

Sammy Roth – The Boiling Point
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A single social media post illuminates the precarious state of the American democratic experiment.

When President Trump said last week that the military had “just entered the Great State of California and, under Emergency Powers, TURNED ON THE WATER flowing abundantly from the Pacific Northwest, and beyond,” he was lying. As The Times’ Clara Harter and Ian James reported, [there was no military invasion](#). The federal government simply restarted some Northern California pumps that had been down for maintenance for three days.

A few days after Trump’s post, things got even wilder.

As Ian reported, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers [dramatically increased the amount of water](#) flowing from two dams in California’s San Joaquin Valley, in response to an executive order from Trump. The water would normally help farmers irrigate their fields, but it’s not irrigation season. Nobody asked for the water; in fact, panicked local water agencies had to persuade the Army Corps to release less to limit flood risks.

None of those facts stopped the Trump administration from spreading propaganda.

An Army Corps official said the releases were intended “to ensure California has water available to respond to the wildfires” — even though the Los Angeles County fires are [finally contained](#), and insufficient water for firefighting was [never a real problem anyway](#). Trump, meanwhile, falsely insisted that if he could have released more water in California during his first term, “There would have been no fire!”

I’d laugh if I weren’t so terrified.

They say a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes. That expression is more true today than ever, as growing numbers of Americans shun mainstream news outlets committed to fact-based reporting and instead get their information from social media platforms, some of which are controlled by billionaires [increasingly enamored of Trump](#), and where the notion of “fact” is malleable.

To wit: On Friday, a Trump-friendly X user with 598,000 followers posted a badly mangled description of the L.A. Times’ story about Trump’s water releases. Attributing the information to The Times — but without linking to our story — the X user grossly mischaracterized our reporting, misstating the facts in an effort to lionize Trump.

“The next time you Liberal Californians turn on your showers or drink water, please take a moment to thank God for giving you Trump to undo the damage the Democrats have done to your state,” the post concluded.

As of Tuesday, the post had been liked 123,000 times and shared 32,000 times — including by the richest person on Earth, Elon Musk, who owns X and is reportedly [directing portions of Trump’s federal government](#).

“All this time, they kept the water from the people of California,” Musk wrote in spreading the mangled L.A. Times reporting — generating 42,000 more shares and 194,000 likes. Musk’s post was [further amplified](#) by Dr. Patrick Soon-Shiong, the billionaire owner of the L.A. Times, who has also been cozying up to [certain members of the Trump orbit](#), Cabinet nominee Robert F. Kennedy Jr., in particular.

All of which is to say: Something is going terribly wrong in the United States.

Trump has launched an unprecedented campaign to evade legal accountability and bend government to his will, [purging prosecutors](#) involved in the Jan. 6 criminal cases, [firing independent watchdogs](#) at departments including the

Environmental Protection Agency and seeking to [force out millions of federal workers](#) he has construed as potentially disloyal to him.

Those kinds of dictatorial aims are easier to achieve when you peddle propaganda and hide inconvenient facts.

That's why the Trump administration has taken down [more than 8,000 government web pages](#) with information about vaccines, hate crimes, environmental justice and other topics, per a New York Times analysis. It's also why the U.S. Department of Agriculture has been ordered to [delete web pages mentioning climate change](#).

Where Trump and his cronies have been unable to hide the truth, they've denied it.

Again, take Musk. At a rally in Washington the night of Trump's inauguration, he "slapped his chest with his right hand and then shot that hand out and up, open and flat and palm down, with his right arm rigidly extended," [per my colleague Kevin Rector](#). Then he did it a second time. They looked very much like "Heil Hitler" gestures.

Musk denied they were Nazi salutes. But he has repeatedly engaged with antisemites, at one point [agreeing with an X post](#) that said Jews hold a "dialectical hatred" of white people. He [spoke last month](#) at a campaign event for the far-right Alternative for Germany party, which has a ["blatantly antisemitic ideology."](#) according to the Central Council of Jews in Germany and the American Jewish Committee.

Within a few days of his salute, Musk was cracking jokes based on the names of Holocaust perpetrators.

"Stop Göring your enemies! His pronouns would've been He/Himmler!" Musk [wrote on X](#).

The “He/Himmler” pun, revolting as it is, is worth exploring a bit further, because it relates to another obsession of Trump, Musk and their ilk: diversity, equity and inclusion, aka DEI. One of the administration’s main goals thus far has been to [end federal efforts](#) to support women, people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals and anyone else who’s not a straight white man.

There are worthwhile debates over how best to ensure that everyone has a fair shot at the American dream. But instead of encouraging those debates, Trump has cruelly blamed an air collision that killed 67 people [on diversity initiatives](#), with no evidence. It’s a callous lie that distracts from his own attempts to gut the federal workforce, an effort that entails pushing hundreds of thousands of employees, [including air traffic controllers](#), to take a buyout.

To pull out Superman’s old motto, these aren’t acts of truth, justice and the American way. They’re acts of greed, selfishness and hunger for power. They’re acts of hatred.

A president who truly cared about helping vulnerable Americans would acknowledge and work to confront the many ways that systemic racism continues to put people of color on the front lines of climate-fueled disasters.

Such a president would review UCLA research finding that Black residents of Altadena were more likely to have their homes [damaged or destroyed by the Eaton fire](#), a disparity stemming in part from pre-World War II segregation and redlining, as my colleagues Hannah Fry and Brittney Mejia report. Such a president would reflect on the fact that immigrants, many of them undocumented, are [crucial to rebuilding L.A.](#)

Instead, Trump is [whipping up fear of undocumented immigrants](#), calling them criminals and attempting to [end birthright citizenship](#). He strong-armed the Senate into [confirming a Defense secretary, Pete Hegseth](#), who has a tattoo associated with the Jan. 6 rioters, and the white nationalists who marched on Charlottesville, Va., in 2017.

As for wildfire victims? All Trump has really done for them is shout nonsense about water.

He might actually make things worse, if he succeeds in promoting oil and gas combustion that will raise global temperatures and fuel bigger, more destructive fires. Last week, Trump celebrated the confirmation of an Interior secretary, former North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum, who has such a close relationship with fossil fuel companies that oil and gas billionaire Harold Hamm once gifted him a set of cuff links to [thank him for his friendship](#).

Fortunately, there are lots of places to find the truth beneath Trump's lies, including the L.A. Times (at least if you [stick to our news coverage](#)). As you can hopefully tell from this column, nobody is stopping me from following the facts. We have an [incredible team of climate and environment](#) reporters.

So we'll keep covering the climate crisis. Because even with all the other scary things happening, it is still a crisis.

Climate change, white nationalism, erosion of democracy — they're all part of the same story. They all remind us that this is not how democracy is supposed to work. The president is not supposed to lie about the military entering the nation's largest state to protect Americans from fires — all while he fuels a climate crisis that will make future fires worse. All while he [hands the reins of government](#) to a guy who mimics Nazi salutes.