

DECLARATION OF DEFIANCE

In the Land of Lincoln, the State of Illinois, the governor is a Jewish Ukrainian-American named J.B. Pritzker.

On April 27th, the governor delivered a speech that both enraged and inspired — and now, with the blessing of the governor's office, I offer you his words, only slightly edited for our setting here today:

A Declaration of Defiance.

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I'm going to give it to you straight.

In this fragile moment, the direction of this nation will turn on whom we choose to listen to,

whose stories we decide to tell about what is happening,

who we elevate and who we ignore,

who we find noteworthy and who we label as just noise.

Who we listen to will shape the way we react to events as they unfold.

We hear plenty of do-nothing types, who assure us that America's house is not on fire, even as the flames are licking our faces.

The blaze is already reaching the rafters, but they tell us, no need to reach for a hose.

Meanwhile, if we took care to listen to the voices of real people, we would hear our neighbors and our friends standing on the streets outside screaming for a response, one big enough for a five-alarm.

Today, I want to talk to you about those people.

I want their voices to be what we hear, their stories to be the ones we tell.

Andie Smith.

She lives in Edwardsville, a small city in southern Illinois.

On February 4th, Andie took a homemade sign to a spot where she figured she would get the most visibility — the intersections of Highway 157 and Highway 143 — and on her own, she lifted up her sign, and started protesting the Trump administration.

Later she told the local paper that on that first day, she felt like a crazy person, standing out there all by herself; and then someone walking her dog saw her sign, stopped, and decided to join her.

That helped, Andie said.

The next day, February 5th, Andie showed up to protest again, and this time, four friends came to join her.

Two days later, on February 7th, the small but hearty band of Edwardsville protesters got their first counter-protester: one guy, who yelled obscenities at them.

But in true Midwestern fashion, that guy later returned to apologize.

Andie Smith's protesters now meet every Friday at 1 p.m.

Last week, there were 300 of them.

Gavin Carpenter. He's a disabled military veteran and a maintenance mechanic at Yosemite National Park.

Every February, Yosemite fills with people waiting to see an event that happens only once a year:

The winter sun lights up a waterfall on the face of the park's most famous cliff, El Capitan.

This year on that day, Gavin climbed to the top of the cliff and hung an American flag upside-down, which is known as a signal of dire distress.

When asked why he did it, Gavin pointed to the cuts that Elon Musk and Doge were making to his beloved national parks, and he said, “We’re bringing attention to what’s happening to our parks, which are every American’s properties.”

Lucy Welch. Lucy writes the daily snow report at the Sugar Bush Resort in Vermont.

Vice-President JD Vance went on vacation at Sugarbush, so Lucy decided to write a very different kind of snow report.

Instead of the usual details about powder conditions and weather, she wrote about what was happening to the diverse and wonderful community of veterans and people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ friends and immigrant workers and people of color.

She wrote about all of these groups being targeted, undervalued, and disrespected by the current administration.

She said, “I am using my relative ‘platform’ as a snow reporter to be disruptive — I don’t have a whole lot to lose. We’re living in a really scary and really serious time. What we do and don’t do matters.”

Andie. Gavin. Lucy. Those are the names we should be paying attention to. Those are the stories that I want to share.

No pontification, no punditry there.

No tortured op-eds about messaging.

No handwringing over which battles to pick.

These three Americans acted on an instinct that we teach our children as one of

their first lessons in life:

When you see a danger, you yell for help at the top of your lungs.

We shouldn't be comfortable ignoring those cries for help.

The fact that so many are speaks to the real reason that progressives lost last November.

What I find ironic about the current conversation in our country is that the *progressive* politicians flocking to podcasts and cable news shows to admonish fellow progressive politicians for not caring enough about the struggles of working families are the same ones who, when it comes to relief of the struggles of real people, have been timid, not bold.

They didn't want to fight the health insurance companies and the drug manufacturers.

They didn't want to demand an increase in the minimum wage or require paid family leave.

They gave in to the powerful hedge fund managers and tech bros whose blind pursuit of profits is now destroying everything that matters to middle-class families, from home ownership to healthcare to veterans benefits.

They told us to ignore the fact that most Americans can't afford a vacation while they're young or retirement once they're old.

Here's the problem with the do-nothing crowd now telling us what to do.

They spent their years watching Republicans illegitimately pack the Supreme Court, take away voting rights from people of color, systematically chip away at the constitutional order — and all the while they offered in response a simple defense of norms and decorum and a blind hope that one day soon, Republicans would wake up to find their better angels.

Well, that got us exactly where we are today.

So folks, the reckoning is here.

And now that this culture of timidity is on full display, those same do-nothing folks want to blame the progressives' losses on our defense of black people, of trans kids, of immigrants, instead of their own lack of guts and gumption. Voters didn't turn out for progressives last November — *not* because they don't want us to fight for their values, but because they think *we* don't want to fight for our values.

We need to knock the rust off of poll-tested language, decades of stale decorum. It has obscured our better instincts.

We have to abandon the culture of incrementalism that has led us to swallow the cruelty and the callousness with barely a cowardly croak.

It's time to fight everywhere and all at once.

Now let's start with something that should well be easy — to say it's wrong to snatch a person off the street and ship them to a foreign gulag with no chance to defend themselves in a court of law.

And I want to be clear, this is not an argument about immigration, this is an argument about the Constitution.

Trump arrested and deported three children under 8 years old, all U.S. citizens — one of them a 4-year-old with stage 4 cancer.

Let that sink in.

This country was founded on the idea of habeas corpus.

It's a fancy legal term that in plain words means no government has a right to arbitrarily take your freedom away from you.

Preserving habeas corpus is not some fever-dream of the left-wing echo chamber.

It's a fundamental concept of justice that people have fought and died for, dating back to the Middle Ages.

It was in the Magna Carta.

It was considered by our nation's founders to be so vital to our liberty that they wrote it right into the Constitution.

Thomas Jefferson called it the essential principle of government.

Benjamin Franklin said that those who would give up habeas corpus for temporary security deserve neither liberty nor security.

Alexander Hamilton wrote that the practice of arbitrary imprisonments has been in all the ages the favorite and most formidable instrument of tyranny.

Franklin, Jefferson, Hamilton.

Standing for the idea that the government doesn't have the right to kidnap you without due process is arguably the most effective campaign slogan in history.

Today it's an immigrant with a tattoo; tomorrow it's a citizen whose Facebook post annoys Donald Trump.

There are plenty of people in this country who hold opinions that I find abhorrent, but my faith, and our Constitution, dictate that I fight for their freedoms as loudly as I defend my own.

And as a Ukrainian-American Jew who helped build the Illinois Holocaust Museum, whose family immigrated here as refugees from the Russian pogroms, let me say this to Donald Trump:

Stop tearing down the Constitution in the name of my ancestors.

Do not claim that your authoritarian power grabs are about combating anti-Semitism.

When you destroy social justice, you are disparaging the very foundation of Judaism.

When the pendulum swings back — and it always does — you will have contributed to the climate of retribution that will inevitably follow.

So let's dispel another myth from the MAGA Republicans:

We progressives believe that undocumented people who are *convicted of violent* crimes shouldn't be allowed to stay in this country.

We want public safety just as much as Republicans do.

And when we get back control of the Congress, and we will — and when we get the White House back, and we will — we'll need to make it a priority to pass real immigration reform, sensible immigration reform.

We need to secure our border.

We also need to attract, and keep, hardworking taxpaying law-abiding people, and give them a path to citizenship.

Immigration, with all its struggles and its complexities, is part of the secret sauce that makes America great.

Immigrants strengthen our communities, enrich our neighborhoods, renew our passion for America's greatness, enliven our music and our culture, enhance understanding of the world.

The success of our economy depends upon immigrants.

In fact, 46% of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or the children of immigrants.

The return on investment for America's 250-year commitment to immigration is incalculable.

But because of Donald Trump's xenophobia, we've already seen foreign students choosing not to attend our universities, and being told to leave.

Businesses overseas are afraid to invest their money here, and to bring their executives to our shores.

Scientists are choosing to innovate in European laboratories instead of American ones.

This was happening in just the first 100 days of the Trump regime!

If the best and the brightest around the world no longer flock to this shining city on a hill, then the U.S. economy is likely to fail.

But failure — it's starting to look like that's the point of all this, isn't it?

We have a Secretary of Education who hates teachers and schools.

We have a Secretary of Transportation who hates public transit.

We have an Attorney General who hates the Constitution.

We have a Secretary of State — the son of naturalized citizens, a family of refugees — on a crusade to purge our country of both.

We have a head of the so-called Department of Government Efficiency — an immigrant, granted the privilege of living and working here, a man who has made hundreds of billions of dollars after the government rescued his business for him — who is looking to destroy the American middle class to fund tax cuts for himself.

And we have a president who claims to love America, but who hates our military so much that he calls them losers and suckers, and who can't be bothered to delay his golf game to greet the bodies of four fallen U.S. soldiers.

And we have a Grand Old Party, founded by one of our nation's bravest presidents, Abraham Lincoln — who today would be a Democrat, I might add — but today it's a GOP so afraid of the felon and the fraud that they put into the White House that they would sooner watch him destroy our country than lift a hand to save it.

Yeah, we may have to fix our messaging and our strategy, but our values are exactly where they ought to be.

And we will never join so many Republican politicians in that special place in hell reserved for collaborationists and cowards.

It's time for us to be done with optimism about their motives or their objectives.
Time to stop wondering if we can trust the nuclear codes to people who don't
know how to organize a group chat.

It's time to stop ignoring the hypocrisy of wearing a big gold cross while
announcing the defunding of children's cancer research.

It's time to stop thinking that we can reason or negotiate with a madman.

Time to stop apologizing when we were not wrong.

Time to stop surrendering when we need to fight.

Our small businesses don't deserve to be bankrupted by unsustainable tariffs.

Our retirees don't deserve to be left destitute by a Social Security Administration
decimated by Elon Musk.

Our citizens don't deserve to lose health care coverage because Republicans want
to hand a tax cut to billionaires.

Our federal workers don't deserve to have a 19-year-old DOGE bro called Big
Balls destroy their careers.

Autistic kids and adults who are loving contributors to our society don't deserve to
be stigmatized by a weird nepo baby who once stashed a dead bear in the
backseat of his car.

Our military service members don't deserve to be told by a washed-up Fox TV
commentator, who drank too much and committed sexual assault before
being appointed Secretary of Defense, that they can't serve their country
simply because they're black or gay or a woman.

And if it sounds like I'm becoming contemptuous of Donald Trump and the people
he has elevated, it's because — I am.

You should be too.

They're an affront to every value this country was founded upon.

I understand the tendency to give in to despair right now, but despair is an indulgence that we cannot afford in the times upon which history turns.

There is a way out of this mess.

Never before in my life have I called for mass protests, for mobilization, for disruption.

But I am now.

These Republicans must not know a moment of peace.

They have to understand that we will fight their cruelty with every megaphone and microphone that we have.

We must castigate them on the soapbox, and then punish them at the ballot box.

They must feel in their bones that when we survive this shameful episode of American history with our democracy intact — because we have no alternative but to do just that — that we will relegate their portraits to the museum halls reserved for tyrants and traitors.

And when the courage of our civic leaders waivers, when they fail to stand up for our country in its moment of greatest need, then we should remind them that cowardice always comes at a cost.

In the world's most successful republic, no generation of Americans has escaped our true inheritance — the test that we are given that asks how hard we are willing to fight to keep our society free.

It was selfish to think that ours would be the first.

But the fact that we are still here debating the question tells me our predecessors never failed this test in the past, often in situations just as dire as the one in front of us.

Cowardice can be contagious, but so too can courage.

And courage born during times when complacency beckons like a siren call is the

most important kind of courage.

Just as the hope that we hold on to in the darkness shines with its own special light, these days I cling to the courage and the hope demonstrated by Andie and Gavin and Lucy.

Courage and hope that risks limbs and livelihoods to go to the most visible place possible, to wave a sign, or to post an upside-down flag, and remind everyone that *what we do, and what we don't do, matters*.

So today I'm telling you what I'm willing to do, and that's fight — for our democracy, for our liberty, for the opportunity for all of our people to live lives that are meaningful and free.

I see around me people who are concerned.

But are you ready for the fight?

* * *

That's the essence of Governor Pritzker's speech.

They're his words, but I agree with most of them.

Now, speaking just for myself, I confess, in the current crisis I have hesitated.

By nature, I'm an approval-monger. I avoid controversy. I like to smooth over any differences of opinion. Finesse relationships.

I was born to a Republican family. My parents, 93 and 92 years old, are lifelong Republicans. I love them. I don't want to hurt them.

I remember watching the Republican National Convention on TV with them when I was 8 years old; we cheered for Barry Goldwater.

I was a Republican most of my life. I voted for Reagan twice. George Bush Sr. twice. George W. Bush twice.

Some of my very best friends to this day are Republicans. I don't want to damage those relationships.

Yes, it was Republicans who chose Donald Trump, and then excused him, and stuck with him, and who continue to defend him, whatever he does.

But because of my natural inclination, which is to make friends and keep friends, I haven't wanted to publicly call out Republicans.

So I've rationalized.

I've told myself this crisis will blow over, I'm being an alarmist, who do I think I am, believing I can make any kind of a difference?

I'll just keep my head down, stay out of it, let this work itself out.

But when the Trump administration started abducting people, and packing them off *without due process*, to prisons overseas, and claiming there was no way to get them back, in defiance of court orders, and chortling online, *They're not coming back!*—

When Trump tells the president of El Salvador to build more prisons because he intends to seize and deliver more of us — and yes, I mean *us*: Trump said, and I quote, “Homegrown are next”—

When even this week the *Washington Post* reported that since the El Salvador imprisonment, Venezuela has accepted at least two deportation flights a week—

It finally occurred to me that keeping your head down, and staying out of it, and letting it work itself out, is how lots of people have responded down through history in other countries, when other totalitarian regimes took power.

Do I need to name the countries?

I feel a certain risk, speaking out like this.

The danger of backlash. Retribution.

Retribution is verbatim what Donald Trump promised.

Will I lose friends? Will I be disowned by members of my family?

Will clients fire me, so my family and I suffer financially?

Will I suddenly find myself being audited?

Will my Social Security checks stop coming because my name has been moved to
a list of dead people?

Will my passport be revoked?

Will my home be targeted? Will my family be targeted?

Will I be detained? Will I be deported?

Will I suffer violence? Will I survive it?

But when I heard Governor Pritzker's speech, I couldn't sit silent any longer.

What he said rings true.

If I don't have the courage to risk retribution, the perpetrators have their way.

And I perpetuate the problem. I'm complicit.

My only choices are courage, or complicity.

I have to speak out. I have to fight back. I have no choice.

Because America has already become too Nazi Germany for me.

So here I am, doing what I can. At the very least, exercising the constitutional right
to free speech, and speaking the truth.

If I can't exercise free speech without retribution, then our country is even further
down the road than I thought.

But I hope this isn't just me taking a risk by speaking the truth.

I hope others will take a chance, and lay hold of this challenge.

I urge you, if you're within the sound of my voice, to take up this same call to
action, this Declaration of Defiance, and deliver it in wherever you are, in
any and every community, all across America.

The text of this presentation is available at DougBrendel.com.

Read the speech wherever you can. Add your own personal commentary at the end, as I have.

Risk retribution. Demonstrate. March. Barricade buildings. Whatever you're able to do to stop the collapse of democracy and decency in this country.

But whatever you do, don't sit silent.

We can't sit silent. Because before we know it, it will be too late.

No surrender. No apologies. Defy tyranny.

