

Lower Than Cowards

The surrender of America's elites

[Adam Serwer](#) September 25, 2025, 7:31 AM ET



Illustration by The Atlantic

This article was featured in the One Story to Read Today newsletter. [Sign up for it here.](#)

“We have to speak out against this bully,” Jimmy Kimmel said in an [emotional monologue after returning](#) to ABC on Tuesday. The network had suspended him, under pressure from the Trump administration, for remarks last week in which Kimmel [appeared to inaccurately](#) suggest that Charlie Kirk’s killer was a conservative. Kimmel choked up when discussing the violence and praised Kirk’s widow, Erika.

But he also warned his viewers—[an audience four times larger than usual](#)—that Trump and his cronies are threatening free speech in all its forms: “Our leader celebrates Americans losing their jobs, because he can’t take a joke,” Kimmel said. But “he’s not stopping. And it’s not just comedy.” True to form, Trump has since threatened to [sue ABC](#) for bringing Kimmel back, as if it were illegal not to like him.

Enjoy a year of unlimited access to The Atlantic—including every story on our site and app, subscriber newsletters, and more.

[Become a Subscriber](#)

Kimmel's refusal to capitulate stands out because so many other well-situated people—those with the resources, platform, and power to stand up to the president, including, initially, the leaders of ABC—have surrendered, withdrawn, or become Trump sycophants themselves. One by one, American leaders supposedly committed to principles of free speech, due process, democracy, and equality have abandoned those ideals when menaced by the Trump administration. These cascading acts of cowardice from the people best positioned to resist Trump's authoritarian power grabs have made Trump seem exponentially more powerful than he actually is, sapping strength from others who might have discovered the courage to stand up. Defending democracy requires a collective refusal to acquiesce to lawless behavior from many different sectors of society. All of these powerful people trying to save their own skin have effectively multiplied Trump's attacks on constitutional government, by enhancing a false sense of inevitability and invincibility.

ABC and its parent company, Disney, had been menaced into suspending Kimmel by Brendan Carr, the head of the Federal Communications Commission. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way,” Carr said on a [right-wing podcast](#).

He later attempted to [walk back](#) what he'd said—despite what your lying ears may have heard, and despite his [gloating on social media](#). As it turns out, you can't sell your soul to Trump and keep your spine; they're a package deal. Nonetheless, the bullying was effective. Kimmel may have returned to ABC, but two of the network's biggest broadcasters, Sinclair and Nexstar, are still refusing to air him on their stations.

If Trump has been right about anything, it is that there is a deep rot in the upper echelons of American society, among people who have been put in positions of power and leadership. Trump understands that many

of these people are weak, that their public commitment to civic principles can crumble under sustained pressure. In many cases, those folding have had ample resources to resist Trump's shakedowns but haven't been brave enough to do so. They are, in a word, chickenshit.

Don't miss what matters. Sign up for The Atlantic Daily newsletter.

I want to distinguish between *chickenshit* and *cowardice*. Fear is part of human existence. Bravery is the overcoming of fear, not its absence. Acts of cowardice can be provoked by genuine danger—think of a deserting soldier fleeing the peril of the battlefield. When you're chickenshit, you capitulate to avoid the mere possibility of discomfort, let alone something resembling real risk. Disney is one of the largest companies in the world, with a devoted following and a market cap bigger than [many countries' stock markets](#). It did not have to cave.

Big companies and their CEOs have cowered before Trumpist intimidation, trying to ease his temper by [settling frivolous lawsuits](#) over "bias" or slathering the president in [juche-style flattery](#). Media companies have [settled First Amendment cases](#) they were likely to win in order to curry favor or protect their parent company's commercial interests. Newspaper owners have [compromised the integrity](#) of their [own publications](#). Elite academic institutions have sacrificed their independence to try to [preserve their federal funding](#). At least one has [turned the names of its own students](#) over to the government [for potential political persecution](#). Major law firms with deep pockets and armies of lawyers have shrunk from defending the rule of law because they fear Trump's wrath.

Promoting [her book](#), former Vice President Kamala Harris [told the MSNBC host Rachel Maddow](#), "I always believed that if push came to shove, those titans of industry would be guardrails for our democracy, for the importance of sustaining democratic institutions." Now we know most titans of industry won't be fighting right-wing authoritarianism as fiercely as they would a tax hike on private equity.

For years the leaders of the Republican Party, with all its tough-guy bravado, have shrunk from standing up to Trump when it matters. But even the opposition party has been less confrontational this time around. This week, the House [passed a congressional resolution honoring](#) Kirk in part for “respect for his fellow Americans.”

Make your inbox more interesting with newsletters from your favorite Atlantic writers.

[Browse Newsletters](#)

The Congressional Black Caucus [rightfully condemned his murder but also opposed the resolution](#), in part because of Kirk’s view that the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed Jim Crow, [was a “mistake”](#) that had become an “[anti-white weapon](#).” Kirk also called for the most recent Democratic [president to be executed](#), which doesn’t seem very respectful, in all honesty. House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries voted for the resolution anyway, [saying](#), “I look at it as a two-page resolution that doesn’t even have the force of law.”

Everyone always has sound, rational reasons for caving to intimidation. They’re protecting their reputation, their job, their family, their institution, their investments—the number of reasons to succumb to an autocrat’s whims compounds until fighting back can feel like a fool’s errand. Multiply that decision a thousand-fold, and you have a society in which people who could otherwise fight back collectively choose to surrender individually, thinking themselves alone. But in every case, the act of capitulation compromises the very thing those capitulating say they want to protect. Fighting doesn’t always result in victory, but surrendering guarantees defeat. The only people who have preserved their dignity or their rights in dealing with Trump are those who have been willing to stand up to him.

The sheer number of American elites willing to acquiesce to the destruction of democratic institutions is demoralizing. But it’s worth noting that many ordinary people seem to be made of sterner stuff. ICE

detainees such as the Palestinian-rights activist Mahmoud Khalil, for example, have continued to [speak publicly about the administration's abuses](#). These are people who stand to lose their homes, their freedom, their families, and they are showing more courage than people who have summer homes and trust funds. Protesters continue to show up in the streets, risking [being brutalized](#) by armed agents of the state. In Washington, D.C., citizens called to serve on grand juries have [refused to indict people](#) accused by the Trump administration of political crimes.

The people, it turns out, are far more courageous than their leaders.