

United States: Taking on Trump: why we have to cast aside shock and fear

Tuesday 11 February 2025, by [FOUTEAU Carine](#) (Date first published: 10 February 2025).

By attacking the rule of law, the newly-installed United States president is weakening democratic checks and balances and undermining resistance. His blizzard of executive orders echoes the US military's 'shock and awe' tactics of the Iraq War and has left opponents reeling. In order to oppose this catastrophic state of affairs, argues Mediapart's publishing editor Carine Fouteau in this op-ed article, we urgently need to put an end to factional infighting, form a united front and confront it head on.

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Every day, the new United States president Donald Trump administers a fresh dose of electric shocks to the world, aiming both to delight his supporters and stun his opponents.

His actions and statements have a similar effect across the board on all those who adhere to the principles of equality, social justice and solidarity that have been enshrined in the founding texts governing international law since World War 2. They stun, shock and frighten them, assault and weaken them, fostering both despair and resignation within the progressive camp.

Since his inauguration on January 20th 2025, Trump has openly deployed the speed of fascism against the slowness of the rule of law, rigorously applying the approach set out by his adviser Steve Bannon to "flood the zone with shit". It does not matter whether his statements and decrees are immediately downplayed by his inner circle or blocked by the courts; Trump is engaging in politics in the most traditional sense. By polarising debate, he reshapes the political and media landscape to his advantage, centring it around his far-right, racist, sexist, homophobic and climate-destroying obsessions. It leaves a deep and lasting impression.

Between the Nazi salutes of his ally Elon Musk, his plan for ethnic cleansing in Gaza, the dismantling of the federal state, the concentration of executive powers, and the endangerment of millions of women, transgender people, and patients living with HIV, his interventions are carefully designed to sow panic and chaos, not only among the affected communities but also among those who believe in democracy as a universal value, however loosely defined.

Thousands of protesters march around the North Carolina Capitol in Raleigh on February 5th 2025, opposing President Trump's policies and Elon Musk's involvement in the federal government. © Photo Matt Ramey / Redux / REA

And it is working: so far, he has faced only limited resistance, despite signs of life from the Democrats ([see Alexis Buisson's article in French](#)) and attempts at a fightback from civil society ([see Patricia Neves' article in French](#)).

Echoing the military tactic used during the Iraq War, the 'shock and awe' triggered by the flurry of executive orders signed on the very day of his inauguration - mass expulsions of migrants, abolition of birthright citizenship, withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on the climate, elimination of renewable energy programmes, pardons for the January 6th 2021 rioters, and the dismantling of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives - has disarmed his opponents. They are struggling to decide what to focus on first, given the scale, multiplicity and speed of the attacks, and unsure how to calibrate their response.

Hurdles to resistance

The contrast with the early days of Trump's first term is striking. One need only recall the vast Women's March that resounded with anger across the country on January 21st 2017: up to half a million people took to the streets of Washington, and as many as five million across the nation, to denounce the president's sexism and misogyny.

Nothing this year has resembled the protests held eight years ago in airports and courthouses against one of Trump's first anti-immigration directives, a 90-day travel ban on visitors from seven Muslim-majority countries.

This landscape of dissent saw the rise of the #MeToo movement at the start of this era, followed in 2020 by the Black Lives Matter protests after the murder of George Floyd. Despite a hostile presidency, the battles for rights and emancipation were built on the collective conviction that civil society could expose injustice wherever it appeared, and win.

But today, with the exception of a handful of figures in Congress and governors of Democratic strongholds such as California, New York, and Illinois, few anti-Trump voices are being heard beyond the country's borders. So much so that Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde has become an international figure simply for daring to confront Trump. By [pleading with him](#) to "have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now" - she was referring to migrants and LGBTQI+ children - she exposed herself to the president's wrath.

It is true that the courts are trying to hold back the tide. More than 20 legal proceedings have been launched to challenge measures taken by the Trump administration, at least nine of which contest the abolition of birthright citizenship. Judges have temporarily blocked this decree, as well as halting the freezing of 3 trillion dollars in national subsidies approved by Congress, and the transfer of transgender detainees to men's prisons.

Checks and balances under attack

Yet in the face of the brutality of far-right repression, these actions seem marginal. During Trump's previous term, the opposition still believed that, while they were dangerous times, the United States maintained a robust system of checks and balances capable of slowing down, if not stopping, the machine. That is less true today. And for good reason. Trump and his gang, led by the powerful tech mogul Elon Musk, no longer consider themselves bound by the rule of law, and they made that clear from the outset of the presidential campaign.

Just as they brand journalists as “enemies of the people”, they denigrate the judiciary. No longer content with merely defying the legal framework, including the Constitution, they now intend to tear it apart by strengthening the grip of executive power. They are no longer seeking to circumvent norms and rules or test their limits, they are actively working to sabotage them from within, following the blueprint laid out in the Heritage Foundation’s [‘Project 2025’](#).

In his blitzkrieg approach, Trump has already scrapped some laws, stopping migrants from seeking asylum on US soil and ordering the Department of Justice not to enforce the TikTok ban, even after the Supreme Court upheld it unanimously.

Donald Trump in the Oval Office, January 30th 2025. © Photo Roberto Schmidt / AFP

He has taken steps to purge the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which was set up by Congress, and has attempted to freeze previously-approved spending, including the majority of foreign aid. He has paralysed the work of three other legally independent agencies - the National Labor Relations Board, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board - by removing some of their members in defiance of legal rules prohibiting arbitrary dismissals.

He has also fired prosecutors without notice or legal basis, particularly those whose investigations led to his indictments and the convictions of rioters involved in the January 6th 2021 attack on the Capitol. Senior career officials at the FBI, as well as inspectors general - whose job is to root out waste, fraud, abuse, and illegality within the government - have also been dismissed, raising fears that thousands of other officials could meet the same fate.

Overcoming contradictions

In the face of this destructive authoritarian power, the opposition appears disoriented. Far from the united energy of resistance seen between 2016 and 2020, the Democrats do not yet seem capable of overcoming this repeat of history. Shock over an election outcome that was seen as an aberration eight years ago has now given way to a realisation that the country is standing by its choice - and to an awareness that they, the Democrats, have made strategic errors.

By exhausting themselves through countering the all-powerful billionaire’s provocations, anti-Trump forces have allowed themselves to get trapped on his battlefield and have lost the cultural fight. By focusing on outrage, they have neglected to create a radical counter-narrative on social issues, one capable of responding to the deep anger felt by American voters, regardless of their political affiliations.

In a recent podcast, Democratic representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez explained why some residents of her New York district had voted for both her and Trump in the last elections. “... [T]hey see two people that are fundamentally anti-establishment, two people that do not respect a rule if the rule does not lead to an outcome, a positive outcome,” she [declared](#).

Rather than focusing on what unites their voters - namely, a strong rejection of the “elites” and deep resentment over declining real wages and generational downward mobility, a phenomenon mirrored in France - the Democrats have continued to rely on the moralistic instincts of an old, privileged white order. They have avoided the necessary introspection about how, for more than 30 years, they have assisted neoliberalism.

How can this party credibly criticise Trump’s subordination to financial interests without itself

renouncing its own courtship of the “right” billionaires and without questioning the structures of capitalism that maintain the unequal distribution of the fruits of people’s labour?

How can its representatives present themselves as guarantors of justice and peace when Barack Obama authorised ten times as many drone strikes as George W. Bush? How could Kamala Harris have convinced anyone of her commitment to free speech while Joe Biden refused to allow a Palestinian-American to speak at the Democratic National Convention?

Meanwhile Trump, presenting himself as a saviour, has managed - through an astonishing sleight of hand - to convince people that he would get his hands dirty and overturn social hierarchies. Yet promising to go to Mars while the planet is burning should have served as a clear warning that his real intention was to save only his own kind, a handful of his allies at most.

Building common ground

The contradictions faced by the Democrats in the US raise questions for the entire progressive camp, particularly in France, where the same causes are in the process of producing the same effects. The fightback against the far-right must begin by refusing to fall into the trap of shock and fear - reactions which, as Eugène Ionesco’s play [Rhinoceros](#) showed, soon turn into familiarity, acceptance and eventually approval. When faced with a flood, bailing out water is useless; a state of constant reaction ultimately leads to powerlessness.

As the ruling oligarchy in the United States - openly hostile to sexual, gender and racial minorities - inevitably turns into a war machine against the poor and the working class, it is also essential, including in our own country, to end factional infighting and to unite social and societal demands. Turning equality and solidarity from abstract principles into lived realities is vital in order to redress injustice and break the cycle of privilege for the benefit of all.

Faced with the digital tools of communication, surveillance and repression now in the hands of American leaders, organising together is a top priority. In his blog on Mediapart, economist [Cédric Durand](#) highlights the need for the “creation of an anti-techno-feudal front, which would include not just left-wing forces but democratic forces, even elements of capital that have broken with Big Tech”.

The media have a crucial role to play in this battle. Just like judges and human rights defenders, journalists are in the [crosshairs](#) of Trump and Musk who, through their algorithms, spread hate, confusion and propaganda on their social networks. Mediapart, whose public-interest mission is to hold economic and political power to account, fully embraces its role as a counterforce. That’s our reason for existing, and all the more so in the dark times in which we live.

*“...[H]ow many times can a man turn his head
And pretend that he just doesn’t see?”*

Bob Dylan’s call for clarity, immortalised in his song *Blowin’ in the Wind*, the anthem of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, is one we endorse. Every day, we try to show the world as it is. For our readers, we strive to provide perspective and meaning so they can navigate the chaos. So that they do not succumb to shock or fear, and so that they become neither rhinoceroses nor robocops.

Carine Fouteau

P.S.

- MEDIAPART. 10 February 2025 à 13h28 :

<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/international/100225/taking-trump-why-we-have-cast-aside-shock-and-fear>

The original French version of this op-ed can be found [here](#)

- *English version by Michael Streeter*

- *Les articles de Carine Fouteau sur Mediapart :*

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