Opinion
Guest Voices



National Portrait Gallery which houses Rigoberto Gonzalez's "Refugees Crossing the Border Wall into South Texas." (Wikimedia Commons/Difference Engine)



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The United States exists in a new-old universe. After nearly 250 years of democracy, it seems infected with totalitarianism, racial superiority, anti-communism and all the petrified theories advanced by another populist politician, Adolph Hitler.

Donald Trump did say he would be a dictator on day one.

History will be the judge, but things look rather bleak right now for the democracy side of the equation.

Take art and culture.

During the 12 years of Hitler's corruption of the concepts of law and order, he also attacked what we now call "creatives" and cultural institutions. The backlash against artistic Modernism had begun earlier in Germany's Weimar era, but the Führer fully enforced his own ideas of what comprised art. He banned "degenerate art": Bauhaus, Cubism, Dada, Expressionism, Fauvism, Impressionism and Surrealism. And the regime supported only official painters, sculptors, architects, writers and even actors.

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Things are trending in the same direction in the 21st-century United States. Trump, having gotten himself elected chair of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, has vowed to end "woke political programming" at Washington's premier arts venue.

As an example of what this means, the Kennedy Center hosted a screening last week of "The Revival Generation," a documentary about a "nationwide campus revival movement" drawing Gen Z Americans. Billed as a "call to faith and a message of hope" that "(c)aptures a spiritual awakening among today's youth," the program included a one-hour worship service with "a local worship collective."

Next Trump ordered a review of exhibits at the Smithsonian Museums that has sent curators scrambling to "fix" exhibits Mr. Trump finds too woke. The list of things needing repair at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the National Portrait Gallery and the National Museum of the American Latino focuses on mentions of race, slavery, immigration and sexuality.

The artwork that offends the curator-in-chief is not Cubism or Dadaism or Impressionism. Unlike Hitler, Trump has not put Picasso, Duchamp and Monet on the banned lists. Rather, it is Rigoberto Gonzalez's extraordinary "Refugees Crossing the Border Wall into South Texas."

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The list goes on. Some of it is, well, edgy. But it is not of the order of "Immersion (Piss Christ)," Andres Serrano's 1987 photograph of a crucifix submerged in a container of his own urine. Despite an outcry from politicians who tried to defund its sponsors, the piece won an award in a competition partly sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts. Ronald Reagan was president then.

If only Trump would confine his new strictures to art and culture, his populism would be an affront only to the pursuit of beauty. But they cross several lines, assaulting truth as well.

As several mainline faith leaders and the U.S. Catholic bishops have pointed out, the derisive oppression of poor immigrants by members of the current administration is sickening. That some administration officials continue to publicly espouse Christian ethics is mind-boggling.

Government spokespeople bend the truth and present an alternate reality. Then, there are the humorless bureaucrats who can change numbers to suit the master's will. The administration is efficient and punctual, and its leader can do no wrong.

The American republic is aiming for a head-on collision with democracy, and not incidentally is becoming an enigma, if not a laughingstock, to the rest of the free world.

It has to stop.