



“L’État, c’est moi” (“I am the state”) is a saying attributed to Louis XIV, King of France. It speaks of the primacy of royal authority in defiance of Parliament and the rule of law; the phrase symbolizes absolute monarchy and absolutism. Here is a contemporary take on one of the most well-known portraits of this symbol of unlimited centralized authority. Image courtesy of Heblo/Pixabay

# Autocracy and the university in America today

By [Leon Botstein](#) | September 4, 2025

A key and crucial attribute of autocratic regimes is that they permit neither dissent nor contradiction. The notion of truth does not matter. In fact, myth and fantasy—as well as unpredictability and inconsistency—become powerful political tools.

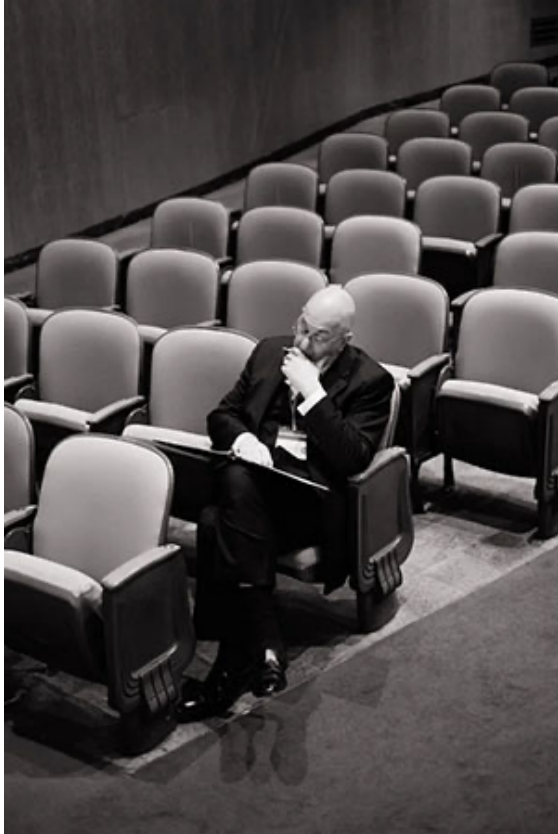
Under an autocracy, it becomes utterly irrelevant whether the beliefs are verifiable, rational, and therefore possibly subject to validation through evidence. Autocracies thrive on lies, particularly those that easily lend themselves to elaboration as officially sanctioned myths—which then are used to define norms and laws. The vilification of immigrants and the embrace of some normative image of a so-called “authentic” American, as well as the distortion of history by diminishing the significance of slavery and

the near-extirmination of the indigenous populations, are what the current presidential administration is fostering.

Comparisons with the past make us uncomfortable. We always believed the United States was immune to real and dangerous autocracy. Other countries were not so lucky: Under Stalin, for example, truths in matters of biological science were defined by adherence to Lysenko and his opposition to Mendelian genetics. That damaged Russian science for generations.

For their part, the Nazis imposed racial pseudo-science on the academic study of biology, and leading Nazi ideologues—including two Nobel Prize-winners—condemned the theory of relativity as “Jewish” science, in contrast to “Aryan-Nordic” science. One can sense a common *modus operandi* here; such pressure from the central government might be compared to the United States today in its current anti-vaccination campaign, the attack on environmental science, cuts to the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation, and the demonization of the study of diversity and inequality.

If the lack of truth in autocracies may not be as destructive to the empirical sciences—where there are significant international standards of verifiability and replication of experimental results—that is not the case in other fields. Disregard for the truth is more toxic in the study of history and the human sciences, where certainty and even probability are hard to establish, given the complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities of human nature and society—even with ample evidence.



Leon Botstein at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.  
Image courtesy of David DeNee

Since understanding the past is never complete and requires a tolerance for competing and conflicting explanations, autocracies prefer pieties and beliefs that have no basis in fact. They thrive on the most attractive of all unverifiable beliefs—the hidden conspiracy and the unseen powers that are said to “actually” govern our lives, such as the notion of a so-called “deep state.” These provide a comforting explanation of why things are not so good for most of our fellow citizens and seem to never go one’s way.

Autocracies thrive on blaming secret powers. The most persistent is the myth of a world-wide Jewish conspiracy, fostered most effectively at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Czarist Russia with the forgery of an historical document, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Autocracies not only tell lies but obliterate the need to appeal to truth-telling and rational persuasion. People like bad news and prefer accusations to exonerations. Useful lies and attractive myths explain an unjust world simply and place blame on others. Consequently, they are more compelling and effective than the dry, uncomfortable, and even ugly truth; they invite us, thoughtlessly, to embrace

corrupt, dishonest, and cruel leaders who cannot withstand the glare of critical examination and the close scrutiny of facts.

This all fairly describes what President Trump has wrought, in his second term, upon American culture and politics. In the autocracy that is taking shape from the executive branch in 2025, there is no perceptible ideological logic. There are whiffs of nativism, manifest destiny, and isolationism borrowed from pre-1945 American history. But greed, an addictive desire for fame, and a wide enthusiasm for the theatrical capacity to dominate the public arena with nostalgic myths—a talent Donald Trump undeniably possesses—are at the center of Trumpism. Fame and wealth are Trump's only currencies, aside from a perverse pleasure in humiliating individuals and celebrating cruelty, primarily in the acts of detention and deportation, and threats of legal prosecution without just cause. There is no idealism except some extreme version of Ayn Rand's glorification of individualism, selfishness, and self-interest. Whatever Trump may stand for, it is a far cry from the traditional ideals of American democracy and a pluralist society—a "melting pot" of sorts—based in part on a long history of immigration from many different continents and cultures.

I write these lines as an immigrant to this country myself; I was born in Zurich as the youngest son of two eminent Polish Jewish physicians who left Poland, studied medicine in Switzerland, and became members of the faculty of the University of Zurich. After waiting for more than 14 years for a visa to immigrate, my parents moved to New York City and ultimately joined the faculty at Montefiore Hospital and the Albert Einstein School of Medicine, where they remained for the rest of their careers.

Unlike my parents (and my older brother and sister), however, I chose not to go into medicine or science, but instead into the arts and humanities, where I became the president of a college, a musician, and historian. The story of my family illustrates the skills, abilities, and contributions that immigrants offer to this country and the opportunities that the United States has offered them in return.



Like many US colleges and universities, Bard College has several study abroad programs and exchange programs, which allow students to immerse themselves in different cultures and environments. Here, Bard College and Bard College Berlin students stand in front of Berlin's Brandenburg Gate as part of Bard's Berlin Theater Intensive. Image courtesy of Bard College.

The less immediately tangible benefits we all gain from the immigrant experience were perhaps best expressed by Arkansas Sen. William J. Fulbright, when he set up his eponymous program at the end of World War II with the goal of promoting peace through the mutual exchange of citizens. Fulbright once explained the strategy behind his educational exchange program by saying: "The best way to appreciate another's viewpoints, their beliefs, the way they think, and the way they do things is to interact with them directly on an individual basis—work with them, live with them, teach with them, learn with them and learn from them." Or, as he put it more succinctly in his autobiography: "It is hard to shoot someone you know."

Case in point: Tomáš G. Masaryk was the first president of the Republic of Czechoslovakia after World War I. Masaryk was a legendary intellectual, politician, philosopher, and writer who married an American (whose last name he took as a middle name). He was determined to create out of the ashes of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy a pluralist democracy modeled after the United States, in which Czechs, Slovaks, Germans, Slavs, and Jews all had equal political status. For Masaryk, a democracy was fundamentally contingent on the Christian admonition, articulated by Jesus in Matthew 22, "to love thy neighbor as thyself." Nothing could be further from the Trump administration than the neighborly love that the Gospels argued was the proper basis for all human law.

Such ideals seem to matter little to MAGA supporters. Yet at the center of Trump's success and popularity is the belief that he will make America "great again," as he put it. This belief justifies the neglect of facts suggesting that America is not in so-called "decline" and that our ills are not the result of immigration, to name just two examples. The belief in a restoration of past glory legitimizes the use of power wielded arbitrarily, and the disregard of the rule of law and fundamental civil rights.

Equally astonishing is the idea that making America great again requires destroying the most consistent and productive dimension of American economic success since the end of World War II: the collaboration between the federal government and our universities. That collaboration yielded, for better or worse, atomic power—and in the decades that followed the Manhattan Project, it yielded an endless array of discoveries, technologies, and products. As a result of the historic partnership between America's government and universities, the United States took a commanding lead in science, medicine, technology, and business. This scientific and technological partnership has made America truly great.

The attack on American higher education—which, not coincidentally, has a large number of students and professors who are immigrants, foreigners, or the first-generation sons and daughters of those from other lands—shows that Donald Trump is not interested in the well-being of America.

He is not a patriot.

He is an advocate of his wealth and personal power.

He does recognize that the mission of universities is inherently dangerous to those who seek absolute power; it challenges the imposition of uncontested ideologies. With tragic irony, Trump has unleashed a Trojan horse in his attack on the American university through his focus on anti-Semitism. Inside that Trojan horse, Trump and his allies argue, are warriors, intent on combatting it. When Trump successfully undermines the traditions of scientific research by withholding funding, and universities are severely damaged if not destroyed, it will turn out to be the fault of the Jews. The fact is that since 1945, the university has enabled much of American Jewry to overcome anti-Semitism. Educational opportunity has realized the promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to those of us in the American Jewish community. What ails the university most is not anti-Semitism (which has a long history in America, inside and outside of our universities), any more than immigration



and immigrants are primarily responsible for America's supposed decline. Both are claims for which there is not only scant evidence, but considerable evidence to the contrary.

The challenge that now faces the American public is how to come to terms with the fact that we have been deceived and manipulated, enabling a level of autocracy, corruption, and mendacity unparalleled in American history. Trump's success lies in his following the classic autocrat's playbook of making alliances with oligarchs of enormous wealth and exacerbating an already intolerable inequality of wealth. An elite of billionaires sits at the top of a distorted distribution of wealth that is unreasonable and inconsistent with a democracy based on the notion of equality of political citizenship for all. As Dame Louise Richardson, the eminent political scientist and president of the Carnegie Corporation, has pointed out, in 1978, a corporate CEO, on average, earned 30 times as much as a worker. In 2023, the comparable CEO was paid 290 times as much as a worker. Such inequality of wealth will not make America great again.

The first obligation, therefore, is to persuade the body politic to reject what they voluntarily brought into power. As we continue to discover how dependent we all are on immigrants (those individuals who do research, work our farms, and provide health services for all of us), we might conclude, based on the facts, that welcoming immigrants is in the nation's best interest. The presence of *illegal* immigrants only points to the catastrophic bi-partisan legislative failure to put into place a sensible immigration policy and oversee the practices of American companies.

Assuming that Trump and his MAGA allies—including isolationists, Christian nationalists, and white supremacists—can and will be discredited and defeated, the damage done by Trump with respect to universities must be repaired. But that repair should not be misunderstood as a restoration to the status quo ante.



Leon Botstein, president of Bard College.  
Image courtesy of Matt Dine.

Trump's attack on the universities has been successful because of vulnerabilities universities have in part brought on themselves: A delight in ideological orthodoxy has not been the exclusive province of the right wing in America. Furthermore, universities have retreated shamelessly from their obligation to teach, particularly undergraduates. Higher education has become a matter of lecture halls, seminars taught by graduate students, standardized testing, fully remote learning, and obscurantist pseudo-professionalism, notably in the humanities and social sciences. Universities have abandoned the act of serious teaching and learning and settled for anonymity and routine. Universities have become giant corporations and investment firms. The pattern of funding education has led universities and colleges to a too-narrow definition of utility and too short-term an understanding of translatable science, thereby orphaning the conduct of basic research and diminishing the pursuit of knowledge and sheer curiosity about ourselves and the world.

The pursuit of knowledge is fundamental to a healthy democracy. When the government that is now in power is displaced, we must not overlook the



opportunity to reinvent the university in a way that better serves academic excellence, students, and the public, and pursues the conduct of scholarship and teaching more effectively than what existed when Trump set out to destroy American higher education.

In the immediate term, the greatest danger facing the American university—apart from the loss of funding—is the loss of independence perpetrated by a profoundly anti-intellectual government. The damage the current government is wreaking on American higher education could take generations to correct. Until recently, on account of their autonomy, in terms of governance, and a commitment to academic freedom, American colleges and universities were the most admired and most competitive in the world.

Trump is in the process of dismantling America's competitive edge. This is apparent in his withholding and cancelling funding, and his attack on recruiting students from abroad. Foreign students, particularly in the sciences and biomedical professions, have been indispensable for decades. Trump is undermining America's ability to recruit first-rate minds in all fields to its faculties and its student populations. Our loss will be the gain of universities in Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South America. Without students and faculty from abroad, the excellence of our universities will be diminished.

There is a historical precedent for the campaign of intolerance represented by Trump's attack on citizenship and visas for students and scholars from abroad (who, I might add, possess exactly the kinds of talents America needs). After World War I, the University of Vienna was a leading university in the world, in medicine, the physical sciences, and philosophy—to name just a few areas. But the politics of the newly constituted republic of Austria after 1918—a relatively homogeneous small country, with a single language—became nativist and reactionary, and anti-Semitic. For most of the interwar period, Austria was ruled by Austro-fascists. They used their power to intervene in university affairs and take control. The academic stature of the University of Vienna declined from that political intervention through the end of World War II. Reactionary politicization from above ensured mediocrity.

The history of the University of Vienna, as well as the capitulation of German universities after the Nazis came to power, are cautionary tales for the American university today. In order to fight what is happening today, including a brain drain from the United States, we need to resist—but not to defend what existed before January 20, 2025. We must do more than just restore the

American university's reputation and competitiveness. We must make higher education better than it was.



Leon Botstein conducting the American Symphony at Carnegie Hall in New York.  
Image courtesy of Jito Lee.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, knowledge and leadership in scientific inquiry are essential to economic competitiveness. There must be serious reform not only of higher education but, with higher education's help, secondary and elementary education as well. In this century, as never before, knowledge and understanding are crucial to establishing and sustaining freedom, security, and prosperity. Ignorance has always been a threat to democracy, but it has never been so powerful as it has become in our era of mass communication and artificial intelligence. We face the unprecedented capacity to falsify reality and undermine the possibility and power of thinking for ourselves—the core objective of our universities and colleges.