



We've Already Got a Dictator-in-Chief: How Absolute Power Corrupted the President

He says, "You're not going to be a dictator, are you?" I said: "No, no, no, other than day one. We're closing the border, and we're drilling, drilling, drilling. [After that, I'm not a dictator.](#)"—Donald Trump to Sean Hannity on being asked if he would abuse power after being re-elected



John Whitehead

Once a dictator, always a dictator.

Power-hungry, lawless and steadfast in its pursuit of authoritarian powers, the government does not voluntarily relinquish those powers once it acquires, uses and inevitably abuses them.

Likewise, any presidential candidate who [promises to be a dictator on day one](#), if elected, will be a dictator-in-chief for life.

Then again, the president is already a dictator with permanent powers: imperial, unaccountable and unconstitutional thanks to a relatively obscure directive ([National Security Presidential Directive 51 and Homeland Security Presidential Directive 20](#)), part of the country's Continuity of Government (COG) plan, which gives unchecked executive, legislative and judicial power to the president in the event of a "national emergency."

That national emergency can take any form, can be manipulated for any purpose and can be used to justify any end goal—*all on the say so of the president*.

It doesn't even matter what the nature of the crisis might be—civil unrest, the national emergencies, "unforeseen economic collapse, loss of functioning political and legal order, purposeful domestic resistance or insurgency, pervasive public health emergencies, and catastrophic natural and human disasters"—as long as it allows the government to justify all manner of government tyranny in the name of so-called national security.

The country would then be subjected to martial law by default, and the Constitution and the Bill of Rights would be suspended.

For all intents and purposes, the Constitution has long been suspended, and we've been operating in a state of martial law for some time now.

The emergency powers *that we know about* which presidents might claim during such states of emergency are vast, ranging from imposing martial law and suspending habeas corpus to shutting down all forms of communications, including implementing an internet kill switch, and restricting travel.

Yet according to [documents obtained by the Brennan Center](#), there may be many more secret powers



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that presidents may institute in times of so-called crisis without oversight from Congress, the courts, or the public.

Deploying the same strategy it used with 9/11 to acquire greater powers under the USA Patriot Act, the police state—a.k.a. the shadow government, a.k.a. the Deep State—has been [planning and preparing for such crises for years now](#), quietly assembling a wish list of presidential lockdown powers that could be trotted out and approved at a moment's notice.

Indeed, President Trump's administration even asked Congress to allow it to [suspend](#) parts of the Constitution whenever it deems it necessary during the COVID-19 crisis and "other" emergencies. The Department of Justice (DOJ) went so far as to quietly trot out and test a long laundry list of terrifying powers that override the Constitution.

We're talking about lockdown powers (at both the federal and state level): [the ability to suspend the Constitution](#), indefinitely detain American citizens, bypass the courts, quarantine whole communities or segments of the population, override the First Amendment by outlawing religious gatherings and assemblies of more than a few people, shut down entire industries and manipulate the economy, muzzle dissidents, "stop and seize any plane, train or automobile to stymie the spread of contagious disease," reshape financial markets, create a digital currency (and thus further restrict the use of cash), determine who should live or die.

Bear in mind that the powers the government *officially* asked Congress to recognize and authorize barely scratch the surface of the far-reaching powers the government has already unilaterally claimed for itself.

Unofficially, the police state with the president at its helm has been riding roughshod over the rule of law for years now without any pretense of being reined in or restricted in its power grabs by Congress, the courts or the citizenry.

Although the Constitution invests the President with very specific, limited powers, in recent years, American presidents have claimed the power to completely and almost unilaterally alter the landscape of this country for good or for ill.

The powers amassed by each successive president through the negligence of Congress and the courts—powers which add up to a toolbox of terror for an imperial ruler—empower whoever occupies the Oval Office to act as a dictator, above the law and beyond any real accountability.

As law professor William P. Marshall explains, "[every extraordinary use of power by one President expands the availability of executive branch power for use by future Presidents.](#)"

Moreover, it doesn't even matter whether other presidents have chosen *not* to take advantage of any particular power, because "it is a President's action in using power, rather than forsaking its use, that has the [precedential significance](#)."

In other words, each successive president continues to add to his office's list of extraordinary orders and directives, [expanding the reach and power of the presidency](#) and granting him- or herself near dictatorial powers.

All of the [imperial powers amassed by past](#) presidents—to kill American citizens without due process, to detain suspects indefinitely, to strip Americans of their citizenship rights, to carry out mass surveillance on Americans without probable cause, to suspend laws during wartime, to disregard laws with which he might disagree, to conduct secret wars and convene secret courts, to sanction torture, to sidestep the



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legislatures and courts with executive orders and signing statements, to direct the military to operate beyond the reach of the law, to operate a shadow government, and to act as a dictator and a tyrant, above the law and beyond any real accountability—were passed from Clinton to Bush to Obama to Trump to Biden and will be passed along to the next president.

These presidential powers—acquired through the use of executive orders, decrees, memorandums, proclamations, national security directives and legislative signing statements and which can be activated by any sitting president—enable past, present and future presidents to operate above the law and beyond the reach of the Constitution.

These are the powers that continue to be passed along to each successive heir to the Oval Office, the Constitution be damned.

The war on disinformation, the war on electoral corruption, the war on COVID-19, the war on terror, the war on drugs, the war on illegal immigration: all of these countermeasures have become weapons of compliance and control in the police state's hands.

This is what you might call a stealthy, creeping, silent, slow-motion coup d'état.

We've been losing our freedoms so incrementally for so long—sold to us in the name of national security and global peace, maintained by way of martial law disguised as law and order, and enforced by a standing army of militarized police and a political elite determined to maintain their powers at all costs—that it's hard to pinpoint exactly when it all started going downhill, but “we the people” are paying the price for it now.

We are paying the price every day that we allow the government to continue to wage its war on the American People, a war that is being fought on many fronts: with bullets and tasers, with surveillance cameras and license readers, with intimidation and propaganda, with court rulings and legislation, with the collusion of every bureaucrat who dances to the tune of corporate handouts while on the government's payroll, and most effectively of all, with the complicity of the American people, who continue to allow themselves to be easily manipulated by their politics, distracted by their pastimes, and acclimated to a world in which government corruption is the norm.

If we continue down this road, there can be no surprise about what awaits us at the end.

After all, it is a tale that has been told time and again throughout history about how easy it is for freedom to fall and tyranny to rise.

What we desperately need is a concerted, collective commitment to the Constitution's principles of limited government, a system of checks and balances, and a recognition that they—the president, Congress, the courts, the military, the police, the technocrats and plutocrats and bureaucrats—answer to and are accountable to “we the people.”

Start locally—in your own communities, in your schools, at your city council meetings, in newspaper editorials, at protests—by pushing back against laws that are unjust, police departments that overreach, politicians that don't listen to their constituents, and a system of government that grows more tyrannical by the day.

We must recalibrate the balance of power.

Congress must also put an end to the use of presidential executive orders, decrees, memorandums, proclamations, national security directives and legislative signing statements as a means of getting around Congress and the courts.



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As I make clear in my book [Battlefield America: The War on the American People](#) and in its fictional counterpart [The Erik Blair Diaries](#), power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely—no matter which party holds office.

The process of unseating a dictator and limiting the powers of the presidency is far from simple, but at a minimum, it must start with “we the people.”

Make the government play by the rules of the Constitution.

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