Opinion

Guest Voices



U.S. Vice President JD Vance enters the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site outside Munich, Germany, Feb. 13. He toured the site with a group that included a Holocaust survivor once held there. The next day, Vance met with the head of Alternative für Deutschland, a political party which the German security services monitor as an anti-democratic extremist organization. (AP/Matthias Schrader)



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There is something troubling about Vice President JD Vance's recent tour of Dachau, Nazi Germany's first concentration camp. It's not that he went. Rather, it is where he went and who he met with *after* visiting Dachau on his first official state visit abroad.

Dachau is a place of unimaginable human suffering and Nazi criminality, a place where my great-grandfather, Alois Beer, kept the books and records as the accountant there. I learned about this family secret from a book hidden in the back of my grandparents' bookshelf in the United States. The book was written by a nun about her experiences with a secret group of Catholics who participated in a life-threatening operation to smuggle contraband to clergy imprisoned there. My great-grandfather, for a time, allowed this group to store the illegal goods in his house before they were smuggled to the prisoners. But, one day, he mysteriously stopped. I spent countless hours in U.S. government archives, trying to find out why my great grandfather was dropped from war crimes indictments. Ultimately, it was his involvement in the "food parcel project."

The pictures I saw of Vance at Dachau brought back my own memories of touring the concentration camp more than two decades ago. This is a living history for me. I have spoken with relatives who grew up right next to the camp. I've visited dozens of sites of Nazi atrocities and read hundreds of books about the rise of fascism and authoritarianism. I've read countless books on human psychology, trying to understand how humans could be capable of such evil. I have studied how a democracy can implode in the blink of an eye. Given my family history, I take seriously the words inscribed at memorials at Dachau and hundreds of sites of Nazi atrocity: *Nie Wieder*. Never Again.



Alois Beer kept the books and records as the accountant at Dachau, Nazi Germany's first concentration camp. (Courtesy of Bjorn Philip Beer)

Two decades ago, when I visited Auschwitz, I lost my own childhood Southern Baptist fundamentalist faith in the span of just a few hours. I can’t describe what it feels like to see the piles of victims' shoes. Yet, researching my own family member's involvement in a small act of resistance would open me up to rare but compelling stories of Christian resistance. From people like Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the most courageous acts of selfless resistance against Adolf Hitler were frequently motivated by a faith that boils down the essence of what Jesus preached: a radical love that crosses boundaries and is willing to re-humanize the "other," even at the cost of the self.

The more I studied about this dark time in human history and my family's involvement, I was confronted by a deep paradox: While the church did next to nothing to stop the rise of Hitler, many of those who resisted Hitler after 1933 were directly informed by a literal reading of what Jesus actually preached. The vast

majority of German "Christians" failed to resist Nazism, yet those rare brave souls who did resist were literal in following the Sermon on the Mount. Sound familiar?

Where did Vance go the day after he visited Dachau on Feb. 13? He met with the head of AfD, orAlternative für Deutschland, a political party which the German security services monitor as an anti-democratic extremist organization. It has been unthinkable since the American-led post-war United Nations was created in 1945 that *any* U.S. vice president would even think of meeting with a representative of the far right in Germany. Yet members of the Trump administration — Marco Rubio, Pete Hegseth and Elon Musk — have expressed overt support for radical groups across the globe that no Republican administration would have even considered endorsing just a decade ago. Where is the outrage?

> Why is it that most American "Christians" seem suspiciously ignorant of what Jesus actually preached, including JD Vance? It's as if their New Testament is abridged, as if someone tore out the Sermon on the Mount or the parable of the good Samaritan.
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At home, anyone who thinks Trump is an aberration is kidding themselves. Our democracy today looks eerily familiar to the Weimar Republic before 1933. Trumpism is inextricably intertwined with Christian nationalism, America's homegrown fascist movement that is contemptuous of democracy and the rule of law. A quote widely attributed to Sinclair Lewis says it best: "When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross." After Trump's first GOP debate appearance in 2016, I called my grandfather (who dodged the draft in the Nazi army) because I knew that he would echo what I was thinking: "It can happen here." *It is happening here*.

Prisoners are seen in the Nazi concentration camp of Dachau in 1945.

Prisoners are seen in the Nazi concentration camp of Dachau in 1945. More than 200,000 prisoners were held there and least 40,000 killed there between 1933 and 1945, according to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. (CNS/KNA)

Today, American *citizens* are being absconded to foreign prisons. The Trump administration is invading the constitutional turf of Congress and is openly ignoring court rulings. Due process is being ignored, as the administration flirts with ending habeas corpus. Big law, higher education, and the media are caving to Trump, as judges and mayors are imprisoned, and governors are even being threatened with arrest. It is tempting to lull ourselves into naïve complacency, saying that it can't get worse and that the guardrails of democracy will hold. It's tempting to think that you are safe. No one is safe.

Who are the true followers of Jesus today? Is it the megachurch minions who voted for Trump or the brave Episcopal bishop who stood up to Trump the day after Inauguration Day with a call to empathy and compassion? Why is it that most American "Christians" seem suspiciously ignorant of what Jesus actually preached, including JD Vance? It's as if their New Testament is abridged, as if someone tore out the Sermon on the Mount or the parable of the good Samaritan. Why is it that so few "Christians" actually seem to follow Christ in their lives and their politics? Perhaps what Jesus preached was too heavy a cross for his self-styled "followers." What would Jesus say about this administration cutting USAID funding? What ought a follower of Christ say about the increased deaths of countless thousands innocent children across the globe from malaria, tuberculosis and malnutrition? There is nothing remotely Christ-like about Christian nationalism in America.

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In Weimar Germany before 1933, Christianity as an institution failed to stop the rise of Hitler. Yet, after the iron grip of authoritarianism took hold, some of the most compelling (albeit rare) acts of resistance to Hitler came from Christians who took the teachings of Jesus literally. Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the gestapo, believed: It's as simple as the Sermon on the Mount.

If we are to stop Christian nationalism and the authoritarian momentum of Trumpism (which will outlast Trump), it will be essential for civil society institutions — like the church — to begin a robust resistance based on thousands of small acts of courage. What will this look like? It is up to you to decide. Does being a "Christian" require one to be Christ-like? Or is it just a comforting in-group label to further divide us versus them?

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In addition to political opponents of the Third Reich, some of the first people imprisoned at Dachau were theologians, clergy and priests who dared speak truth to power. I leave you with the words of Martin Niemöller, a priest imprisoned just yards from where my family lived:

> First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out — because I was not a socialist.
>
> Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out — because I was not a trade unionist.
>
> Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out — because I was not a Jew.
>
> Then they came for me — and there was no one left to speak for me.

Niemöller most likely benefited from the contraband stored temporarily in my family's house before it was smuggled into the adjacent concentration camp. Before becoming a vocal Hitler critic, Niemöller supported the Nazis. He changed his mind after 1933, when it was too late. In other words, yesterday's Trump supporter could be tomorrow's resistance hero. There is always a path to redemption and reconciliation.

The Democratic Party will not save us. The courts will not save us. Moderate Republicans will not save us. We need a robust grassroots resistance as our politics falls into the same black hole as German democracy did in 1933. All civil society institutions — especially Christ-literate Christians — must join. This will require a courage that transcends self-interest.