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Dictator for Life: The Rise of the American Imperial President

The presidency will survive. The real question is what leads American presidents into the imperial temptation. When the American presidency conceives itself as the appointed savior of a world in which mortal danger requires rapid and incessant deployment of men, weapons, and decisions behind a wall of secrecy, power rushes from Capitol Hill to the White House.”—Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

I’m not a fan of Communist China.

It’s a vicious totalitarian regime that routinely employs censorship, surveillance, and brutal police state tactics to intimidate its populace, maintain its power, and expand the largesse of its corporate elite.

Just recently, in fact, China banned the use of the word “disagree,” as well as references to George Orwell’s novels *Animal Farm* and *1984*. What’s really Orwellian, however, is China’s plan to use surveillance to create a “citizen score” that determines one’s place in society based on one’s loyalty to the government.

China—an economic and political powerhouse that owns more of America’s debt than any other country and is buying up American businesses across the spectrum— now plans to make its president, Xi Jinping, president for life.

President Trump thinks that’s a great idea.

Trump thinks the idea of having a president for life is so great, in fact, that America might want to move in that direction. “Maybe we’ll have to give that a shot someday,” said Trump to a roomful of supporters.

Here's the thing: we already have a president for life.

Sure, the names and faces and parties have changed over the years, but really, when you drill down under the personalities and political theater, you'll find that the changing names and faces are merely cosmetic: no matter who sits on the throne, the office of the president of the United States has, for all intents and purposes, become a unilateral power unto itself.

Although the Constitution invests the President with very specific, limited powers, in recent years, American presidents (Trump, Obama, Bush, Clinton, etc.) 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 whomever occupies the Oval Office to act as a dictator, above the law and beyond any real accountability.

The presidency itself has become an imperial one with permanent powers.

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.

So you see, we have been saddled with a "president for life"—i.e., a dictator for life—for some time now.

This abuse of presidential powers has been going on for so long that it has become the norm, the Constitution be damned.

The government of laws idealized by John Adams has fallen prey to a government of men.

As a result, we no longer have a system of checks and balances.

"The system of checks and balances that the Framers envisioned now lacks effective checks and is no longer in balance," [concludes Marshall.](#) "The implications of this are serious. The Framers designed a system of separation of powers to combat government excess and abuse and to curb incompetence. They also believed that, in the absence of an

effective separation-of-powers structure, such ills would inevitably follow. Unfortunately, however, power once taken is not easily surrendered.”

All of the imperial powers amassed by Barack Obama and George W. Bush—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 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 inherited by Donald Trump.

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 will be passed along to each successive heir to the Oval Office. After all, presidents don’t give up power.

And executive orders don’t expire at the end of each presidential term.

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

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’re certainly on that downward trajectory now, and things are moving fast.

A handful of us have been warning for years about this growing danger posed by the Executive Branch with its presidential toolbox of terror that could be used—and abused—by future presidents.

The groundwork, we warned, was being laid for a new kind of government where it won’t matter if you’re innocent or guilty, whether you’re a threat to the nation or even if you’re a citizen.

What will matter is what the president—or whoever happens to be occupying the Oval Office at the time—thinks. And if he or she thinks you’re a threat to the nation and should

be locked up, then you'll be locked up with no access to the protections our Constitution provides.

In effect, you will disappear.

Our warnings went largely unheeded.

First, we sounded the alarm over George W. Bush's attempts to gut the Constitution, suspend habeas corpus, carry out warrantless surveillance on Americans, and generally undermine the Fourth Amendment, but the Republicans didn't want to listen because Bush was a Republican.

Then we sounded the alarm over Barack Obama's prosecution of whistleblowers, targeted drone killings, assassinations of American citizens, mass surveillance, and militarization of the police, but the Democrats didn't want to listen because Obama was a Democrat and he talked a really good game.

Donald Trump has already picked up where his predecessors left off: he has continued to wage war, he has continued to federalize the police, and he operates as if the Constitution does not apply to him.

From Clinton to Bush, then Obama and now Trump, it's as if we've been caught in a time loop, forced to re-live the same abuses over and over again: the same assaults on our freedoms, the same disregard for the rule of law, the same subservience to the Deep State, and the same corrupt, self-serving government that exists only to amass power, enrich its shareholders and ensure its continued domination.

As tempting as it may be to lay all the blame at Trump's feet for the totalitarian state of the nation right now, remember that he didn't create the police state.

He merely inherited it, along with the dictatorial powers of the presidency.

So if you're looking for someone to blame when the nation eventually locks down...

If you're looking for someone to blame when Americans are rounded up and detained based on the color of their skin, their religious beliefs, or their political views...

If you're looking for someone to blame when law-and-order takes precedence over constitutional principles...

If you're looking for someone to blame when martial law is eventually declared...

If you're looking for someone to blame when there is nowhere to run and nowhere to hide from the surveillance state's prying eyes and ears...

And if you're looking for someone to blame when our constitutional republic finally plunges headlong over the cliff and leaves us in the iron grip of totalitarianism...

Blame the Imperial President, our so-called President for Life.

Blame the Republicans and Democrats who justified every power grab, every expansion of presidential powers, and every attack on the Constitution as long as it was a member of their own party leading the charge.

Blame Congress for being a weak, inept body that spends more time running for office and pandering to the interests of the monied elite than representing the citizenry.

Blame the courts for caring more about order than justice, and for failing to hold government officials—especially the president—accountable to the rule of law.

Blame Corporate America for taking control of the government and calling the shots behind the scenes.

Most of all, blame the American people for putting up with this travesty for so long and continuing to blindly pull the levers for the president of their choice instead of vehemently protesting the excesses and abuses of the White House.

So where does that leave us?

We'd better stop hanging our hopes on a political savior to rescue us from the clutches of an imperial president.

It's possible that the next president might be better, but then again, he or she could be far worse.

Remember, presidential elections merely serve to maintain the status quo. Once elected president, that person becomes part of the dictatorial continuum that is the American imperial presidency today.

Unfortunately, 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."

If we are to return to a constitutional presidency, we must recalibrate the balance of power. The first step is to 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.

As I make clear in my book *[Battlefield America: The War on the American People](#)*, the only thing that will save us now 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."

This will mean that Americans will have to stop letting their personal politics and party allegiances blind them to government misconduct and power grabs.

It will mean holding all three branches of government accountable to the Constitution (i.e., vote them out of office if they abuse their powers).

And it will mean calling on Congress to 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.

Thus far, Congress, with little spine, less integrity and too busy running their own re-election campaigns, has offered little attempt at oversight, enabling the president to ride roughshod over the Constitution.

The media—the perfect accomplice in this stealthy, bloodless coup—continues to inundate us with the latest celebrity scandal, while saying virtually nothing about these burgeoning powers.

All the while, Americans continue to cling to their out-of-date partisan allegiances, allowing themselves to be manipulated by a two-party system whose only purpose is propping up an imperial president.

Yet as historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. points out, “Holding a President to strict accountability requires, first of all, a new attitude on the part of the American people toward their Presidents, or rather a return to the more skeptical attitude of earlier times: it requires, specifically, a decline in reverence... The age of the imperial presidency has produced the idea that run-of-the-mill politicians, brought by fortuity to the White House, must be treated thereafter as if they have become superior and perhaps godlike beings.”

Schlesinger continues:

“I would argue that what the country needs today is a little serious disrespect for the office of the presidency; a refusal to give any more weight to a President’s words than the intelligence of the utterance, if spoken by anyone else, would command... If the nation wants to work its way back to a constitutional presidency, there is only one way to begin. That is by showing Presidents that, when their closest associates place themselves above the law and the Constitution, such transgressions will be not forgiven or forgotten for the sake of the presidency but exposed and punished for the sake of the presidency.”

In other words, we’ve got to stop treating the president like a god and start making both the office of the president and the occupant play by the rules of the Constitution.