

Why Trump Turned to the Sewer

The president's disturbing, excremental propaganda campaign

By Anne Applebaum



Alex Wong / Getty
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Lieutenant Colonel Harald Jäger was in charge of a Berlin Wall checkpoint on the evening of November 9, 1989, when a garbled televised press conference convinced thousands of East Berliners that they were allowed to cross into West Germany. People ran to the checkpoint. They started shouting at Jäger, telling him to open the barrier, even though no one had told him about any changes.

Still, “when I saw the masses of East German citizens there, I knew they were in the right,” he told an interviewer, many years later. In another interview, he recalled, “At the moment it became so clear to me ... the stupidity, the lack of humanity. I finally said to myself: ‘Kiss my arse. Now I will do what I think is right.’” He opened the barrier and people started walking through.

Had these events taken place a few months earlier, Jäger might have kept the barrier shut. But the “masses of East German citizens” who had spent that autumn marching against dictatorship in East Berlin, Leipzig, and other East German cities had shaped his understanding of events. Watching them, he understood that most of his countrymen opposed the regime and hated the Wall. If everyone was against it, he no longer wanted to defend it.

The differences between the “No Kings” demonstrations that took place across the United States on Saturday and the East German protests 36 years ago are too numerous to list. I saw no riot police at the protest I watched in Washington, D.C. Nor did the demonstrations in the autumn of 1989 feature animal costumes, cute homemade signs, or people dancing the Macarena. But they shared at least one goal: to remind the government’s supporters and enablers that the public is unhappy. The majority of

Americans object to President Donald Trump's politicization of justice, his militarization of ICE, and his usurpation of congressional power. Eventually some of those presidential supporters and enablers might, like Jäger the border guard, be persuaded to side with the majority and help bring this assault on the rule of law to an end.

The people in the White House know this too, and they reacted accordingly. Trump, the successor to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, posted an AI-created video of himself as a fighter pilot, wearing a crown, flying over an American city, and dumping shit onto American protesters. The point was not subtle: Trump wanted to mock and smear millions of Americans, literally depicting them covered in excrement, precisely so that none of his own supporters would want to join them.

Mockery isn't Trump's only tool, nor was it the only one that his team has borrowed from other autocrats and would-be autocrats around the world. Just as the Chinese leadership once described participants in popular, broad-based Hong Kong protests as "thugs" and "radicals," the speaker of the House of Representatives, Mike Johnson, said before Saturday's protest that the only people protesting would be "Marxists" or "pro-Hamas." Just as Russian President Vladimir Putin has called democracy protesters "paid agents of the West"—he once even claimed that Hillary Clinton, then the U.S. secretary of state, had sent "a signal" to "some actors in our country"—Ted Cruz, among others, insinuated that the millions of American protesters were paid by George Soros. A host of Republicans tried to portray the protesters as dangerous or treasonous, or else, paradoxically, as elderly and ineffective.

For those using the oldest tools in the authoritarian playbook, the nature of the smear is unimportant. What matters is the intention behind it: Don't answer your critics. Don't argue with them. Don't let them win over anyone else. Describe them as dangerous radicals even when they wear frog costumes. Imply, without evidence, that they were bribed to speak out, because there can't possibly be any sincere idealists who criticize the Party and its Leader out of a genuine desire to help other Americans. Dump AI-generated sewage on their heads to discourage anyone else from joining them. And if they keep coming out, make the messages even harsher.