How Minnesota Beat Trump

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The last year has been one of the most depressing of my nearly 50 years as a journalist. It's not just that I've had to watch the Trump administration destroy cherished alliances, like ours with Western Europe and Canada, that have upheld freedom, democracy and global trade since World War II. It's also been the stunning cowardice and boundless greed with which leaders of big law firms and Big Tech have bent their knees to King Donald and indulged a cabinet of clowns — not one of whom they'd hire in their own businesses.

But then I spent time in my native state, Minnesota, after something else that I'd never seen in nearly 50 years: a spontaneous uprising of civic activism propelled by a single idea — I am my neighbor's keeper, whoever he or she is and however he or she got here.

It was one of the most courageous battles ever fought by American men and women not in uniform. It was led by moms ready to donate their breast milk to strangers and dads ready to drive someone else's kids to school because the parents, terrified of ICE agents, were too afraid to go out outdoors. It was neighbors ready to hit A.T.M.s to help out neighborhood restaurants and businesses deciding not to open — thus forgoing their income — for fear that masked ICE agents might drag away their cooks or dishwashers or desk clerks.

And the best part was this: At a time when we have a president so shameless that he insists on putting his name on every public building he can, these good Samaritans of all colors and creeds acted without fanfare. "There were hundreds of leaders of this movement," Bill George, a longtime Twin Cities business executive, said to me, "and I don't know a single one of their names." Many surely got to know one another, though, because they were all propelled by a verb I'd never heard before: "neighboring," as in, Today I will be neighboring — going out to protect the good people next door or down the block. Not because I favor illegal immigration, but because I oppose the fundamental indecency of President Trump and Stephen Miller and the blessedly now departed Kristi Noem trying to fulfill their daily quota for evicting illegal immigrants by arresting my neighbors, most of whom work hard, pay taxes, go to church or mosque and help me dig out my car from the snow in winter.

Here's some free advice for Trump and Miller: Minnesotans are winter people. Don't come for winter people in winter. They're not afraid of the cold. Just the opposite. The weather has forged a unique Minnesota neighborliness — not everywhere, not always, but in a lot of places on a lot of days. Its power is rooted in its ordinariness — just a basic human impulse to look out for your neighbors and, yes, dig their cars out of the snow on Monday because you know they will do the same for you on Wednesday.

Observing it up close made me think about what Stephen Miller told CNN's Jake Tapper in January: "We live in a world in which you can talk all you want about international niceties and everything else. But we live in a world, in the real world, Jake, that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power."

Well, Stephen, maybe you don't know the real world after all, because your private ICE army — "governed by strength" and "force" — was sent packing by a bunch of moms and dads armed only with cellphone cameras and whistles, ready to walk out on a freezing morning in bathrobes and bunny slippers, to defend their neighbors, some of whom they barely knew.

Virtually every person I spoke with had at least one remarkable story. In fact, I have not heard so many stories of either incredible cruelty by men and women with guns or incredible kindness by neighbors and strangers for one another since I covered the Lebanese civil war in the late 1970s. To fully appreciate what is so new and special, though, you probably need to have grown up here. I was born in 1953 on the Northside of Minneapolis, a few miles from where George Floyd was killed, and back in my childhood everything seemed binary: You were either white or Black, Christian or Jewish, et cetera. Minnesota was roughly 99 percent white. By 2023, however, the state was 76 percent white, with Black, Hispanic, Asian and other minorities all making up a far bigger share of the population than in my youth.

That is a lot of demographic change. Indeed, in the mid-1970s, my aunt, who lived in Willmar, in west-central Minnesota, took me aside one evening during a family event and furtively whispered, "Tom, I was in the grocery store on Saturday and I heard someone speaking Spanish." It was a first for her. She never forgot it, and neither did I. Willmar was almost entirely white when she moved there in the late 1940s. Today it is 59 percent white and has vibrant Somali and Latino communities.

The state economy could not thrive without immigrants — legal and illegal — as producers and consumers. Immigrants make up some 11 percent of the Minnesota work force today, and about 16 percent of the state's manufacturing work force is foreign-born.

Bruce Corrie, a professor emeritus of economics at Concordia University, remarked in a recent interview with Minnesota Public Radio that Trump's rant claiming Somali immigrants "contribute nothing" could not be more wrong. "Foreign-born workers make Minnesota affordable, wealthy, productive," Corrie said, "whether we're eating out or getting our roof fixed." He estimates that immigrant workers and businesses contribute $26 billion annually to Minnesota's economy.
But, I repeat, there has been a lot of demographic change, very fast. The other morning, I took an Uber to visit my Somali American friend Hamse Warfa, head of a very creative education nonprofit, World Savvy, at his office in St. Paul. My Uber driver was also Somali. Her name was Huda, and, she told me, she has an adult child in the U.S. Air Force.

I thought to myself: Huda is taking Tom to see Hamse in St. Paul, where the new mayor is a Laotian Hmong refugee woman. Welcome to Minnesota circa 2026. Go Vikings!
That is the demographic and economic backdrop to Trump's Operation Metro Surge. Beginning in December, Trump and Noem poured 3,000 ICE and Customs and Border Protection agents into the Minneapolis-St. Paul region to arrest and deport illegal immigrants. That federal force, whose poorly trained foot soldiers eventually shot and killed two citizen observers, Renee Good and Alex Pretti, dwarfed the local police force in number. In announcing the operation, Trump ranted that Somali immigrants were "garbage," that "these aren't people who work" or say "let's make this place great."

Trump's view of Somali Minnesotans was, no doubt, shaped in part by the fact that nearly 80 individuals, most of them Somali immigrants, have been indicted and at least 57 of them convicted for stealing hundreds of millions of dollars from government food programs. That fraud was a shameful moral failure by its perpetrators and a shameful management failure by Gov. Tim Walz, but Trump's attempt to tar all 80,000 Somali Americans and Somalis in Minnesota, and other immigrants, generally to justify his federal invasion into the Land of Lakes has turned out to be a huge mistake, and, in my view, a racist one.

While church and other civic groups had built some organizational foundations in case ICE came to Minneapolis — after seeing what federal forces had done in cities like Chicago and Los Angeles — it is safe to say that no one anticipated the spontaneous upsurge of neighboring that exploded in the Twin Cities and eventually forced Trump into a humiliating withdrawal.

"Trump expected that the protests against ICE would be dominated by antifa or violent leftists and that they would become the damnable face of the resistance and the face of Minneapolis," and therefore "legitimize" Trump's invasion, Don Samuels, a Black former city councilman, told me.

But what happened instead, said Samuels, was that many everyday middle-class white Minnesotans turned out "to share risk and leadership of the resistance with their brown and Black neighbors."

As the whole rainbow of Minnesotans watched their Hispanic, Hmong and Somali neighbors — some of them their local shopkeepers, small-business owners, carpenters or cooks — being violently pulled out of homes, restaurants and construction sites, Samuels noted, the popular reaction was: "I can't believe this is happening in America — they killed Renee Good and Alex Pretti in cold blood!"

Black and brown residents, many less likely to be as confrontational in their interactions with ICE, told their white neighbors: This is what we've been dealing with forever! And so, suddenly, Samuels added, Trump and ICE found themselves "fighting the people they thought they were supposed to be saving America for": white moms and dads and college students appalled by the obvious cruelty of federal agents dragging away their neighbors.

"This was Minnesota standing up — not being just 'nice' but being good and courageous and unified," said Samuels. "Something was born in this crisis that could never have been born on a good day. Otherness has been replaced with kinship between brown, Black and white Minneapolitans."

Jaylani Hussein, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations in Minnesota, told me, "We broke out of bowling alone," referring to Robert Putnam's book "Bowling Alone," about how communities in America had fragmented. "The concept of neighbors meeting neighbors has come back," he said. "The idea of community was present again. I was at Costco the other day and a woman, she was white, just came up and asked if she could hug me."

Members of two Minneapolis congregations — Shir Tikvah, a Reform synagogue, and San Pablo/St. Paul Lutheran Church — shared two services together, on Jan. 30 and Feb. 1, as a show of solidarity following the immigration siege. Then they jointly raised $1 million in one month to aid immigrant families who could not pay rent or buy food; some of it came from the synagogue's and church's own members, and some came from donors in 47 states.

In addition to residents who made benevolent gestures like buying groceries, there were activists willing to annoy less provocative Minnesotans if their creative tactics could annoy ICE more.

After the Minnesota-based Target Corporation refused to speak out against ICE operations, no doubt for fear of retaliation by the Trump administration, Minnesotans went into local Target stores by the dozens and each bought a single container of salt — "to melt ICE" — and then immediately returned it, over and over again, to clog up checkout lines and drive away customers. Other protesters found the suburban hotels where immigration agents were staying and stood outside until late at night banging pots and pans, blowing noisemakers, shouting through speakers and leaning on car horns so the agents couldn't sleep.

A local sex toy store donated dozens of dildos that were distributed to protesters outside a federal building housing ICE activity, with some tossed at immigration officers. The organizer told Minnesota Public Radio that the sex toys were employed in the spirit of weaponizing the absurdity of the whole ICE campaign. "Power hates being mocked more than it hates being challenged," he said.

It was Adriana Alejandro Osorio, a board member at World Savvy, the education nonprofit led by my friend Hamse, who first said to me that Minnesotans had turned "neighboring" into a verb. Then people outside of Minnesota saw how locals responded, she added, "and that was magical. People were contacting me and asking: How did you mobilize so fast? People recognized that they need to neighbor, and that was a positive thing in a dark time."

The World Savvy board chairwoman, Linda Ireland, told me about a mom who donated breast milk because she was a superproducer and discovered she could help in a totally special way: "After being called to bring breast milk to a baby whose mom was taken by ICE during a diaper run, she connected with mothers who were so frightened they struggled to provide for their babies or could not leave home, and they created a network of moms donating breast milk."

Abdirashid Abdi is the principal of AIM Academy of Science and Technology, a charter school in South Minneapolis, not far from where Pretti was killed. His school serves mostly Minnesotans from East Africa. He turned to me during a discussion with other school leaders and, with the most sincere and painful look, asked why the president of the United States would call Somali immigrants "garbage."

Trump slings so many insults, it's easy to get inured to them. It makes you forget what it might actually be like to be called "garbage" by the American president. The more we talked, though, the more it became clear that Trump's verbal and physical onslaught was in some ways beneficial to Somalis and immigrants in the state.

"What came out of this was an understanding of who our neighbors are," Abdi told me. "It has redefined that they are not just neighbors only. They are family, and we are not alone in this, and I have never been prouder to be a Minnesotan. That was a gift to our community. I have lived in the same place for 15 years, and I just met some of my neighbors. They brought over cookies."
Bill Graves, who runs a family foundation focused on education and youth development, has a team of seven and said two of his team members were staying home, even though they were both citizens. One of the people made the decision because she "was followed one day by ICE and witnessed her neighbor being abducted by ICE while taking out the garbage," Graves said.
In the other case, the team member's parents were staying with her after they came from their home in Saudi Arabia for medical care, Graves explained. The parents are both Oromo, part of an ethnic group from Ethiopia and Kenya. After the ICE invasion began, the parents decided to return to Saudi Arabia, where the father ran a school, before his treatment was completed. The couple said it was "safer" in Saudi Arabia, Graves told me, given how ICE had seized other East African patients when they went to Minneapolis hospitals for care.

I have two childhood friends in the restaurant business in the Minneapolis area, and over dessert one night they poured out their stories of what a struggle it has been to keep their doors open these past few months. I'm not naming them; with ICE still operating with a small crew in Minneapolis, and with my friends' staff made up mostly of immigrants, they could not risk being publicly identified.

When I sat down at the table in their restaurant, they asked if I wanted anything.
"Only a glass of water," I answered, to which one instinctively asked me: "Ice or no ice?"
We laughed — but just for a moment. Because just hearing those three letters — I-C-E — still sends shivers down the spine, especially for people here in the restaurant business, where so many cooks, servers and bussers are immigrants, particularly from Hispanic countries.
To keep their doors open, my friends hired drivers to pick up their workers from their homes at 4 each morning, when fewer ICE agents were on the streets. They provided roughly 100 rides through each day and night. Employees did not want to drive their own cars because ICE was tracking license plates. The paid drivers were trained to circle an employee's neighborhood once to ensure ICE was not present, then quickly pick up the employee and drive to the restaurant. Inside the restaurant were air mattresses next to the kitchen, for the many employees who preferred to sleep at the restaurant rather than risk moving around in public.

Customers, friends and neighbors filled the restaurant's back rooms with household and personal products for employees to take home — and my friends set up movies on a laptop. Other neighbors and volunteer groups would drive these employees' children to school while the parents were at work.

As one of my friends put it: "The unbelievable randomness, aggression and frequency of ICE abductions created fear among all immigrant workers, whether they had followed all the rules, had work permits or had been here for 20 years."

Now, many of the employees' children are so traumatized by stories of parents' being taken away by immigration agents that they still refuse to go to school. Consequently, one parent must stay home from work, reducing the family income. A conservative friend of these restaurateurs one day simply dropped off a bag containing 40 $100 bills and told them to distribute the cash to their neediest employees. Other customers gave smaller amounts.

Today, there is an epidemic of ICE PTSD in the Twin Cities of epic proportions, but it is matched by an equally epic level of kindness. "This is our family," my friends said of their employees. They told me one of their longest-serving cooks said to them the other day: "I came here for a better life. I had my children here. I worked two jobs to put them through school, but now all I want to do is take my garbage to the curb without being afraid."

It is not clear how many restaurants will survive the aftershock. With fewer employees able to work regularly, those who can often do double shifts, meaning they receive overtime pay, thus increasing costs for every restaurant owner.

Meanwhile, on any given day, restaurants did not know how many people they were going to serve. Some past regular customers would not come — or would post hostile one-star online reviews — if a restaurant did not put "ICE OUT!" posters in its windows, and some conservative customers would boycott if it did.

The whole two months of the intense ICE presence reminded many workers and employers of living through Covid — but without the anesthetic of a huge infusion of cash from the government to ease the pain.

No one is more aware of the financial costs to the city than Mayor Jacob Frey. But nor is anyone more aware of the way that the neighboring movement has helped heal Minneapolis, especially the fraught relationship between the city's police and its residents caused by the 2020 killing of George Floyd by a police officer. Floyd's murder created a real rupture locally, and it was not just political. Trust in the police fractured. Trust in institutions fractured. Trust between people of color and white people fractured.

Since the ICE operation began, Frey told me as we sat around his conference table in City Hall, "my most vocal critics were embracing police and thanking police and grateful for their presence" — not only because they declined to assist ICE agents, but also because, he said, the Minneapolis police force has been transformed in the past few years.

"They are better trained," said Frey, whose security team includes a Somali immigrant, and "they are now the most diverse police department we have ever had." In the last year, he said, the city has had a 135 percent increase in applications to join the force.

The diversity of the protest movement, Frey said, was unlike anything he'd ever seen. "It was 'neighboring' — not 'Latinoing' or 'Somaliing,'" he said. "You come for one of us, you come for all of us."

And, for now at least, it has trumped both the divisive identity politics pushed by the far left and the borderline racist politics pushed by the far right, which combined to rip apart the city after Floyd's killing.

"This was not a resistance movement," Frey insisted. "It was about something far more powerful and expansive. It was 'Love thy neighbor.'" ICE agents thought they were coming for random migrant strangers stalking Minneapolis, he added. What they learned the hard way was that, for many Minneapolitans, they were coming for their babysitter or their kid's best friend — people embedded in their communities and not the caricature of the illegal immigrant rapist spread by the Trump administration.

But while neighboring helped defeat ICE, the unpaid bill federal agents left behind is its own form of Trumpian revenge. In January alone, Frey said, small businesses suffered over $80 million in lost sales, workers lost $47 million in wages, the city had to pay the police some $6 million in overtime, an additional 76,000 people experienced food insecurity and over $15 million in rent could not be paid to landlords.
For anyone outside of Minnesota who wants to help, the best thing you can do is vacation in the Twin Cities or hold your next convention here.

To be sure, many Republicans in Minnesota and across the country support ICE. "Opinions about the agency and its actions are sharply divided along political lines," PBS News reported in early February based on a national poll, "with 91 percent of Democrats and 66 percent of independents registering their disapproval. Republicans, however, remain supportive, with 73 percent approving of the agency's work."
It's hard to predict the long-term political impact, but, for now, I'd say a Trump endorsement in a 2026 midterms race in Minnesota might not exactly be a blessing for a candidate.

Justin Buoen, a leading Democratic political strategist, pointed out to me that a few weeks ago the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party held its precinct caucuses to nominate candidates for the November elections. The caucuses were held in school classrooms, cafeterias and

gymnasiums, and the turnout was so overwhelming that lines snaked around the block outside many meetings.

Minnesota Public Radio quoted a woman named Theresa Baker as saying that the ICE crackdown motivated her to attend her first precinct caucus since high school. She said she now always carries her passport in her car, so she can prove her citizenship, if necessary. “I was born in St. Paul,” she said, but “it doesn’t matter anymore. And so I have to care. … I have to give a damn.” **The longer I stayed in Minneapolis,** the more a phrase that Jews recite on Hanukkah to commemorate the victory of the Maccabees over the Greeks came to my mind: “Nes gadol haya sham” — “A great miracle happened there.”

My shorthand for it is that Donald Trump, who seeks to govern only by division, never by addition, accidentally created “out of many, one” in Minnesota. Thank you, Mr. President. We needed that.

Sondra Samuels, president of the Northside Achievement Zone, remarked to me that after Floyd’s killing, many white Minnesotans said, “That is so terrible what happened to Black people.” But the ICE invasion “happened to all of us. And then we redefined ‘us.’” *We redefined “us.”* I love that expression. That is EXACTLY the miracle that happened here.

Flannery Clark, a parent-activist at a Minneapolis elementary school**,** told me, “Families are paying rent at our school for 130 other families.” They had “a lot of grandmas driving Subarus around to make sure their neighbors were safe. … We created a new version of ‘neighbor’ here, and we need to export that.”

We need to export that. I really love that expression, too.

Minneapolis, St. Paul and even lots of small rural towns look more like the world today than ever before. And the world looks more like Minnesota today than ever before. And so the great governing challenge in Minnesota, to my mind, is a microcosm of the great governing challenge facing America today: Can we make “out of many, one” — our great national project since our founding — when the “many” is now so much more diverse, even more than it was just 10 years ago.

If Minnesota can model that, maybe America can model it, too. And if America can model that, it could become our greatest political export to the world in the 21st century — as much as democracy was 250 years ago.

Why? Because today, as my friend Dov Seidman, an author and expert on leadership, likes to say: “Interdependence is no longer our choice. It is our condition.” All the big existential challenges humanity faces today are planetary in scale — how to manage A.I., climate change, nuclear proliferation, pandemics and global migrations with so many people on the move. All of these challenges require planetary-scale collaboration. Either we figure that out soon — or we’re heading for a really bad century together.

In Minnesota, I heard a talk by Ian Bassin, a founder and the executive director of Protect Democracy, a nonprofit that works to ensure election integrity. In a follow-up conversation, he told me a story that perfectly captured the power, peril and importance of what happened here. “A lifelong Minnesotan shared with me two lessons she’d learned watching the recent federal assault on her hometown,” said Bassin. “The first was her jarring realization that ‘there is no net below us.’ She had spent her life assuming that somewhere beneath the visible architecture of laws and institutions there existed a backstop — guardrails that would prevent a fall into the

unthinkable. Watching masked federal agents abduct her neighbors and shoot them with impunity forced her to reckon with the reality that no such net exists."

But the other lesson she drew from Minnesota, said Bassin, was that in the absence of solid safeguards, "watching ordinary citizens show up for one another — offering shelter, standing watch, car-pooling an endangered family's kids to school — gave her a different kind of confidence. Not that formal checks will save us, but that solidarity remains a renewable resource — that we are and can be our own net."