

When to Comply, and When to Resist: Strategic Decision-Making in a Time of Authoritarianism

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*This article will be shared to individuals, groups, organizations and institutions for help making their own choices. It will also be a reading assignment to give context to participants in the forthcoming (fall 2025) Dragonfly workshop, **When to Comply, and When to Resist**.*

Tough challenges

Do we change the name of our racial equity program from DEI to comply with Trump's executive order? Or do we hold our ground and keep the name?

Do we shift our client base to stay out of trouble? Or do we stay in the line of fire, helping support groups who may be targeted by Trump?

After our Member of Congress refused to meet with members of the public, protesters spray-painted political messages on the walls of local public buildings. A group we work with frequently asked our group to join their coalition to protect freedom of speech. Do we join? Sign their petition? Go to their protest? Speak out against them?

Do we join a lawsuit against Trump?

Would our organization participate in a general strike?

Is there anything in our power or possession that our group would not spend or sacrifice to stop the regime from dismantling American democracy, imperfect as it is?

Is it more strategic to avoid scrutiny by following the rules or by laying low and hiding? Or, should we join the resistance?

You can get whiplash watching law firms, mission-driven nonprofits, tech companies, and institutions of every size and purpose twist themselves to face questions like these.

In April, Trump threatened to defund Harvard University. President Alan Garber responded that Harvard would never cave over threats to academic independence. Harvard has since sued the Trump administration for freezing federal funding and trying to bar international students from the University. With its well-published principled public positions, Harvard has been held up as brave and bold in its stand against autocracy.

Yet during the same period, with less media attention, Harvard changed its "Office of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging" to the "Office of Community and Campus Life." Trump's demand that Harvard amplify its efforts to fight anti-semitism on campus was a barely-disguised pretext for bullying Harvard, rather than genuine concern for Jewish people on campus, but President Garber responded to this particular request as if it were a sincere request. In July, Harvard made public its intention to comply with several of the administration's other demands.

This article is meant to frame decision-making in the era of rising government authoritarianism. The US administration's show of force on city streets and its frivolous investigations, anti-immigration overreach, political retaliation, and use of threats require businesses and non-profits to make unprecedented organizational decisions.

As your own organization grapples with more and more agonizing choices, this article will help you think through these choices:

- How do we take care of ourselves?
- Should we try to end the growing tyranny of this government?
- How do we meet the moment with our own best contribution?
- How do we protect what is beautiful and vulnerable in our communities?

Above all, we are called upon to respond with a conscious strategy, rather than the strategic habits we may have become accustomed to. I hope the framing offered here helps make sense of these excruciating choices – both the ones you may face, and the ones you see others making.

A range of responses

With a barrage of horrible actions coming from the White House,. we have witnessed the gamut of responses from institutions and individuals:

- *Complying* to avoid the possible consequences of failing to comply
- *Laying low*, either to manage limited resources or to get in position for a future win
- *Resisting* the demands of the administration for reasons of strategy, principle, or fear
- *Taking initiative* to be part of the project of dismantling the authoritarian regime

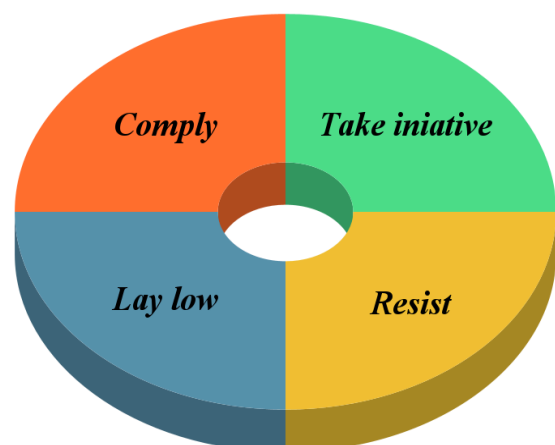
We have seen many examples of each approach:

Compliance

We have seen groups fall in line with the administration quickly – or after pressure has been applied. The law firm Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison was targeted by a Trump executive order. They made a deal with Trump’s lawyers to avoid sanctions and preserve their business. At least eight other law firms “complied in advance,” negotiating agreements to evade punishment by Trump before even being targeted.¹ Republican Congressional leadership has overwhelmingly supported the President despite plenty of evidence they are going against their own commitments to constituents in doing so. And with pressure, Columbia University collapsed into the arms of the Trump administration.

Laying low

We have seen groups duck or hide from the administration’s executive orders. Among the



¹ Data as of May 2025. See the [Biglaw Spine Index](#) for updates and my further references to law firm responses to Trump’s EOs.

biggest 200 US law firms, 168 have been silent in the face of Trump's orders against their fellow firms, neither trying to make preemptive deals nor speaking out against the administration's policies. Among the silent top-200 firms, 36 have deleted DEI-related information from their websites. Some businesses and nonprofits continue to work on diversity and racial equity, calling it something else. Others have abandoned any commitment to address disparities based on race, gender, disability, or immigration status altogether. Individuals are making parallel choices – you may know Americans who have discovered pathways to establish citizenship in other countries; so do I.

Resistance

We have seen national advocacy groups that campaign for a progressive political agenda recast themselves as the vanguard of principled resistance to autocracy. The ACLU filed 53 lawsuits against the Trump administration in its first 100 days. Labor unions have been rising up and pushing back. Individual champions have also emerged. In March, attorney Rachel Cohen left the law firm of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher and Flom when it caved to the Trump administration's demands, [warning](#) that “if the nation's most powerful lawyers will not stand up for legal process, who will?” David Huerta, the Service Employees International Union leader was arrested in Los Angeles in June at a protest against Trump's immigration crackdown, and is now held up in mainstream media as a hero of democratic struggle.

Millions of Americans respond to each other's calls for protest by showing up en masse in big cities and picketing in hundreds of small towns whose citizens overwhelmingly voted for Trump. Ordinary people who live in the US capital have harnessed anger at Trump into a resurgent Free DC movement focused on the fight for home rule. Campuses continue to be hubs of protest, with students galvanizing public support for foreign students targeted by ICE. New Yorkers nominated outspoken resister State Representative Zohran Mamdani for mayor.

Taking initiative

We have seen new formations with novel initiative-oriented agendas fresh for this moment. The national network 50501 formed to protest authoritarian rule. Government workers founded the Federal Workers Against DOGE to organize pushback against the administration's massive “reductions in force.” A group of lawyers called Democracy Forward uses the courts to defend democracy and civil rights from Trump and the far right.

New Projects have emerged to replace government services with community-based solutions to meet people's basic needs. They describe their contribution as mutual aid, or the “prefiguring” of a sustainable economy that works for all. Faculties have begun to create [Mutual Academic Defense Compacts](#) among universities who commit to supporting each other legally and financially should any among them be targeted by the Trump administration. This includes the Big Ten Academic Alliance, joined by over half of the Big Ten universities whose presidents and faculty members are essentially resisting in advance.

How to decide?

When you face these choices about how to respond to the outrageous challenges of the Trump administration, three questions can get you most of the way to a solid answer:

1. What are your highest-priority values?
2. What is your role in ending authoritarianism?
3. What is your level of strategic fitness?

First, you need to get clear about what matters to you. Identify your values and rank them in order of priority. These likely include care for yourself, your people, your sustainability or profit, and your purpose. You can also choose to value your organization's role in ending the authoritarian regime. It is possible to protect your organization's interests while helping to end autocracy. Because autocracy doesn't care about your priorities, and is likely to undermine them, you will need to do both.

Next, grounded in your organizational values and priorities, you can learn how this regime can end, and you can discover how you can help. Identifying your role in bringing down the regime gives you a provisional strategy. To do this you must understand how autocracies are dismantled and identify your organization's potential leverage in carrying out the dismantling.

Finally - this moment requires you to develop and exercise strategic fitness. Strategic fitness is the practice of becoming more conscious of the choices you make about whether to resist, to comply, to lay low, or to initiate a response. It requires unearthing realities previously beyond your perception, and identifying risks that could derail your strategy. It is about checking your work. Where is your thinking muddy? Where is your knowledge lacking? Where does your typical approach to changes in policy or politics block your perception of what's needed in this uniquely dangerous moment?

Let's dive into each of the three steps – assessing your values; assessing your role, and assessing your strategic fitness.

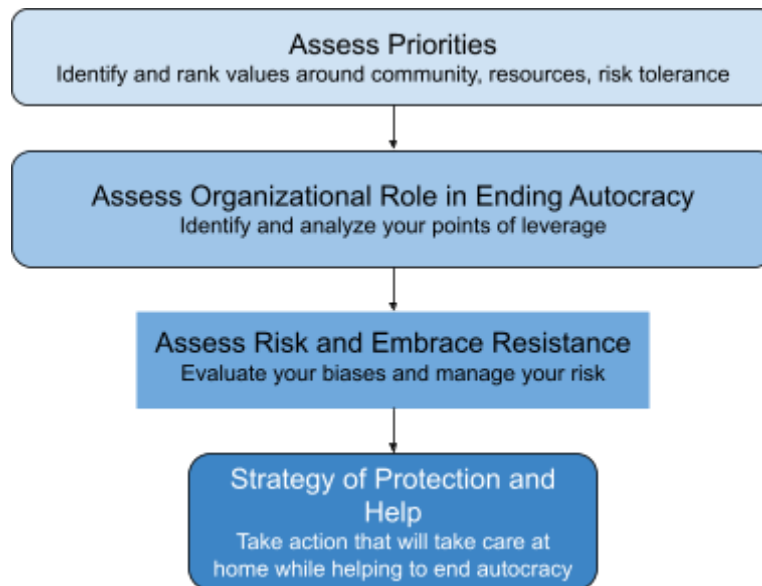
What are your highest-priority values?

What should you do to protect yourself under an autocratic regime? What are your bedrock values or principles? What would you risk your safety for? What do you care most about?

When pressed to make a decision quickly, you will, at best, do what you have thought through beforehand, and at worst, follow an instinct or habit. Our instincts are formed from our experiences and learning, and may not be sufficient to manage the unusual challenges we will increasingly face under authoritarianism.

Your consciously prioritized values will help guide you in making strategic choices now and when you're under pressure. You have principles about guarding what is close to you – the organization's mission, your ability to pay the organization's bills, to pay salaries, to be well. Our own reputation and the wellbeing of your staff, board, members, constituents, clients and

customers may matter to you the most. Your values surely include your own family and community.



You and your people also care about the world around you and your impact on it. You may value specific elements of a just society – racial equity, universal access to health care, the sustainability of life on the planet, freedoms of speech and assembly, the protection of immigrants. Look at what matters to your people about society as a whole, people you can't name but whose welfare you care about.

Go beyond simple or superficial answers. For example, is the law important to you? When Trump ignores the rule of law, do you want to fight for him to uphold it? When the rule of law is under attack, what matters most – the rule of the law that has been undermined? The law itself? Societal respect for the law – the social contract that means most of us generally follow it when we're not fighting to change it? Is the value of the law the order it gives us? Or is it the values that underlie it?

Be sure to rank the values you have named. You will want to choose the best way to support freedom and democracy while simultaneously caring for your organization, your people, your purpose, and your principles. It is worthwhile even to rank the relative priority of your care for yourselves and your contribution to ending authoritarianism. These may not be in opposition to each other, but they may wind up in tension.

Your challenge should be to identify what is most important to you and your organization in a pooled set of values that includes internal as well as external commitments. There is challenge but also relief in this exercise; it's an opportunity for your decision-makers to sharpen their thinking about what is most important to them.

With clarity about your priorities, you can locate your organization's role in bringing down the authoritarian regime in the White House. You will be well on your way to choosing your strategy.

What is your role in ending authoritarianism?

Let's start with the big picture. What, if anything, can be done by anyone or any group of people to take down the Trump administration? Students of authoritarian regimes have identified patterns to successful take-downs:²

- Street protest grows from the margins to become massive as increasing numbers of citizens come to feel more pain than protection by the regime.
- The voices of marginal truth-tellers on social media get more plentiful until it is accepted in mainstream media to name the realities of authoritarianism.
- Popular protest takes the form of mass organized noncompliance such as large-scale consumer boycotts and general strikes.
- More and more people associated with the autocrat defect.
- As insiders defect, critical institutions like the educational system, religious institutions, the federal workforce, business and eventually the whole economy, and finally the police and military – the pillars that support the regime – crumble or cave.

All the dismantling may seem like the work of full-time activists. It can be challenging to decide whether you should comply, lay low, resist, or take initiative against government demands, or whether and when to partner with or try to influence other groups to move in the direction you've chosen.

To help make this choice, you could deliberate on these questions: What are your strategic strengths? What is the organization's capacity in terms of time and money? What is a manageable level of financial, reputational, or other risk for your organization? How do members, staff, or other stakeholders *feel* about the different types of responses to Trump? What is the story you want to tell about your organization's role in dismantling the autocrat?

Most of us already identify more strongly with one approach or another. We may even judge those whose choices don't match our own. If you take a minute you'll notice that individuals, and groups, get used to being either advocacy-oriented, and in fight mode; negotiation-oriented, and prepared to make deals; or conciliatory, and ready to lay low. Few of our teams, organizations, or communities of practice specialize in the combination of negotiation, conciliation and resistance. With the notable exception of labor unions, there aren't many such organizational cultures in our economy.

All of this means that to decide whether to comply, lay low, resist, or take initiative in response to rising authoritarianism in the US, it will help to move from strategic habit to more conscious strategy. We must build our strategic fitness to meet the moment.

² Brecher, Chenoweth, Gandhi, Hunter, Lakey, Mandela, Merriman, Popovic, Sharp, Stephan, York

Assessing your Strategic Fitness

Strategic fitness is the practice of becoming more conscious of the choices we make about whether to resist, to comply, to lay low, or to initiate a response in these situations of conflict with the Trump regime. You have probably clarified organizational values before, and you certainly have analyzed your strategic positioning. The hard part now will be looking at the way you make decisions of organizational strategy, and in particular the habits, biases, or automatic responses that you bring to the game. This may require a rigor and an orientation that are new for you.

Are you prone to resisting or laying low? Are you prone to taking initiative, to complying? Is there an inherent caution in your organization or your field that makes you do that? Is there something about the structure of an established organization that makes you want to maintain the existence or robustness of the institution more than your mission and perhaps even more than its people?

Strategies needed to end authoritarianism are not ones you're accustomed to choosing. Noncooperation, defection, and dismantling the pillars that sustain our government are not ordinary moves for most of us. We may find a large-scale economic boycott instinctively distasteful, or the idea of a general strike misaligned with our organizational culture, let alone our purpose. We need to get used to the possibility that these choices are the best ones we can make to preserve what we care about and help turn around Trump's agenda.

Our biggest challenge to identifying our role may be the need to ground ourselves in greater Strategic fitness requires us to question our assumptions; seek out points of view that we don't routinely hear; acknowledge that there is a limit, or an edge, to our perception, and get curious about what's beyond it; and seek out the wisdom and experience of people who have experience using the approaches that we generally avoid.

Groups also have tendencies toward or away from resistance, negotiation, and compliance in the ways we make choices or move through conflict *inside* the organization. As a group develops over time, it is influenced by the conflict and decision-making styles of its members, along with their demographic mix, political diversity, personalities, skills, training, and experiences. But the group's style is influenced by its characteristics as a group, too—its internal dynamics and cultural norms, its external collaborators and detractors, events and changes in the world around them, and the accumulated history of the group's past responses to conflict.

In our workplaces, we might see colleagues forming competitive factions around an issue, poised for fights among colleagues or between staff and management. At the same time, we may see others trying to engage in dialogue with those they oppose. In earlier years, in working for racial equity in your organization, you may have encountered -- or been part of -- diverse groups of disgruntled millennials organizing against management. A separate set of staff will

have voluntarily joined a new diversity committee set up by Human Resources, eager to be cooperative contributors.

We find the same pattern when we see groups of activists marching in the streets to demand new legislation, while other citizens' groups work directly with elected officials to change laws. Some environmental groups have cooperated with big business, and others refuse to.

We may have habits of advocating for what we want by playing hard which give us greater comfort choosing resistance in the political context. We may be inclined to lead out front, taking initiative to wrangle fascism out of the White House. However, these habits may also make it harder to go back to two-way communication, and consensual problem-solving, when strange bedfellows have to work together to dismantle one of the pillars.

The stakes are high in our current national circumstances, and our strategies have to be intentional ones. We can't rely on previously successful strategy to achieve something we have never faced. We will need to get conscious of the habits, inclinations, and strategic biases we have developed over time. That will prepare us to craft strategies that work here and now.

Embracing resistance

As we assess our strategic fitness, and get a sense of our habits and biases, we can choose to build new skills and practices that will allow us to meet the moment. In addition to being guided by your values and your desired role in ending authoritarianism, you will need to determine the *conflict strategy* that is grounded in the current political realities you are facing. Conflict strategy can be sorted into three buckets:

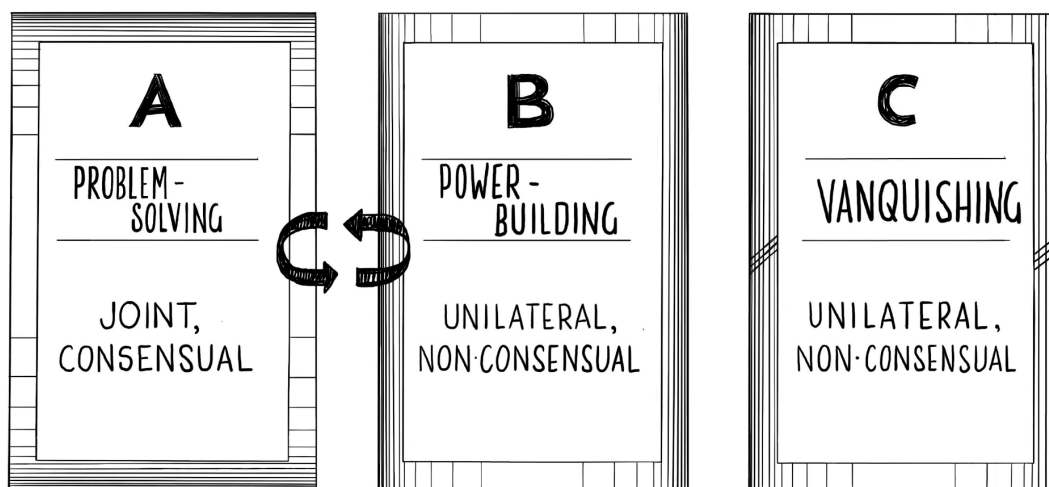
- A. Joint, consensual methods of problem-solving, typically involving talking. This includes approaches like deliberation, negotiation, and mediation. The method is talking; the purpose is solving the problem in a way our needs are met. We can summarize this as **talking to win**.
- B. Unilateral, non-consensual, often confrontational power-building approaches. This includes, for example, advocacy, protest, and noncompliance. Notice that these approaches don't solve our problems; they shift the power dynamics so that talking can work. We can summarize this as **powerbuilding to talk**.
- C. Unilateral, non-consensual approaches to problem-solving. The methods used here may look like the ones in B above, but we are employing them for a different purpose – to resolve issues at our own initiative, without the consent of the other. Besides protest and noncompliance, approaches may include litigation and more coercive methods. We can summarize this as **powerbuilding to win**.

Most of us are used to choosing *talking to win* approaches to solve problems wherever possible. When we get into a conflict with a group or entity that is more powerful than us, we will use a *powerbuilding to talk* approach to change the conditions so negotiation can be fruitful. When we

are more concerned about the problem we're facing than the people or institutions holding the keys to a solution, we may take problem-solving into our own hands and choose *powerbuilding to win*.

Those of us saddled with making strategic institutional decisions can frequently afford to talk to win.. Yet certain critical strategic wisdom is available only from people with a more marginalized experience who can report in depth on the view from below. We may not perceive their wisdom if it looks to us like disorder and chaos. But we may need that wisdom in this moment when talking to win has ceased to be as universally effective as it may have been for us in the past.

If we have a policy or practice of not signing petitions, we may need to change that. If we don't take political positions, we may need to find a way to do that. If we don't make common cause with certain types of groups, it may be time to relax that practice. If we are risk-averse, we will likely need to get accustomed to taking risks for the future occasions when risk-taking is our best strategy.



We will need to choose methods of *powerbuilding to talk* to influence, or even force, potential allies to defect from their pillar positions. We will of course always need the methods of category A, *talking to win*, though now, with people we don't have natural affinity with – even with people who helped elect this president. We certainly need to use the methods of category C, *powerbuilding to win*, because we will not be negotiating the end of authoritarianism with the authoritarians.

The actions groups take in categories B and C may seem similar, but they are going different places. Groups in B are building power to take over to category A for joint resolution. Groups in C are building power to prevail over their opponents and resolve their conflict unilaterally. In short, power is built in B and C, and conflicts are resolved in A and C.

In confronting the regime, winning requires either a C strategy or a chain of B campaigns in an extended struggle to change the fundamental arrangements of power. Resistance must be constant. That's why Civil Rights movement leader Ella Baker spoke strategy when she said, "We who believe in freedom cannot rest until this happens."

This incremental use of mobilized power by the weak to change the prevailing arrangement of institutionalized power constitutes one of the most powerful applications of category B – powerbuilding to talk. But with Trump we won't ever have a negotiating partner. Strategy for taking down an authoritarian regime requires the dismantling of pillars, and the regime held up by those pillars will hardly consent to their demise. With Trump, we will be applying category C. We will be powerbuilding to win, an approach that will require its own comprehensive, coordinated strategy.

Assessing risk

We have to make wrenching choices in the face of new and vexing external forces. But now that you have both prioritized your values and cultivated awareness of your preferred approaches to problem-solving inside conflict, a fuller range of considerations is embedded in your assessment. Now, when you ask, "what could go wrong?" and "what impact will it have if it does go wrong?" you will be considering the impact on your organization as well as your contribution to dismantling the regime.

By adding rigor to your risk assessment and increasing your strategic fitness around decision-making, you will emerge with a more conscious strategy for meeting this moment.

From hindsight toward the horizon

To Thomas Jefferson, the moment of resistance for a people against its government is "when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism." He wrote in the *Declaration of Independence* that even when a society is mistreated terribly by its leaders, the people tend not to run out and scrap the government. They only do that when things get really out of hand. Here is Jefferson justifying the revolution against King George III:

We hold these truths to be self-evident – that all men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable rights... That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it... Prudence, indeed, will dictate, that governments long established, should not be changed for light and transient causes... But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is

their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.

Our founders were white male land owners and slave owners who believed in preserving government - hardly bastions of radical left thinking. They too had to prioritize their values, determine their role in ending tyranny and assess their strategic fitness. Not that Thomas Jefferson was so special. But it can be useful to reclaim that piece of our history – that our government was intended by some as an imperfect remedy to a tyrannical reality.

Now, you get to play your part in bringing about the end of the tyranny we inherited in 2025. As Langston Hughes wrote:

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.
(It never was America to me.)

...We must take back our land again,
America!
O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!