



Written by [John and Nisha Whitehead](#) on March 16, 2025

When Dissent Becomes a Crime: The War on Political Speech Begins

You can't have it both ways.

You can't live in a constitutional republic if you allow the government to act like a police state.

You can't claim to value freedom if you allow the government to operate like a dictatorship.

You can't expect to have your rights respected if you allow the government to treat whomever it pleases with disrespect and an utter disregard for the rule of law.

There's always a boomerang effect.

Whatever dangerous practices you allow the government to carry out now — whether it's in the name of national security or protecting America's borders or making America great again — rest assured, these same practices *can* and *will* be used against you when the government decides to set its sights on you.

Arresting [political activists engaged in lawful, nonviolent protest activities](#) is merely the shot across the bow.

The chilling of political speech and suppression of dissident voices are usually among the first signs that you're in the midst of a hostile takeover by forces that are not friendly to freedom.

This is how it begins.

Consider that Khalil Mahmoud, an anti-war protester and recent graduate of Columbia University, was [arrested on a Saturday night by ICE agents](#) who appeared ignorant of his status as a legal U.S. resident and his rights thereof. That these very same ICE agents [also threatened to arrest Mahmoud's eight-months-pregnant wife](#), an American citizen, is also telling.

This does not seem to be a regime that respects the rights of the people.

Indeed, these ICE agents, who were "[just following orders](#)" from on high, showed no concern that the orders they had been given were trumped up, politically motivated and unconstitutional.

If this is indeed the first of many arrests to come, what's next? Or more to the point, *who's* next?

We are all at risk.

History shows that when governments claim the power to silence dissent — whether in the name of national security, border protection, or law and order — that power rarely remains limited. What starts



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as a crackdown on so-called “threats” quickly expands to include anyone who challenges those in power.

President Trump has made it clear that [Mahmoud’s arrest](#) is just “the [first arrest of many](#) to come.” He has openly stated his intent to target noncitizens who engage in activities he deems [contrary to U.S. interests](#) — an alarmingly vague standard that seems to change at his whim, the First Amendment be damned.

If history is any guide, the next targets will not just be immigrants or foreign-born activists. They will be American citizens who dare to speak out.

Mahmoud is the test case.

As journalists Gabe Kaminsky, Madeleine Rowley, and Maya Sulkin point out, Mahmoud’s arrest for being a “[threat to the foreign policy and national security interests of the United States](#)” (note: he is not actually accused of breaking any laws) is being used as [a blueprint for other arrests to come](#).

What this means is that anyone who dares to disagree with the government and its foreign policy and express that disagreement could be considered a threat to the country’s “national security interests.”

Although the right to speak out against government wrongdoing is the quintessential freedom, throughout history, U.S. presidents have used their power to suppress dissent.

Once dissent is labeled a threat, it’s only a matter of time before laws meant for so-called extremists are used against ordinary citizens. Criticizing policy, protesting, or even refusing to conform could be enough to put someone on a watchlist.

We’ve seen this before.

The government has a long list of “suspicious” ideologies and behaviors it uses to justify surveillance and suppression. Today’s justification may be immigration; tomorrow, it could be any form of opposition.

It’s a system just begging to be abused by power-hungry bureaucrats desperate to retain their power at all costs.

This is not just about one administration or one set of policies. This is a broader pattern of governmental overreach that has been allowed to unfold, unchecked and unchallenged. And at the heart of this loss of freedom is a fundamental misunderstanding — or even a deliberate abandonment — of what sovereignty really means in America.

Sovereignty is a dusty, antiquated term that harkens back to an age when kings and emperors ruled with absolute power over a populace that had no rights. Americans turned the idea of sovereignty on its head when they [declared their independence](#) from Great Britain and rejected the absolute authority of King George III. In doing so, [Americans claimed for themselves the right to self-government](#) and established themselves as the ultimate authority and power.

In other words, as the preamble to the Constitution states, in America, “we the people” — sovereign citizens — call the shots.

So, when the government acts, it is supposed to do so at our bidding and on our behalf, because we are the rulers.

That’s not exactly how it turned out, though, is it?



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In the 200-plus years since we boldly embarked on this experiment in self-government, we have been steadily losing ground to the government's brazen power grabs, foisted upon us in the so-called name of national security.

President Trump wants us to believe that the menace we face (imaginary or not) is so sinister, so overwhelming, so *fearsome* that the only way to surmount the danger is by empowering the government to take all necessary steps to quash it, even if that means allowing government jackboots to trample all over the Constitution.

Don't believe it. That argument has been tried before.

We are walking a dangerous path right now.

Political arrests. Harassment. Suppression of dissident voices. Retaliation. Detention centers for political prisoners.

These are a harbinger of what's to come if the Trump administration carries through on its threats to crack down on any and all who exercise their First Amendment rights to free speech and protest.

We are being acclimated to bolder power grabs, acts of lawlessness, and a pattern of intimidation, harassment, and human rights violations by government officials. And yet, in the midst of this relentless erosion of our freedoms, the very concept of sovereignty — the foundational idea that the people, not the government, hold ultimate power — has been all but forgotten.

Don't allow yourselves to forget.

As I make clear in my book [Battlefield America: The War on the American People](#) and in its fictional counterpart [The Erik Blair Diaries](#), the moment these acts of aggression become the new normal, authoritarianism won't be a distant threat; it will be reality.

About John & Nisha Whitehead:

Constitutional attorney and author John W. Whitehead is founder and president of The Rutherford Institute. His latest books [The Erik Blair Diaries](#) and [Battlefield America: The War on the American People](#) are available at www.amazon.com. Whitehead can be contacted at johnw@rutherford.org. Nisha Whitehead is the Executive Director of The Rutherford Institute. Information about The Rutherford Institute is available at www.rutherford.org.



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