

An Administration that Makes Kafka Look Tame

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by Karen Sullivan

I'm a retired federal employee who worked for the US Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska during the George W Bush administration. It was a bit of a hot seat, as I was the spokesperson for the agency who had to walk a public tightrope between our scientists and what the oil industry and climate deniers wanted me to say. So, challenges are not new to me, but the sheer scope and carelessness of today's sweeping changes are almost unbelievable.

You may be wondering what's going to happen next week, and whether or not you can endure it—let alone four years of this. For me, a source of comfort comes from a quote by President Obama. He said, "The most important job in this country is being a citizen." Another quote I like is from the poem *Dover Beach* that says, "Let us be true to one another." So, the trick is not to permanently pull away and ignore it all—go ahead and do that when you need a rest, but please come back. Stay informed, *not* overwhelmed.

Let's take a brief look at a couple of things in the most recent week of an administration that makes Kafka look tame. And then let's look at what we can begin to do about it.

By now we should all believe any promise made by Donald Trump and Elon Musk, to cause pain. Four days ago, the Ketamine-addled Musk called the entire federal government "the biggest scam in history," and Social Security "the biggest Ponzi scheme of all time." Two days ago, the former head of Social Security warned that the whole system faces collapse in 30 to 90 days, and that everyone who depends on it should start saving now.

Yesterday, entire federal buildings were briefly listed for sale on a government website (GSA, or General Services Administration, which handles facilities and real estate). These included the Washington DC headquarters for the Justice Department, Labor Department, Social Security Administration, Agriculture, and Census Bureau, along with 443 other federal properties nationwide, many where federal employees were ordered back from remote work on the same day their office leases were cancelled. The list was taken down yesterday afternoon. Ironically, there aren't enough employees left at GSA to handle the real estate transactions.

And for the White House to release a video of chained deportees that emphasizes cruel visuals and the sounds of rattling chains and then publicly call it an ASMR relaxation tape that's intended to give viewers a pleasant tingling feeling, well that's sadism.

If the Republican party is the party of fiscal discipline, as Speaker of the House Mike Johnson claimed yesterday while discussing cuts to Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare, then what's missing are the proposals to increase taxes, even a little, on the wealthiest Americans. To propose funding tax cuts for billionaires by firing and demonizing federal workers, cutting vital services, and calling people who depend on these programs "parasites" indicates that cruelty is not only their point, it's their pleasure.

‘Shock and awe’ is a military term, and it’s being used on Americans. The effect of this blitzkrieg and the type of trauma it’s causing *by design*, is to mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually drain not just the groups and individuals who are being targeted, but the American people as a whole. The result, if it goes on too long, will be to create a state of despair and learned helplessness where, instead of rejecting Trump and his future strongman successors, many Americans could end up actually longing for and voting for the stability and easy solutions these people always promise but never deliver. Even JD Vance called Trump “an *opioid* for the masses” back in 2016.

So here’s the point: Mental and emotional abuse share common qualities. If you look up the characteristics of *domestic* mental and emotional abuse, they align with what’s happening nationally. So, it’s normal to feel helpless, angry, and overwhelmed as we watch the cruel “flood the zone” tactics trigger peoples’ coping mechanisms, such as emotionally shutting down, or avoiding the subject. This can translate into detachment and apathy, but detaching can be a self-preservation tactic if it’s temporary. If you’re exhausted but can recognize this and then *selectively engage*, as much as your own strengths permit, even a little bit of engagement can help, especially if everyone does it.

On the positive side, unlike most bog-standard dictatorships, we have a lot going for us in this country, including a strong belief in the rule of law, and the Constitution. Amending it so Trump could serve a third term would be very difficult—three quarters of the 50 states, meaning 38 out of 50, would have to approve it. Also, DEI isn’t going away forever, because multiculturalism isn’t, either, especially given our population demographics.

So, the sooner we understand that what Trump and company are doing is a form of mental abuse whose purpose is to demoralize, distract and disorient us to a point where we don’t resist the power grab, the better we will be able to cope with it and resist it. Understanding it in an abuse context will help us remember that we don’t have to be victims, because **we are American citizens with an awful lot of collective power.**

Among the strongest and best things you can do besides speaking out is to get involved in local organizations that strengthen community ties. And to reach out to people who aren’t like you, because history has shown us over and over again that only a coalition of people who are willing to make some compromises in pursuit of common goals like democracy, have ever been able to defeat authoritarianism and fascism. I’ll be talking more about this to the Jefferson County Democrats of Washington at their March 27 meeting at the Tri-Area Community Center in Chimacum. And I’ll have a list of organizations you can join, and things you can do, posted on their website soon.

Thank you.