News
Analysis



Trump signs clemency for abortion protesters in Oval Office, Washington, D.C., Jan. 23, 2025.

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February 13, 2025

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Christianity is by far the largest faith in America, and Christian conservatives have a strong grip on the levers of government. That dominance is leaving many to question why President Donald Trump's new task force on eradicating anti-Christian bias is needed.

Critics see the task force initiative as unnecessary and pandering to Trump's base. But some Christian supporters said it is overdue, claiming the Biden administration had discriminated against them through actions and inactions.

The two-year task force, chaired by Attorney General Pam Bondi and composed of Cabinet and other government representatives, is assigned to review and "identify any unlawful anti-Christian" actions under the Biden administration, change any objectionable policies and recommend steps to rectify any past failures.

A debate over victimhood

Bruce Ledewitz, a law professor at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, criticized the mindset behind the executive order as that of a powerful group claiming victimhood.

The Christian conservative movement — a core Republican constituency — now has significant sway on the Supreme Court and in numerous states, Congress and the presidency, Ledewitz said. And still, they declare, "We are victims," he said.

"There's a struggle for the soul of America," said Ledewitz, who studies the relationship between constitutional law and religion. "We call this a culture war, but it's very deep," animated by the charge "that you people, the Democrats, you are not religious, and we are."

Trump said exactly that at a National Prayer Breakfast gathering on Feb. 6.

"The opposing side, they oppose religion, they oppose God," Trump claimed, accusing the previous administration of engaging in "persecution." President Joe Biden, a regular Mass-attending Catholic, often spoke of drawing on the values of his faith and had warm relations with Pope Francis.

But Ryan Bangert, a senior vice president at the conservative legal organization Alliance Defending Freedom, said the task force is overdue.

He said the Biden administration was "deliberately targeting Christian beliefs through discriminatory policies" on issues such as abortion and gender. These are "not fringe beliefs" and are shared by other religious groups besides Christians, he said.

Do the cases of alleged bias add up to a pattern?

Critics said Trump is claiming to see persecution in distorted case descriptions, a calendar coincidence and other situations that, while raising concerns, don't add up to a pattern.

> "When a majority begins to claim persecution, that is often a license for attacks on minorities," Matthew Taylor said.
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For example, Trump spoke at the prayer breakfast about how he pardoned a set of abortion protesters. He mischaracterized the case of one woman, who was sentenced to prison at age 75, as being "put in jail because she was praying." She and co-defendants were sentenced for blockading an abortion clinic in violation of the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act, enacted in the 1990s after violent attacks on abortion providers.

But Bangert said the Biden administration "severely weaponized" the FACE Act, being far more aggressive against anti-abortion protesters than those who vandalized or threatened other institutions protected by the same act, including churches and pregnancy centers that counsel women not to have abortions. Those incurred a spate of attacks after the Supreme Court, in 2022, overturned the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that had made abortion legal nationwide.

A Biden-era Justice Department document lists one case of a conviction of three activists who supported abortion rights and vandalized pregnancy centers. That list otherwise documents numerous prosecutions against anti-abortion protesters who blockaded, threatened or disrupted clinic activities.

The act was "simply deployed to prosecute pro-life advocates who, had they been advocating for any other set of beliefs, would never have been prosecuted by the government," Bangert said. "Yet the Biden administration refused to enforce the

FACE Act in cases where pro-life pregnancy centers or churches or synagogues were targeted."

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The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops welcomed the creation of the task force.

"We are hopeful in hearing the news that the Administration is seeking to address anti-Christian bias and incidents, and we stand ready to offer our own insights into how we might ensure that all people are able to fully exercise their religious freedom," said conference spokesperson Chieko Noguchi.

The conference keeps a running list of reports of vandalism and attacks on churches, reporting at least 366 cases of arson, damaged religious statues and other incidents since 2020. The conference's religious liberty committee released a report in 2024 citing a bipartisan list of concerns ranging from mandates from the Biden administration regarding gender and abortion to a crackdown by Texas' Republican attorney general on Catholic organizations serving immigrants.

Trump's executive order claims that Biden-era equal-employment officials sought to "force Christians to affirm radical transgender ideology against their faith" and that another department "sought to drive Christians out of the foster-care system."

Trump claimed the FBI in 2023 "asserted that traditional Catholics were domestic-terrorism threats and suggested infiltrating Catholic churches as 'threat mitigation.'"

The claim emerged from the case of a man who pleaded guilty to a federal weapons charge and who had spoken of intending to kill Jews and other minorities. He had been attending a church espousing traditionalist Catholic beliefs — though not in communion with the pope — where he reportedly sought to recruit others, according to a Justice Department review.

A leaked FBI report cited a purported link between "Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists" and "Radical Traditionalist Catholic" adherents.

A Justice Department inspector general subsequently found "there was no evidence of malicious intent" but that the memo showed a failure to "adhere to analytic tradecraft standards."

Trump also cited a calendar mashup.

Biden had issued a declaration proclaiming March 31, 2024, as "Transgender Day of Visibility," which occurs annually on that date. In 2024, that date also happened to be Easter Sunday. While churches have a range of views on LGBTQ+ issues, the proclamation's timing led to indignant responses from conservative Christian leaders that do not affirm transgender identity.

Looking at the big picture

A White House action focused on a specific religion is not unprecedented. The Biden administration, for example, issued strategy plans to combat antisemitism and Islamophobia.

The secular advocacy group Freedom From Religion Foundation questioned the new task force on the social media platform X, saying "government's job is to protect everyone's rights, not give special treatment to one religion." It questioned whether the task force would "just push a Christian nationalist agenda."

Ledewitz said the task force doesn't violate the constitutional prohibition on the state establishment of a religion — in theory.

"If, in practice, it's going to have government promote Christianity, that violates the Establishment clause," he said.

Ledewitz cited the Supreme Court's 2017 ruling in favor of a Colorado baker who refused to bake a wedding cake for a same-sex couple, saying that his state's Civil Rights Commission showed "hostility" to his religious beliefs.

"Government is not allowed to be hostile to religion," Ledewitz said.

However, Ledewitz said there is no case to be made for U.S. Christians suffering systemic persecution.

Though the numbers of people without religion have grown to about 3 in 10 American adults, Christians still make up nearly two-thirds of the population.

Matthew Taylor, Protestant scholar at the Institute for Islamic, Christian and Jewish Studies in Baltimore, said the task force raises concerns. Taylor's 2024 book, "The Violent Take It By Force: The Christian Movement That Is Threatening Our

Democracy," recounts the role of charismatic leaders who have been among Trump's most fervent supporters.

In a majority Christian country, "it's a bit absurd to claim that there is widespread anti-Christian bias," Taylor said. "When a majority begins to claim persecution, that is often a license for attacks on minorities."

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.