

# FLYING BRIBERY PALACES AND THE END OF THE WESTERN ORDER

I am the rare person who thinks Trump's authoritarian push has not, yet, gone as far as it might as quickly as I imagined.

I think that for two primary reasons. First, I expected far more violence than we've seen, both from jack-booted thugs and from Trump's terrorists. While ICE has definitely done horrible things and wielded unnecessary violence, they have thus far limited their targets to people who are or look like they are migrants or those who've defended migrants' due process. It doesn't make what they've done right. It makes that violence an entrée.

That may change if Trump's budget authorizing 20,000 more immigration cops—which should be viewed as a wholesale shift in the United States from *law enforcement* to *policing*—gets passed by the Senate. That may change as Trump and Stephen Miller continue to gin up violence targeting judges. That may change as Trump's rubes begin to lose their livelihoods and need someone besides Trump to blame. But thus far, Trump has not wielded the kind of violence he has tested in the past.

The other thing I expected to happen more quickly was a solidification of an alliance with the great authoritarians of the world – the Middle Eastern autocrats who had been bribing Trump in plain sight throughout the Biden term, Russia, which had partnered with those same autocrats in Putin's effort to destroy the United States, and eventually China. Such an alliance would leave Europe – already undermined by the Orbanist project – as the rump defender of once dominant Western ideals.

My concern about such a plight is more than my

own parochial interest, living within that rump world protecting human rights and democracy.

If Trump joins such an alliance, it would turn all the tools the US has used to uphold a tainted version of the Western order for most of a century against itself, in precisely the same way Trump has turned the strengths that Made America Great – immigration, diversity, debate, science – against the United States.

When I wrote a post on the “terrifying complexity of tech oligarch obeisance to Trump,” I was thinking of the US power wielded *through* US tech giants, in the form of spying, platforming and promoting violent and fascist speech, and serving as the digital infrastructure for the world’s commerce and communication. I was imagining what Quinn described, where Trump wielded US power over Microsoft to cut off an ICC prosecutor targeting Israel and Russia, Karim Khan. I was imagining the tools once used against people the US called terrorists, now targeting human rights defenders as if they were terrorists.

It’s not just the Internet. So long as the dollar remains the reserve currency, it’s banking too, which Trump also used to debank Khan.

Trump has used the tools the US used to use against terrorism and dictators to instead make a prosecutor of war crimes a person non-grata. He has made it a crime to uphold human rights.

The reports of Khan’s targeting came out while Trump was in his *triumphant* Middle East tour, where oligarchs who want the ability to chop up journalists with bone saws with impunity feted Trump’s return and threw more bribery at him. Trump brought many of the tech oligarchs who had earlier bowed in obeisance, which turned it into an orgy of oligarchy. While there, Trump handed away American tech advantage on AI. While there, Trump assured the men who chop up journalists that he, that America, wouldn’t tell them what to do anymore. That was the message of his

triumph. Probably Trump will, probably he did, share the intelligence that went into chopping up a WaPo journalist, but that didn't stop WaPo's owner Jeff Bezos from following along like a puppy.

And through it all, even Trump's supporters criticized Trump's plans to accept a flying bribery palace from Qatar, an expensive sign of how goddamned easy it was to purchase Trump with a bit of guilt.

But Trump has no self-control in the face of a shiny bribe, so he accepted it with no consideration of the symbolic and national security implications of doing so.

Trump is an insanely easy mark for ruthless autocrats bearing bribes.

Most commentators have been measuring Trump's authoritarian project in terms of Orbán's model, and they're not wrong. That's what Project 2025 had in mind. But Trump already went far beyond Project 2025 in key areas, starting with the gutting of USAID, including the projects Republicans favor, a move that likely eliminated good will to the US in areas threatened by authoritarianism.

But Trump seems to be pursuing an additive model, one adopting the excess of the Gulf. There was a video (I'm still looking for it again) of the end of a receiving line with Trump and – I think – Mohammed bin Zayed. Stephen Miller was last in line and whichever Sheikh it was shook Miller's hand and then didn't let go, embracing him, engaging in an extended discussion with him. There were smiles everywhere. (Update: From SteveBev, here's that video.)

The project is larger than Orbán's. Orbán's was just a package to sell it to the Christian nationalists.

And Trump came back from the Gulf, determined to flaunt his flying bribery palace from Qatar, on the verge of ending sanctions on Russia having

achieved absolutely nothing in the way of peace concessions to excuse it, even while 80 Senators support *more* sanctions on Russia. In recent days Trump has done several things (besides accepting the flying bribery palace).

He has floated draconian 50% tariffs for the EU. If imposed, they would treat the EU as a greater adversary to the US than China (which is exactly how Trump's aides treated the EU when thinking of their short-lived campaign against the Houthis). He is complaining about more than trade. He is also complaining about non-monetary barriers – the kinds of rules that make EU life safer and more civilized than in the US – and lawsuits of the sort that impose limits on American tech.

And, under the same kind of dereliction Marco Rubio brought to dismantling USAID, Trump is now dismantling the NSC so as to eliminate the possibility that actual experts will advise him against stupid policies. Axios provided the propaganda version, but FT provides the best explanation of the import.

“By whittling down the NSC staff to almost nothing, you kneecap the US government’s ability to generate foreign policy options, or to potentially act as a brake on Trump’s preferences. All that remains is presidential power.”

That would be dangerous enough if Trump were smart, sophisticated, or fully cognizant.

He’s not.

As such, he remains suggestible to whoever is in his office, starting with Stephen Miller (who’ll expand his portfolio with this move), but undoubtedly including whatever dictator can get him on his phone, those autocrats bearing bribes.

Admittedly, Trump’s complete reversal of sanctions on Syria will provide the country needed relief. It’ll also help his Gulf buddies

consolidate power.

We should expect to see more instances where Trump takes sudden actions that empower authoritarianism. And as he proceeds, he will look for ways to start chipping away at democracy where it remains.