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Who's on the List of Radical Left Thugs that Live Like Vermin?



A stark monument in Hamburg's courthouse square, near the infamous Dammtor prison. Photo by the author.

I'm married to a German citizen who's a life-long resident here in Hamburg, and I spent most of the winter and spring in this city of two-million — a far cry from my rural Wisconsin homestead outside a town of 2,000. Not far from our flat is Hamburg's federal, state and municipal courthouse square, which has a billboard-sized concrete cuboid monument with a blunt, stark, and grim reminder. It reads simply: 1933. The monument is also the site of Dammtor prison where during the terror the Nazi regime conducted 468 executions using the guillotine.

It's frightening to follow news of repression in the United States, and people here ask why I intend to fly back this month. The short answer is my connection to the rest of my family and friends, my work colleagues, personal identity, the national park system, and the intentional community farmstead that a group of us built with our own hands over the last 36 years.

The prevalence and unpredictable expansion of political persecution is what my friends here and at home are afraid of. They know even high-ranking Republican Party stalwarts like

Alaska's U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski have said publicly, "We are all afraid. I'm oftentimes very anxious about using my voice because retaliation is real."

This trepidation in high places prompted Sally Quinn to write in the New York Times on May 10, "Washington is . . . , "Washington is physically, emotionally, psychologically and spirituality permeated with an invisible poison. The emotion all around ... is fear. Nobody feels safe." Perhaps nobody should. Trump said Nov. 17, 2023 in New Hampshire, "We will root out the communists, Marxists, fascists, and the radical left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country." I wonder if Sally Quinn and I qualify for the "vermin thug" list.

It's hard to say, since Trump himself could hardly be more thuggish. On his first day in office he demonstrated that his magical thinking can't find thugs among his radical right storm troopers. He released from prison 1,500 January 6 rioters led by far-right militias, many of whom had been convicted of violently assaulting police officers, injuring 140.

Speaking of thugs with the rightwing website National Pulse, Trump said that immigration was "poisoning the blood of our country" — his Hitlerian dog whistle heard around the world which he would repeat. At an Ohio rally March 16, 2024, he said about immigrants, "I don't know if you call them people. In some cases, they're not people, in my opinion." Using his best words, Trump added, "I've seen the humanity, and these humanity, these are bad, these are animals, okay?"

Dehumanization and vengeful cruelty

Robert Jones, of the Public Religion Research Institute, told National Public Radio in 2023 that "dehumanization of political opponents are the bricks that pave the road to political violence." In view of Charlottesville, January 6, and the pardons of unrepentant paramilitary rioters, that road's been paved, resurfaced, and upgraded to a speedway.

Rümeysa Öztürk, a Tufts Univ. graduate student from Turkey was grabbed March 25 in Somerville, Mass. by masked secret agents, shipped off to a Louisiana jail, and held there 7 weeks for signing an opinion piece in the college paper. Mahmoud Khalil, a green card holder married to a U.S. citizen, was abducted without a warrant from his Columbia University housing in New York City by ICE agents March 8 and shipped to jail in Louisiana, although he's not charged with a crime. Kilmar Armando Abrego Garcia, a Maryland sheet metal worker with no criminal record, was *mistakenly* shipped to El Salvador's notorious "Center for Terrorism Confinement" or Cecot maximum security mega-prison, in violation of a federal immigration judge's 2019 order prohibiting the U.S. from

returning him to El Salvador, where gangs could “pose a threat to his life.” Garcia is still there.

The Kafkaesque nightmare nature of Trump’s martial law dreams is that neither the U.S. State Department nor the government of El Salvador have even identified the 260 prisoners sent to the giant maximum-security prison, and neither state has provided evidence of the men’s alleged crimes or gang membership. A federal judge’s order forbade the White House from invoking an antique wartime law to justify the deportations, but the flights had already left. The imprisoned men have effectively vanished indefinitely inside a Salvadoran dictator’s police state nihilism, without recourse.

And immigrants aren’t Trump’s only targets. Lydia Polgreen reported May 8 in the New York Times that the president “muses about ejecting U.S. citizens too,” and enacting “the fantasy of expelling every person he deems undesirable.” In January, Trump talked about sending U.S. citizens who are “repeat offenders” to El Salvador’s gulag-for-hire. Repeatedly belaboring his repetitive repetition again and again, Trump said January 27 in Miami, “If they’ve been arrested many, many times, they’re repeat offenders by many numbers.”

He added, “We’re going to get approval, hopefully, to get them the hell out of our country, along with others,” NBC News reported. The next day Trump said in the Oval Office he wanted U.S. citizens convicted of crimes sent to foreign prisons “to get these animals out” of the United States. “If we could get them out of our country, we have other countries that would take them.” In February, El Salvador offered to jail violent U.S. citizen convicts in the “most severe cases,” in addition to the 260 men flown there earlier from the U.S. without due process.

On May 9, White House adviser Stephen Miller said for the cameras, “The Constitution is clear — and that, of course, is the supreme law of the land — that the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus can be suspended in a time of invasion. So, it’s an option we’re actively looking at.” Miller mis-quotes the U.S. Constitution to suit his Apartheid agenda. Article VI says, “This Constitution, and the laws of the United States which shall be made in pursuance thereof; and all treaties made, or which shall be made, under the authority of the United States, shall be the supreme law of the land; and the judges in every state shall be bound thereby.”

Habeas corpus is the right to challenge your detention in court and threats of its suspension moved Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut to warn, “The slope to despotism can be slippery and quick.” And this is where Trump’s deliberately irrational, secret and rogue police actions, designed to keep opponents off balance, can look and feel like terror. In my work against

nuclear weapons and the war system over 4 decades, I've been convicted of dozens of nonviolent misdemeanor charges for sit-ins, blockades, and non-payment of fines, and have been sent to 20 county jails and four federal prison camps — including one here in Germany. Within our bands of “repeat offenders,” we call ourselves “nuclear resisters,” but the peace movement's resistance has never garnered much more than a “pffff” from the police, the masters of war, or the courts that protect them. That's why I'll likely be left alone at passport control when I return.

But in view of warrantless, secret police snatching and detention of nonviolent immigrants and students without due process and even in violation of court orders, Sally Quinn's withering warning gives pause. “The hallmark of this administration is cruelty and sadism, vengefulness carried out with glee.” As if to prove the point, Trump's richest friend, the Afrikaner Elon Musk, has declared: “The fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy.” Ja voll, Herr Musk! Que the stiff-arm salute. #

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