

Welcome to the Enemies List!

if you're not on it now, you will be soon

Over the past weeks, I've channeled my concern about the systematic dismantling of American university research into writing opeds. I published one a few weeks ago about how this threatens to weaken the United States while strengthening China.

My latest opinion piece (non-paywalled version), published in last Sunday's Austin-American Statesman, explores how these attacks on academia serve a strategic purpose: creating a diversion that masks the real agenda—a massive transfer of wealth from poor and middle-class Americans to the ultra-wealthy.

I recently found myself added to America's growing list of “enemies.” As a climate scientist at Texas A&M, I'm both a government employee, part of the “Deep State,” as well as someone perpetuating the so-called “hoax of global warming.”

In being on this list, I join a diverse group of Americans who have been branded as threats: immigrants, civil servants, transgender Americans, librarians, journalists and many others who serve vital roles in our lives.

I can assure you that professors are not America's enemy. We are the lifeblood of our higher education system, whose research generates technological breakthroughs that make America an economic powerhouse. We also train the workforce that will keep America competitive in the high-tech world of the future.

In fact, the entire enemies list is just a calculated campaign of division, distrust, misrepresentation and fearmongering.

Let's look at immigration. The data tell us that immigrants contributed over \$2 trillion per year — nearly 10% — to U.S. gross domestic product in recent years. More than half of America's billion-dollar startups were founded by immigrants, many of whom began as international students in university labs.

In particular, undocumented workers form the backbone of essential industries. They pay taxes, yet get few services from our government. Visit any major agricultural operation, construction site or food processing plant, and you'll find these workers performing crucial labor — often for wages far below market rates. When the pandemic hit, they were deemed “essential workers” in our food supply chains.

The “Deep State” narrative targeting civil servants is equally misleading. Federal and state employees maintain our highways, ensure our food is safe and process Social Security checks. When politicians attack them, they’re attacking the system that prevents bridges from collapsing, forecasts the weather, keeps our national parks open and shows up after disasters to literally rebuild lives. These public servants deserve our thanks, not our outrage.

Why would people engage in this persistent effort to create enemies? To distract you from the ongoing dismantling of the government. If you’re mad about trans athletes, you might not notice that hundreds of Federal Aviation Administration employees, including those essential for maintaining air traffic control infrastructure, are being terminated.

You also might not notice the layoffs of workers at the National Weather Service, or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or the National Institutes of Health.

You probably also won’t notice that, since 2017, tax policies have redirected huge amounts of wealth from working Americans to the wealthiest individuals and corporations.

Hundreds of demonstrators gathered March 3 outside the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Silver Spring, Maryland, to protest against the Department of Government Efficiency firing about 800 probationary staff at NOAA, one of the world's premier centers for climate science. Chip Somodevilla, Getty Images

We should absolutely have a thoughtful debate on immigration policy, government efficiency and education funding. But demonizing entire groups serves only to distract from the real problems facing America.

When we are caught up in fear and anger, we miss what is happening in plain sight. We lose track of why our schools are underfunded, or why bridges and roads are crumbling, so that billions in tax breaks flow to wealthy donors and corporations. If we are angry at immigrants who picked the lettuce for our salads, we are not demanding accountability from those in power.

Today it's university faculty, immigrants and civil servants on the enemies list. Tomorrow, it could be you. Anyone who challenges power can be transformed into a threat with frightening speed. Just ask the Capitol Police who faced down the Jan. 6 rioters.

So, yes, I am on that enemies list. But I wear it as a reminder that demonizing people is a strategy to distract from real issues. The next time you hear about a new "threat" from some supposed outsider group, ask yourself: Who benefits from that anger? Who wins when we focus on scapegoats instead of a system that shifts wealth to a tiny elite?

It is time we see these tactics for what they are and recognize who the real enemies are: not our neighbors, classmates or coworkers, but those who profit from division, anger and confusion.

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