

The Contrarian

**Undaunted**

## **Four Undaunted Individuals**

Heroes propel the virtuous cycle of resistance

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When historians review the Trump Presidency 2.0, they may well cite this week as a tipping point.

From collective action in civil society (colleges and nonprofits) to courts (on the MAGA effort to steal the North Carolina Supreme Court election, Voice of America), to the government's noncompliance with discovery in the Kilmar Abrego Garcia case, to Democratic politicians' vigorous advocacy (with Minority Leader Charles Schumer standing with nonprofits and four members of Congress traveling to El Salvador on their dime) we saw forceful, effective pushback against the Trump regime. Like many archetypal bullies, Trump frequently backs down when people stand up to him or when he is faced with the consequences of his actions (e.g., backing off firing Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell, shelving the attack on nonprofits, and pausing some detrimental tariffs).

Not everyone is backed by the power of collective action, however. Four individuals this week, acting without institutional or political support, firmly defied authoritarian power plays—and it is their courage that we want to underscore at the end of this inspired week.

Bill Owens, executive producer of the iconic news program 60 Minutes, left rather than consenting to compromise his journalistic integrity. Apparently, the sticking point was his refusal to go along with CBS's ludicrous settlement of a specious claim brought by Trump.

The New York Times recapped the circumstances leading up to the anticipated settlement:

Paramount's controlling shareholder, Shari Redstone, is eager to secure the Trump administration's approval for a multibillion-dollar sale of her company to Skydance, a company run by the son of the tech billionaire Larry Ellison. She has expressed a desire to settle Mr. Trump's case, which stems from what the president has called a deceptively edited interview in October with Vice President Kamala Harris that aired on "60 Minutes."

Legal experts have dismissed that suit as baseless and far-fetched.

As Oliver Darcy reported, Bill Owens told his colleagues in a hastily scheduled meeting that he had become the “corporation’s problem.” And rather than sacrifice his journalistic independence, he decided to leave. Owens refused to do the bidding of another corporate toady willing to sacrifice the independence of an esteemed media outlet. Moreover, he made clear precisely why he was going and encouraged his staff to stay. Redstone and Paramount management may be ready to capitulate (as ABC did in settling a suit against Disney, which was almost as ridiculous as the 60 Minutes case), but Owens was not about to give her cover. He reminded us that individuals always have a choice to refuse to obey authoritarian bullies and their enablers. He remained undaunted and left his office with dignity.

When refusing to obfuscate (or flat-out lie), devoted patriots encourage others to take a principled stance. We saw that same approach in the Southern District of New York, when three more prosecutors—Celia Cohen, Andrew Rohrbach, and Derek Wikstrom—quit rather than “apologize” for refusing to carry out a corrupt “Justice” Department deal to dismiss the criminal charges against New York Mayor Eric Adams.

“The Department placed each of us on administrative leave ostensibly to review our, and the Southern District of New York U.S. Attorney’s Office’s, handling of the Adams case,” they wrote in their joint resignation letter to Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche. In leaving, they joined a fleet of other prosecutors (including Acting U.S. Attorney Danielle Sassoon) who resigned, bringing the total to at least ten.

“It is now clear that one of the preconditions you have placed on our returning to the Office is that we must express regret and admit some wrongdoing by the Office in connection with the refusal to move to dismiss the case,” the prosecutors wrote. “We will not confess wrongdoing when there was none.”

Quite simply, they would not go through with a false confession reminiscent of a communist regime.

Most importantly, the three lawyers restated the essential obligations of a prosecutor:

[A] a prosecutor must abide by the oath to uphold the Constitution and laws of the United States, and the rules of professional ethics set by the bar and the courts. The Department has long understood that these duties can and should coexist with the need to follow Department policies and orders. This is to the benefit of all: the courts, defendants, and the public, who can have confidence in the good faith and judgment of line prosecutors; the Department, which retains credibility while still receiving zealous advocacy from its lawyers; and the prosecutors themselves, who can stand in court confident that they are ethically carrying out their duties.

Now, the Department has decided that obedience supersedes all else, requiring us to abdicate our legal and ethical obligations in favor of directions from Washington. That is wrong.

These recent acts of defiance, both individual and collective, remind us of three essential lessons in the fight to defend democracy.

First, democracy does not defend itself, nor can we expect politicians to save us from autocrats' clutches. The decision to capitulate or to resist rests with each of us. One can refuse to lie and/or lower moral and professional standards. The sum of all those decisions will determine if Trump's attempted authoritarian coup from within succeeds or fails.

Second, a virtuous circle can develop in defense of democracy: Ordinary people organize and protest; politicians and officials realize resistance is popular, they step up their defense of democracy; and their increased resilience in turn inspires more popular defiance. And so it goes, with increased momentum as one courageous action begets the next. (A side benefit: such defiance humiliates the politicians and civil society appeasers who claimed to have had no choice but to go along with the autocrat.)

Finally, individual actions do not immediately defang autocrats. Until removed from power, the Trump regime will continue destroying functional government, violating civil liberties, and weaponizing the justice system against Trump's enemies. But with every loss, the MAGA cult leader's veneer of invincibility cracks. In persisting despite losses, the autocrat will likely annoy his allies, anger the courts, and reveal his own mind-numbing incompetence. Coupled with the appalling mismanagement of the economy, Trump's power and the MAGA Republicans' grip on the levers of government thereby will be diminished until—we must hope—we, the voters, throw them out.

For now, we salute the Undaunted heroes, Bill Owens; Celia Cohen, Andrew Rohrbach, and Derek Wikstrom. They have set an example for others to follow.

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Jennifer Rubin is Editor-in-Chief of The Contrarian, independent media published at substack. Free and paid subscriptions are available.

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