**Headline:** First, They Came for the Venezuelans

**Teaser:** Trump is turning deportation into a weapon of mass destruction. None of us—undocumented immigrants, people with papers, naturalized citizens, or native-born citizens—are safe.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**[Article Body:]**

President Donald Trump promised to unleash mass deportations on immigrants during his presidential campaign. But he has gone much further, with the disappearing of hundreds of Venezuelan nationals from the United States to El Salvador’s notorious gulag. It’s a warning shot—one that has serious consequences for all of us, immigrant or not.

The method and speed of his actions are breathtaking. Over several years, there has been an [exodus of millions](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-48121148) of Venezuelans from the left wing regime of Hugo Chávez, now overseen by President Nicolás Maduro. The U.S. Congress granted them [Temporary Protected Status](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/tps-temporary-protected-status-for-venezuelans-in-us-bipartisan-immigration-bill-lawmakers-believe-trump-might-support/) (TPS), enabling nearly [350,000 Venezuelans](https://immigrationforum.org/article/temporary-protected-status-fact-sheet/) to legally reside in the United States.

That designation remained on the government’s books until the [beginning of 2025](https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/17/2025-00769/extension-of-the-2023-designation-of-venezuela-for-temporary-protected-status). But, within weeks of Trump’s second-term inauguration in January 2025, he [rescinded](https://www.uscis.gov/save/current-user-agencies/news-alerts/secretary-of-homeland-security-announces-termination-of-2023-designation-of-venezuela-for-temporary) TPS for Venezuelans, [invoked](https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/invocation-of-the-alien-enemies-act-regarding-the-invasion-of-the-united-states-by-tren-de-aragua/) a [1798 law](https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/alien-enemies-act-explained) called the Alien Enemies Act, and immediately [dumped three planeloads of Venezuelan men](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/venezuelans-deported-el-salvador-names/) to El Salvador’s prisons for allegedly being gang members.

When an emergency ACLU-led court hearing resulted in U.S. District Judge James Boasberg [ordering](https://www.axios.com/2025/03/16/trump-white-house-defy-judge-deport-venezuelans) an immediate halt to the deportations, including a demand that the flights be turned around midair, the Trump White House defied the order and pressed ahead. Their justification was that the planes were outside U.S. airspace and, therefore, the order didn’t apply.

This action, only one in an overwhelming series of violent political earthquakes unleashed by the Trump regime, is an intentional test of myriad institutional norms and laws.

First, Trump is making clear that this is no longer about deporting undocumented immigrants and that anyone can be disappeared at any time. His government is going after [U.S. citizens of color](https://www.propublica.org/article/more-americans-will-be-caught-up-trump-immigration-raids). It is targeting [academics](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/scholars-targeted-deportation-trump-administration-rcna197331) of color who are working or studying in the country with valid papers, particularly those who are Muslim or seeking justice for Palestine, such as [Mahmoud Khalil](https://apnews.com/article/columbia-protests-immigration-detention-mahmoud-khalil-755774045e5e82849e3281e8ff72f26d) and [Bader Khan Suri](https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/21/us/bahar-khan-suri-deportation-what-we-know-hnk/index.html). He is also targeting white [Europeans and Canadian tourists](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/u-s-detention-of-european-and-canadian-tourists-creates-fear-over-traveling-to-america), artists, and others. The situation is so dire that [Germany](https://www.axios.com/2025/03/19/germany-travelers-advisory-us-immigration) and the [UK](https://www.axios.com/2025/03/20/uk-travel-advice-us-immigration) have issued travel advisories against the United States.

Second, Trump is using disinformation so willfully and skillfully that he has news media fumbling on fact-checking him, as they take him at face value. He has asserted “[pro-Hamas aliens](https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/01/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-takes-forceful-and-unprecedented-steps-to-combat-anti-semitism/)” have infiltrated college campuses—relying on the bipartisan conflation of anti-Israel criticism with antisemitism—and is ominously taking his lead from a Zionist organization that sent him a [list](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/14/israel-betar-deportation-list-trump) of thousands of potential deportees. Indeed, if Nazis—the worst antisemites—are to be found anywhere, [it is among Trump supporters](https://www.msnbc.com/top-stories/latest/joe-rogan-podcast-daryl-cooper-nazi-trump-antisemitism-rcna197137).

He has claimed the U.S. is being [invaded](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/20/fact-check-is-tren-de-aragua-invading-the-us-as-trump-says) by a dangerous and violent Venezuelan gang, Tren de Aragua—[it is not](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/20/fact-check-is-tren-de-aragua-invading-the-us-as-trump-says). White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt [outrageously libeled](https://www.axios.com/2025/03/16/trump-white-house-defy-judge-deport-venezuelans) the Venezuelan men who were sent to El Salvador as “rapists, murderers, and gangsters.” But there is [no evidence of this](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/tattoos-deported-venezuelans-not-necessarily-gang-members-rcna197089), and even if there was, there are due process laws in place to deal with these allegations. Instead, [innocent](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/families-search-for-loved-ones-after-hundreds-taken-on-u-s-immigration-flights-disappear-from-online-locator?fbclid=IwY2xjawJJ0uNleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHZHAW-6USFv0OSN7f_20o0_RljVQQdnG6QcDsm022sAFsdo2_OzHOjJLGw_aem_v4rCs0-TI37xQoYGM2eMSw) [people](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/16/world/americas/el-salvador-venezuela-deportations-families.html) have been indefinitely disappeared into a prison system known for torture and cruelty—what some have justifiably termed a “[concentration camp](https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/on-security-bukele-and-petro-have-a-problem-in-common/).”

To add to the confusion about his actions, Trump [claimed he didn’t sign](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/03/22/trump-deportations-autopen/) the Alien Enemies Act—and why would he sign a 1798 law? But he *did* invoke it, in writing, on the [White House website](https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/invocation-of-the-alien-enemies-act-regarding-the-invasion-of-the-united-states-by-tren-de-aragua/). This sort of confusion is designed to suck up media resources. For example, the [Washington Post printed an entire story](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/03/22/trump-deportations-autopen/) about it, wondering, “Did Trump misspeak? Is he trying to deflect responsibility for a decision?”

Trump did the same thing during his first term and many journalists [tied themselves into knots](https://money.cnn.com/2018/05/27/media/president-trump-lies/index.html) attempting to cover his deception. “President Donald Trump lies, but not everything he says is a lie,” said CNN’s Brian Stelter in 2018. That’s like saying, “this man is a rapist but does not rape every woman he encounters.” The obfuscation is the point.

And third, Trump is testing the ability of the courts to stop him from breaking the law. Defying Judge Boasberg’s order to stop the disappearances of Venezuelans into El Salvador’s prisons, Trump violently [railed](https://truthsocial.com/%40realDonaldTrump/posts/114183576937425149) against Boasberg as a “Radical Left Lunatic of a Judge, a troublemaker and agitator,” and demanded he be impeached in a social media post. Supreme Court Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr issued a [rare rebuke](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/18/us/chief-justice-roberts-impeachment-trump.html) denouncing such threats, but it was Roberts’s court that ruled Trump was [legally immune from prosecution](https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/supreme-courts-presidential-immunity-ruling-undermines-democracy) for actions conducted during his presidential terms. As it stands now, the president faces [no consequences](https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2025/03/20/what-happens-if-trump-officials-defy-court-orders-how-they-could-be-punished-even-though-trumps-immune/) for defying judicial orders. He has also [threatened to sanction law firms](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/03/22/trump-litigation-lawyers-pam-bondi/) for accepting cases challenging his policies.

There is no more apt time to remind us of the poem, “[First They Came](https://hmd.org.uk/resource/first-they-came-by-pastor-martin-niemoller/),” by Martin Niemöller. Today the administration is going after Venezuelans and Palestinians—tomorrow it can be any one of us.

Those [Trump supporters](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/2025/03/17/wife-of-wisconsin-man-who-voted-for-trump-detained-by-ice/82494099007/?fbclid) who cheered on the president, thinking themselves and their loved ones safe from his hate, now face the deportations of spouses and neighbors.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement even mistakenly detained [a pro-Trump naturalized U.S. citizen](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/us-citizen-hispanic-detained-ice-questions-vote-trump-rcna195406) who voted for the racist president and who then expressed shock that he wasn’t safe from Trump’s white supremacist dragnet.

Progressives warned for years that Trump’s presidency is based on [maintaining white power](https://www.americanprogress.org/article/white-supremacy-returned-mainstream-politics/) and racial capitalism at all costs in a demographically changing nation. Critics also cautioned Democrats like [Chuck Schumer](https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/chuck-schumer-anti-semitism-israel/) and Joe Biden against equating anti-Israel rhetoric with antisemitism and against leaning into [anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies](https://amicacenter.org/statements/cair-coalition-condemns-the-biden-administrations-latest-attempt-to-deprive-asylum-from-newly-arrived-immigrants/). They advised mainstream corporate [media outlets](https://www.aclu.org/news/immigrants-rights/three-ways-the-media-introduces-bias-to-the-immigration-debate) against accepting and disseminating anti-immigrant narratives and [social media platforms](https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/meta-has-earned-over-390000-hundreds-ads-pushing-anti-immigrant-invasion-rhetoric-just) against spreading racist lies about immigrants.

Had liberal leaders and media outlets unabashedly embraced a multiracial democracy, there would have been a clear delineation between Trump’s Republican Party and the opposition.

Instead, by accepting the dehumanization of Palestinians, Muslims, Latin Americans, South Asians, and Arabs—as though there is a hard line between the humanity of immigrants and citizens—Americans opened the door to undermining all our rights. There is no limit he won’t cross unless forcefully stopped.

One pro-Trump conservative whose organization [boasts](https://www.article3project.org/about) about successfully pushing for an extremist Supreme Court majority [warned](https://www.axios.com/newsletters/axios-am-7392bd60-0440-11f0-8c85-a577f8a4ce48.html?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign), “What’s going to be on the horizon are denaturalization cases,” which means Trump is likely to begin stripping naturalized citizens (like me) of their citizenship. He’s also pursuing an end to [birthright citizenship](https://www.npr.org/2025/03/14/nx-s1-5327552/trump-takes-birthright-citizenship-to-the-supreme-court).

The danger of our current political moment is the inevitable outcome of accepting and internalizing dehumanizing narratives about people we deem “others.” Tolerating anti-immigrant cruelty opens the door to all of us being victims of such savagery. No one is immune.