



GENERAL

## The Charitable Community Steps Up

04.21.25 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



“History teaches,” wrote the authors of [Project 2025](#), “that a President’s power to implement an agenda is at its apex during the Administration’s opening days. To execute [it] requires a well-conceived, coordinated, unified plan and a trained and committed cadre of personnel...”

On Inauguration Day 2025, the second Trump administration launched Shock and Awe 2.0 as the guiding strategy of its First One Hundred Days.

In [How the Republic Falls](#) (April 20, 2025), Georgetown history professor Thomas Zimmer, wrote yesterday: “Constitutional protections suspended. The government purging ‘alien enemies’ and the ‘enemy within.’ Three months into Trumpist rule, despotism is rising in America.”

“On some days,” he observed, “the Trumpist regime’s assault on democratic self-government crystallizes in events that have such a visceral effect on anyone who dares to pay attention that it can feel overwhelming.” For him, “Monday, April 14 – Day 85 since Trump took power – was such a day .... “

Similarly, in [When the Institutions Waver, Civil Society Must Lead](#) (April 19, 2025), nonprofit thought leader Ted Bilich wrote over the weekend about his own tipping point: “I have been reading a lot about fascism since Inauguration Day. It’s dreadful stuff, but it has been necessary....We face an attempt to reject the rule of law and create an authoritarian state. The emergency is upon us.”

He had published a blog post a few days ago, on Thursday, April 17th, “[making the same pitch](#),” but he worried that it “was not strident enough. Now is the time when nonprofits must stand up for bedrock notions about America that may have been left unstated in our mission statements.”



Explaining further, he added: “It never occurred to us that animal welfare organizations, dance companies, after-school programs, and other nonprofits would need to state that they see defending the Constitution as part of their duty as civic entities. I believe that this is because nobody ever thought it would come to this: a sitting President taking unprecedented authoritarian actions, and the majority party in both houses of Congress acquiescing or even encouraging this unlawful power grab.”

### ***The Urgency of the Moment***

“You didn’t sign up for this. But it’s here anyway.” This simple sentiment by Ted Bilich on Saturday is the same one that, last week, had prompted calls for action by major nonprofit coalitions. See, for example:

- *Meet the Moment: A Call to Action for Philanthropy in 2025 (and Beyond)*, presented by the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, in collaboration with Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and the National Center for Family Philanthropy
- *Threats to Civil Society and the Independence of the Charitable Sector* (Thursday, April 17, 2025), Joint Statement by the Council of Foundations, Independent Sector, National Council of Nonprofits, and United Philanthropy Forum

In the last 24 hours, more leading voices from the philanthropic community have sounded the alarm. Based on information gleaned from administration communications, our leaders are saying that there is reason to believe there are about to be additional executive orders directly targeting the nation’s 501(c)(3)s.

For example, John Palfrey, president of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, wrote on LinkedIn: “It seems at this point fairly certain that the non-profit, charitable sector will come under full frontal attack from the United States government this week. I deeply hope I am wrong but all signs point in this direction. If the storm does not hit us, I will give thanks that I was mistaken. \*\*\* We who do the work of supporting charitable efforts in every state in America, every community, are linking arms in advance of this attack. That’s what it means for us to #UnitelnAdvance. We are committed to doing everything we lawfully can to defend the freedom to speak, the freedom to give, and the freedom to invest.”

Diane Yentel, President and CEO, The National Council of Nonprofits, posted this urgent message this morning: “The Trump administration may, as part of its broad assault on civil society, soon issue orders aimed at directly harming or destroying certain nonprofit organizations. We won’t stand for it, and will continue robust defense of the nonprofit sector and its essential work. But please REMEMBER: the Trump Administration \*does not have the authority\* to unilaterally target nonprofits. Any Executive Orders will be the first word on these attempts, not the last. See our latest resource to separate the myths from reality: [https://lnkd.in/eu\\_KyFTC](https://lnkd.in/eu_KyFTC).”

This is the tip of the iceberg of not only the urgent warnings but also helpful guidance and advice from the nonprofit legal community. See, for example, the post on the FPLG Blog this morning by May L. Harris, Esq., MA, our founder and managing partner: *Setting the Record Straight: What the Executive Branch Can and Cannot Do to Nonprofit Organizations* (April 21, 2025).



### ***Conclusion***

There are critical cautions from history in the twentieth century as well as more recently about how rapidly would-be autocrats act to “rubblelize” democracy. See, for example: [\*The Germans have a word for what’s happening in Trump’s America\*](#) (February 28, 2025) [forward.com/opinion](#). There, historian Terrence Perry observes: “As the president lays waste to the rule of law, too many Americans are experiencing ‘Gleichschaltung’ — being brought into line.”

See also: [\*The Nazis Called It Gleichschaltung: Total Political and Cultural Control\*](#) (March 29, 2025) Bill Berkowitz, [dailykos.com](#); and [\*‘Gleichschaltung’— or How Trump is Consolidating Power\*](#) (January 20, 2025) James Louis Bruno, [medium.com](#).

Stay tuned. This is a huge topic that is growing by the hour.

In his substack, [\*What Authoritarianism Means\*](#) (March 16, 2025), historian Thomas Zimmer, noted: “Even critical observers underestimated the speed and scope of the Trumpist assault, they overestimated democratic resilience. What is America now, and what comes next?”

– Linda J. Rosenthal, J.D., FPLG Information & Research Director