driven. Any programs designed to improve services for underrepresented populations will be targeted for elimination, and when one is talking about programs like those provided by the Department of Education, for instance, this could mean the dismantling of the entire department, which is Trump’s stated goal (Meckler, Douglas-Gabriel, and Natanson 2025).¹⁶

¹⁶ Furthermore, in keeping with the Trump administration’s anti-science agenda, Musk’s team has canceled core Department of Education research contracts for tracking national school performance; this means that for the first time since 1867, parents and policymakers will lack comparative data on school performance and quality (Cohen and Smith Richards 2025).

Musk's interest in demolishing the government may have more to do with reducing unwelcome inquiry into his companies than with fostering "efficiency."¹⁷ After all, even if the federal workforce were cut by twenty-five percent, this would reduce the budget by only one percent because most of the costs are tied up in the military, social security, and Medicare/Medicaid programs (Tanenbaum 2025). Yet, cutting investigators and litigators at federal agencies effectively ends ongoing investigations into or lawsuits against Musk's many companies, including Tesla, SpaceX, Neuralink, and X (Lipton and Grind 2025). Trump's removal of board members at the National Labor Relations Board and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission further means that those entities lack a quorum for pursuing active cases against X for labor law violations and against Tesla for racial harassment and discrimination (Lipton and Grind 2025). The flipside to these moves is that Musk's unconstitutional oversight of federal agencies means that he is also in a position to influence the awarding of federal contracts to his companies, making his involvement a massive conflict of interest. The stakes are high too, with his companies currently having "100 contracts with 17 federal agencies" for an amassed total of "\$13 billion in contracts over the past five years, making SpaceX, which collects most of that money, one of the biggest government contractors" (Lipton and Grind 2025).

Surveillance under Musk's DOGE means the targeting and removal of any person or program construed as supporting progressive positions. This is a surveillance operation that discursively reads "government" as discriminatory (against whites) and brands any public or humanitarian programs as corrupt and ideologically dangerous by definition. Efficiency, therefore, is only nominally about cost cutting: it is mostly about imposing costs and burdens upon others, especially those who are not in the billionaire class. Such "efficiency" signifies the apotheosis of the capitalist state, where business titans literally run the agencies intended to regulate them.

Anticipatory Compliance

Many companies, especially Big Tech media companies, have preemptively harmonized their operations with Trump's interests. Companies such as Disney, Walmart, Target, and Lowes have all voluntarily cut or scaled back their DEI programs, folding in advance of any request to do so (Masunaga 2025). Disney has further dropped programming that might offend fragile white Christian nationalist sensibilities, such as an animated Pixar miniseries (*Win or Lose*) featuring a trans athlete; the company explained this decision with a statement saying: "many parents would prefer to discuss certain subjects with their children on their own terms and timeline" (Masunaga 2025). Clearly, financial interests motivate these moves by media companies, especially if they fear falling out of favor with the Trump administration. With the Chairperson of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) appointed by Trump, any mergers that companies would like to execute in the coming years would be depend on FTC approval, so canceling DEI serves the instrumental goal of signaling allegiance to Trump. It likely does not hurt that many CEOs also gave lavishly to Trump's inauguration fund (Kim and Allyn 2024).

In addition to eliminating DEI programs, media companies have radically attenuated any monitoring they might have done to curtail disinformation or hate speech. Whereas after Trump's first election and during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media companies sought to limit disinformation, which was seen as a threat to democracy or to lives, the current moment has seen a normalization of disinformation. Elon Musk led the way by scaling back content moderation at X, done in the name of ending what he viewed as "censorship" of far-right figures like the one he was becoming (Lima-Strong 2024). (Although censorship of pro-Kamala Harris accounts or of any of his critics seemed to be just fine [Joyella 2024; Maruf 2024].) Meta/Facebook has now embraced this position too by "ending its factchecking program in the US and

¹⁷ However, there is some reporting that Musk's evolution into an anti-government, hard-right culture warrior was partially catalyzed by his anger at having a transgender daughter, Vivian Jenna Wilson. He claims that the "woke mind virus" is to blame for her gender transition, and he devoted himself to eradicating wokeness in response to it (Ingram 2024).

easing content restrictions around immigration and gender identity to focus on ‘free expression’. Meta’s ‘hateful conduct’ policy was changed to allow users to accuse transgender or gay people of being ‘mentally ill’” (Bhuiyan and Kerr 2025).

These developments have implications for the larger culture of surveillance moving forward. As Alice Marwick explains, “The country’s public discourse has shifted to the right, so you no longer have to look at fringe spaces to hear anti-immigrant sentiment, anti-feminist sentiment, anti-trans, anti-LGBTQ sentiment, that stuff is being espoused by people across the elite” (quoted in Clarke 2025). This feeds into what I have elsewhere called *crisis vision*: the active scapegoating, surveillance, and punishment of marginalized others for perceived social, economic, and environmental insecurities (Monahan 2022a). The normalization of anti-DEI stances reifies mythologies of white persecution. Such anti-DEI positions also become a rationale for surveillance of nonwhite or gender-nonconforming people or of anyone whose work or beliefs might challenge the conservative status quo.

Threats to International Security

The tentacles of the US surveillance state reach far beyond its borders, making the developments I have been describing that much more alarming. Trump is now publicly signaling his allegiance to President Vladimir Putin and turning his back on Ukraine and European allies. The evidence is stacking up quickly: the US refusing to back a UN resolution condemning Russia (Lederer 2025); Trump calling President Volodymyr Zelenskyy a “dictator” and claiming that Ukraine started the war with Russia (Spike 2025); the US suspending offensive cyberoperations against Russia (Barnes, Sanger, and Cooper 2025); the US ceasing military and intelligence support for Ukraine (Gecsoyler 2025; Roth and Holmes 2025); and a televised press meeting with Zelenskyy where Trump and Vance sympathized with Putin and pilloried Zelenskyy for not being sufficiently grateful for America’s assistance (Nichols 2025). These actions, which are likely just the beginning, threaten to upend international relations and alignments with disastrous implications for Ukraine, but perhaps will also pave the way for further military conflict in Europe and beyond. As Tom Nichols (2025) cautions: “America’s alliances are now in danger, and *should* be: Trump is openly, and gleefully, betraying everything America has tried to defend since the defeat of the Axis 80 years ago. The entire international order of peace and security is now in danger.”

With respect to surveillance, US intelligence operations with allies should be called into question as a security risk for participating countries. This may certainly be true for Ukraine, where US intelligence has previously been instrumental in Ukraine achieving degrees of tactical advantage on the battlefield (Najibullah and Dobrynin 2025). Now, it does not seem farfetched to imagine that intelligence about Ukrainian forces may be delivered to Russia. Such informational vulnerabilities could also extend to other European countries, particularly given Russia’s robust campaign of hybrid and information warfare against countries like Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic (Morris and Oremus 2022; Wenzel et al. 2024). Destabilizing European alliances is strategically advantageous for Russia as it seeks to expand its territory and influence. In this international arena, there was already concern that the new US Director of National Intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard, was a Russian asset (Hall and Feinberg 2025), but now Trump and Vance are similarly siding publicly with Russia and attempting to sow discord in Europe (e.g., by weakening the NATO alliance or supporting far-right, pro-Russian political parties like Alternative for Germany [AfD]).¹⁸ This situation also raises questions about the complicity (and exposure) of other countries in the Five Eyes network (UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand). Historically, the Five Eyes alliance has allowed the US to tap intelligence networks throughout the world and also circumvent the few legal prohibitions against

¹⁸ As Bryce Newell (2021: 342) reminds us: “the overlapping issues of domestic extremism, terrorist violence, white supremacy, and state surveillance manifest in numerous ways and in nations and communities around the world.” Tracking how states such as the US or Russia influence those configurations is especially pressing in the current moment.

spying on its own people (Bamford 1983; Greenwald 2014). This arrangement will likely persist, but it is an open question how longstanding US allies will modulate or filter the intelligence they collect and share with the US, and vice versa (Harris 2025).

Conclusions

Surveillance in “Trump’s America” taps into deep reservoirs of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and Christian nationalism. Many of the developments I have sketched in this paper represent a proud, public embrace of far-right positions that were previously viewed as sordid or undignified. They are now becoming mainstream. Such positions are being woven into a state/media/militia policing apparatus designed to dehumanize and punish anyone falling outside this norm. In this moment, many mainstream media and social media companies are eagerly aligning themselves with right-wing agendas by stripping protections against disinformation or hate speech while placing prohibitions on criticisms of Trump. Meanwhile, institutions of higher education have become targets because they present counternarratives to this new orthodoxy, whether by providing a liberal education, teaching undocumented students, attempting to correct systemic inequities, or allowing expressions of dissent.

In this America, there are many perceived enemies. Undocumented immigrants and their communities are especially reviled, but, so too might be anyone presenting as a racial, gender, or religious minority. The demonization and scapegoating of these groups are key to Trump’s storyline that minoritized others are to blame for any forms of precarity experienced by working-class white Americans—or even by other minoritized groups. Women who might dare to exercise control over their reproductive choices or who resist becoming submissive wives are also viewed as a threat. Anyone who might assist a pregnant person in obtaining an abortion could likewise be criminalized, harassed, or attacked. LGBTQ+ individuals, and especially trans people, are characterized as being particularly dangerous to Christian nationalist values, leading to efforts to erase them from the social fabric. Government workers across the board—whether firefighters, food-safety inspectors, air-traffic controllers, healthcare workers, or social-security employees—have been painted as agents of the “deep state” and in need of termination. Even federal research agencies (and researchers) have been treated as ideological threats for producing knowledge about disease, the environment, politics, or social inequities.

As surveillance studies scholars know, surveillance is not simply a tool for locating and punishing purported enemies. It is an apparatus of power that produces and reproduces the social order. Therefore, as these changes unfold, they will imprint themselves, in some fashion, on institutions and social structures. They will alter cultural beliefs and values. Even resistance practices, while urgent and necessary, may amplify societal divisions in ways that could be hijacked by what is quickly becoming an authoritarian, if not a fascist, state. The surveillant activities of DOGE, along with the infiltration of government by oligarchs such as Musk more broadly, reveal the dangers of unaccountable, unfettered AI for government functions. Finally, on the global stage, ongoing realignments between the US, Europe, and Russia throw into doubt longstanding military commitments and intelligence-sharing arrangements. The Trump model of governance builds on hate to breed instability and chaos. These are the dynamics we must confront and disarm.

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