Opinion
NCR Voices



A federal agent walks around at the immigration court at Jacob K. Javits Federal Building in New York, June 9, 2025. (AP/Yuki Iwamura)



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If the Democrats and others opposed to President Donald Trump's authoritarian abuses of our constitutional order can show some message discipline, they now have a consistent line of criticism that might not only unite them internally and also win over any swing voters. Some, not all, of the president's actions are un-American.

First, there is the unwillingness of agents with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency to identify themselves or to show their faces when they are apprehending people. Videos of these encounters are disturbing. In one videotaped instance, an American citizen in Los Angeles was taken by men presumed to be ICE agents, wearing nothing to identify them as federal agents, and their cars were not marked either.

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"Masks bring to my mind the paramilitaries and death squads that seized people and made them 'disappear' during the 1970s and 1980s in Chile, during the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, and in El Salvador during the presidency of Jose Napoleón Duarte," wrote theologian Tobias Winright, himself a former police officer, at America magazine. For those of us with ancestors from former Soviet bloc nations, that terrible time was not only about economic deprivation and a lack of political freedoms; it was the fear of the knock on the door by secret police.

The GOP has its knickers in a knot over the New York City mayoral candidacy of democratic socialist Zohran Mamdani, and they are denouncing socialism hourly. Let's remind them that it is the ICE agents who are behaving like socialism's secret police.

Second, there was the detention of migrants on church property at St. Adelaide and Our Lady of Lourdes churches in the Diocese of San Bernardino, California, as NCR reported last week. The separation of church and state is valued by virtually all Americans, with the exception of a few rabid secularists on one side and a few Christian integralists on the other.

As with all our important constitutional provisions, the spirit of that separation is often as important as the legal letter. Arresting people as they go to or leave a church undoubtedly violates the spirit of our constitution and we should protest as San Bernardino Bishop Alberto Rojas did. But, why not get the letter of the law right, too? Democrats and principled Republicans should introduce legislation banning federal agents from arresting anyone on church property without a warrant. Let's see just how committed they are to religious liberty.

Read this next: ICE agents detain migrants on church grounds at 2 California parishes, diocese says

In his magnificent 1941 State of the Union speech, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt explained the stakes in the fight between the dictators and democracy that had engulfed all of Europe. He finished by sketching a vision of a peaceful, decent world order built upon four freedoms. The second was the "freedom of every person to worship God in his own way" and the fourth was "freedom from fear." Trump's decision to send ICE agents into our places of worship violates both of those most basic, essential freedoms. The U.S. Army Rangers who stormed Pointe du Hoc on D-Day and the Marines who landed on the beaches of Iwo Jima were responding to FDR's vision. They fought so that government agents would never violate a religious space.

Finally, as mentioned last week, there was the president's failure to brief the full congressional leadership, the so-called "Gang of Eight," in advance of the attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities. Republican leaders were briefed, but not Democrats. When the nation engages in an act of war, when soldiers are sent into harm's way, it is the whole nation, not any one party or leader, who stand behind those soldiers.

Some Democrats complained that Trump should have sought congressional approval before launching the attack on Iran. But presidents of both parties have been launching military raids without such approval for years. That dog won't hunt and, besides, it makes the Democrats look wimpy. The fact that Trump turned the congressional briefing into a partisan affair strikes a different chord, an unpatriotic

chord.

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This un-American activity is not like the first two. There is no great video to be made and it would be difficult to frame without relying on members of Congress to provide the testimony. They tend to be dreadful communicators. The case should be made only by someone in uniform or who served in active combat situations and can say, "When I was searching for terrorists in Fallujah, I knew the entire country had my back. Why would we ever lose that?"

With the first two situations, the people who witnessed masked, unidentified ICE agents arresting people and the clergy whose houses of worship were violated can be powerful advocates. There are already a slew of videos on YouTube and elsewhere about the ICE raids. Some of them are searing, all are frightening.

As the country gets ready to celebrate its birthday, Democrats need to remind their fellow Americans of what truly has made America great, and shine a spotlight on these highly unpopular and highly un-American activities the Trump administration has embraced.