

TRUMP IS NOT ON A “RETRIBUTION TOUR;” HE’S ON AN AUTHORITARIAN SPREE

A wave of media commentary about Trump’s lawsuit against Ann Selzer and the Des Moines Register for engaging in First Amendment protected speech has treated it as somehow more ominous than any of the other nuisance lawsuits Trump has filed over the decades.

I’m skeptical whether this marks a newfound escalation (or even whether ABC’s settlement with Trump had any effect at all on it); remember Trump’s lawsuit against the Pulitzer Prize for rewarding NYT and WaPo journalism that (as I laid out) got to the core of the Russian investigation rather than the stuff Trump distracted people with, which – like the ABC one – won the support of a Florida judge sympathetic to Trump’s bullshit misrepresentations, in this case about the Russian investigation?

This Selzer lawsuit follows a long thread of similar ones that are just as abusive, attempts, like so much else that Trump does, to create his own false reality.

What I do know, though, is that contrary to at least three columns (TPM, Puck, Status), Trump is not on a retribution tour.

retribution

noun

ret·ri·bu·tion ,re-trə-'byü-shən

Synonyms of retribution

1: recompense, reward

2: the dispensing or receiving of reward or punishment especially in the hereafter

3: something given or exacted in

recompense

especially : punishment

Did you know?

With its prefix re-, meaning “back”, retribution means literally “payback”. And indeed we usually use it when talking about personal revenge, whether it’s retribution for an insult in a high-school corridor or retribution for a guerrilla attack on a government building. But retribution isn’t always so personal: God takes “divine retribution” on humans several times in the Old Testament, especially in the great Flood that wipes out almost the entire human race. And retribution for criminal acts, usually in the form of a prison sentence, is taken by the state, not the victims.

Synonyms

payback

reprisal

requital

retaliation

revenge

vengeance

If you believe Trump is on a retribution tour, you are accepting his claim that truthful reporting of (flawed) survey results, or truthful reporting of what sources say about Trump associates’ attempts to cover up their ties to Russia, or truthful labeling of lies as lies, amount to some kind of harm.

If you use the term “retribution” to describe Trump’s attacks on the press, you are accepting his frame that free speech that accurately describes his faults is somehow wrong, an injury to be avenged.

Worse still, if you adopt his frame – retribution – you are normalizing the false claims of grievance that animated Trump’s entire campaign, from the kickoff in Waco to the far right rally in Madison Square Garden – a campaign of grievance explicitly defending insurrection against democracy, as Jonathan Karl

laid out over a year ago.

He declared, "2024 is the final battle."

This wasn't a campaign speech in any traditional sense. Trump echoed the themes of paranoia and foreboding that grew out of the Waco massacre. "As far as the eye can see, the abuses of power that we're currently witnessing at all levels of government will go down as among the most shameful, corrupt, and depraved chapters in all of American history," he said.

"They're not coming after me," he told the crowd. "They're coming after you."

The message seemed to resonate, but its brazenness was staggering. The folks cheering Trump had not taken boxes stuffed with classified documents out of the White House—and it's safe to assume that none of them spent tens of thousands of dollars to cover up an affair with an adult-film star.

Whatever you think about the investigations, Trump invited the scrutiny. Special Counsel Jack Smith was probing Trump's role in the January 6 attack and his failure to turn over that classified material. Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis was investigating his efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential-election results in Georgia. And Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg was nearing an indictment on charges related to hush-money payments Trump made weeks before the 2016 election to the porn star Stormy Daniels.

"The DOJ and FBI are destroying the lives of so many Great American Patriots, right before our very eyes," Trump posted on Truth Social the day after four members of the Proud Boys militia were convicted of seditious

conspiracy for their role in the storming of the Capitol. "GET SMART AMERICA, THEY ARE COMING AFTER YOU!!!"

[snip]

"The sinister forces trying to kill America have done everything they can to stop me, to silence you, and to turn this nation into a socialist dumping ground for criminals, junkies, Marxists, thugs, radicals, and dangerous refugees that no other country wants," he said. The speech was ominous, but one rhetorical flourish stood out. "In 2016, I declared I am your voice. Today, I add: I am your warrior; I am your justice," Trump said. "And for those who have been wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution." He repeated the last phrase—"I am your retribution"—and promptly the crowd started chanting: "U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.!"

When I spoke with Bannon a few days later, he wouldn't stop touting Trump's performance, referring to it as his "Come Retribution" speech. What I didn't realize was that "Come Retribution," according to some Civil War historians, served as the code words for the Confederate Secret Service's plot to take hostage—and eventually assassinate—President Abraham Lincoln.

"The use of the key phrase 'Come Retribution' suggests that the Confederate government had made a bitter decision to repay some of the misery that had been inflicted on the South," William A. Tidwell, James O. Hall, and David Winfred Gaddy wrote in the 1988 book *Come Retribution: The Confederate Secret Service and the Assassination of Lincoln*. "Bitterness may well have been directed toward persons held to be particularly responsible for that misery, and Abraham Lincoln certainly

headed the list.”

Trump’s authoritarian project depends on convincing masses of people that accurate descriptions *about him*, or equal application of the law *to him*, or good faith if flawed efforts to measure the number of Iowans who prefer someone else to be president harm not just him, but them, his followers. Trump’s authoritarian project depends on convincing people that because he can’t withstand truthful descriptions, his followers must oppose the truth as a grievous harm, a crime.

Trump’s authoritarian project depends on packaging up his assault on truth as justice.

That’s what you buy into when you use the word “retribution” to describe what he’s doing.

No person who cherishes journalism, truth, democracy should be a party to that kind of obfuscation.