

THE ATLANTIC DAILY

The Natural End Point of Trump's Falsehoods

Someday, the president may need the American people to believe something he says—and they won't.

By David A. Graham



Al Drago / Bloomberg / Getty

AUGUST 26, 2025

This is an edition of The Atlantic Daily, a newsletter that guides you through the biggest stories of the day, helps you discover new ideas, and recommends the best in culture. [Sign up for it here.](#)

If you're looking for reasons to be skeptical about the [FBI's raid on John Bolton's home](#) last week, you don't have to look very hard.

Bolton has been an outspoken critic of Donald Trump more or less since the day he left his role as national security adviser in the president's first administration, and Trump has been calling for his jailing for years, as my colleague [David Frum](#) wrote. The raid was conducted by the FBI, which is led by Kash Patel, an unqualified pick who [lobbied for the job](#) by promising retribution against Trump's enemies—including Bolton. The FBI seems to have tipped off the [friendly New York Post](#) to the raid. And

although Bolton has not been charged with any crimes, he is reportedly being investigated for the mishandling of classified documents, which is particularly rich coming from the Trump administration. (Bolton has not commented directly on the raid, save for an oblique mention in a column published today.)

So many reasons for skepticism exist, in fact, that even if Bolton has committed serious crimes, a substantial chunk of the population might never believe it. A durable minority of Americans appear willing to follow Trump, no matter what he says or does, but the rest are voters who could swing either way or who are hard-set against him. In the immediate aftermath of the raid, even long-standing hatred of Bolton didn't prevent many left-of-center observers from flocking to his defense. Although Trump's attempts to undermine objective truth for his own political ends have received much attention, this incident points to how his chronic dishonesty could come back to haunt him. Someday, the president may need the American people to believe something he says—and they won't.

In an *Atlantic* cover story last summer, my colleague Anne Applebaum chronicled how modern-day authoritarians in countries such as China and Russia erode truth, not by convincing people to believe lies but by just wearing them down with so many:

This tactic—the so-called fire hose of falsehoods—ultimately produces not outrage but nihilism. Given so many explanations, how can you know what actually happened? What if you just can't know? If you don't know what happened, you're not likely to join a great movement for democracy, or to listen when anyone speaks about positive political change. Instead, you are not going to participate in any politics at all.

This will sound familiar to Americans as well. Yesterday, Trump claimed that Maryland Governor Wes Moore—a Democrat who campaigned vociferously against

Trump in 2024—told him, “Sir, you’re the greatest president of my lifetime.” This is such a laughable claim that Trump couldn’t have expected people to believe it, yet Moore felt compelled to deny it, and the press felt compelled to fact-check it. That digging is admirable, but it won’t deter Trump from sowing doubt.

Once you see the pattern that Applebaum described, its effectiveness for a political movement seeking power is clear enough, but it also has drawbacks for a government that (for now) depends on democratic legitimacy. One of the first victims might be the FBI itself. As the former special agent Asha Rangappa wrote in *The New York Times*, “An F.B.I. that is not perceived as legitimate will have a more difficult time gathering information and intelligence for its cases, which are often provided voluntarily by individuals who believe in its mission.”

Last night, Trump announced that he was firing Lisa Cook, a member of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, after Bill Pulte, the housing heir whom Trump appointed to lead the Federal Housing Finance Agency, levied accusations of mortgage fraud against Cook. Here, again, there are reasons for doubt: Trump has fired many top Black or female leaders in government; he’s waging a campaign of political pressure against the Fed. Cook is challenging the firing in court and has not been charged with a crime, although, ironically, Trump has been found liable for extensive, long-running fraud in real estate. The Supreme Court suggested in May that a president can’t remove a Fed governor except for cause, so Trump is claiming cause. But why should anyone believe him?

Lower courts have become markedly more skeptical of arguments coming from government lawyers, *The New York Times* reported earlier this month. The court system is adversarial, but judges have heretofore assumed they can defer to representatives of the federal government on some matters. The Trump administration’s equivocations and evasions in arguments this year have led many judges to withdraw that benefit of the doubt, slowing cases down. A president who says he wants swift justice is instead gumming up the system.

This lack of credibility can manifest in ways both large and small. On a global stage,

Trump will have a hard time brokering the peace deal in Ukraine that he so badly wants, because his vacillation gives neither side much incentive: Russia's Vladimir Putin doesn't fear him, and Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky and his European allies don't trust him. But the effects can also be much more direct for American citizens. The government sometimes has to warn people about ill effects of foods, medicines, or products. But who, other than the MAHA faithful, will believe a Department of Health and Human Services that's led by Robert F. Kennedy Jr.? If a dangerous storm is coming, the government needs to warn those in the path. But who will believe the Trump administration once they've seen a hurricane map that the president altered with a Sharpie?

This is the problem with entirely subjugating governance to immediate political concerns. As one former Trump aide told ABC News in 2020, "He was so focused on the reelection that longer-term considerations fell by the wayside." That insight came from Bolton himself.

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- Trump is getting close to a complete Federal Reserve takeover.
- David Frum: Trump is sending a terrifyingly clear message.

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- Fast times at Immigration and Customs Enforcement
- Life has gotten surreal in China.
- Trump loses a lawyer—and much more.

Today's News

1. A Utah judge ruled that the state must redraw its congressional map, saying the Republican-controlled legislature ignored voter-approved anti-gerrymandering rules by dividing a Democratic-leaning area and reallocating it into four Republican-dominated districts.
2. A federal judge dismissed the Trump administration's lawsuit challenging a court order issued in Maryland that blocks the immediate deportation of migrants contesting their detention.
3. Yesterday, two Israeli strikes on Gaza's Nasser Hospital killed at least 20 people, including five journalists who worked for outlets including Reuters, the Associated Press, and Al Jazeera, according to their employers. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it a "tragic

mishap” and said the incident would be investigated.

Evening Read



Illustration by Akshita Chandra / The Atlantic. Source: Getty.

If the University of Chicago Won't Defend the Humanities, Who Will?

By Tyler Austin Harper

The Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree was lit, COVID-19 was still a mysterious respiratory illness in Wuhan, and I was a Ph.D. candidate in a dying field: comparative literature. I was getting ready to Zoom interview for a tenure-track job near Boston that I almost certainly wouldn't get (and didn't). Sardined with me in a Greenwich Village coffee shop in December 2019, one of my faculty mentors talked me through, for the thousandth time, the questions I should expect the hiring committee to ask me and dispensed advice about how I should answer them. Then we walked back to his office, lined in handsome foreign-language editions of various novels and works of philosophy, where I would sit for the interview. There, he offered a final piece of wisdom: “Don't be nervous. It's just Harvard,” he said, grinning. “It's not like it's Chicago” ...

At least, that's the reputation. And Chicago's reputation is no doubt why, when the university announced recently that it was reducing

Ph.D. admissions for seven departments—among them art history and English language and literature—and outright freezing admissions to others, including classics, the decision was met, in some quarters, with fury and disbelief.

[Read the full article.](#)

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Culture Break

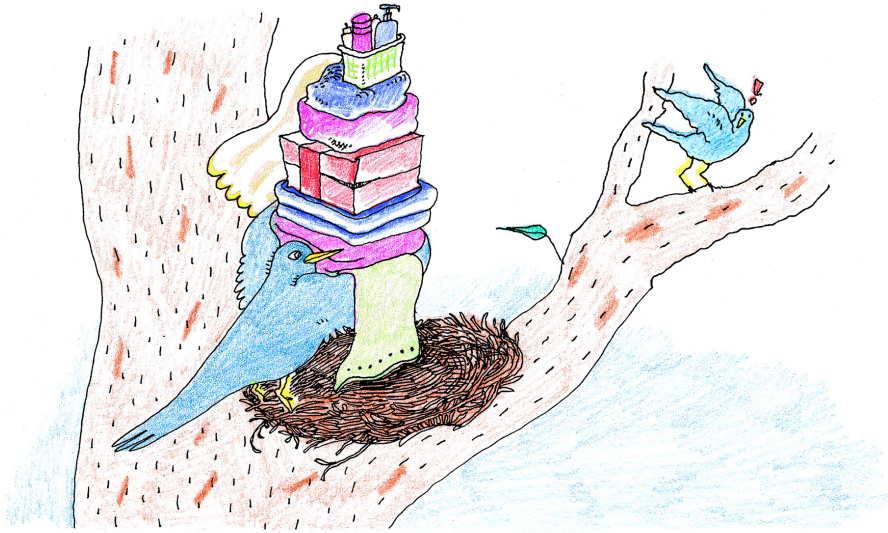


Illustration by Liana Finck

Consider this. Parents are taking over dorm-room furnishing—and, in the process, robbing their kids of an opportunity to practice independence. Meagan Francis writes on the era of peak dorm decor.

Read. “June,” a short story by Daniel J. O’Malley.

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