

Trump Invokes Kirk's Killing in Justifying Measures to Silence Opponents

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President Trump has begun a major escalation in his long-running efforts to stifle political opposition in the United States, using the assassination of the right-wing activist Charlie Kirk to make the baseless argument that Democratic organizations and protesters are part of a violent conspiracy against conservative values and the American way of life.

In the six days since Mr. Kirk was gunned down in Utah, Mr. Trump and his top officials have promised a broadside against the political left, indicating that they would go after liberal groups like George Soros's Open Society Foundations and the Ford Foundation; revoke visas for people seen to be "celebrating" Mr. Kirk's death; begin federal investigations into hate speech; and designate certain groups domestic terrorists.

"We want everything to be fair; it hasn't been fair, and the radical left has done tremendous damage to the country," Mr. Trump told reporters on Tuesday, as he continued to play down and excuse violence on the right. "But we're fixing it."

The threats come even as the authorities said the suspect in Mr. Kirk's shooting acted alone and presented no evidence that political violence is coordinated on one side. Political violence is a scourge across the [political spectrum](#), targeting Democrats and Republicans.

Image

Open Society Foundations' headquarters in Manhattan. The vice president singled out the liberal organization, backed by George Soros, in recent days. Credit...Gili Benita for The New York Times

The 22-year-old man accused of assassinating Mr. Kirk said in text messages to his romantic partner that he had “had enough” of Mr. Kirk’s “hatred,” according to prosecutors who filed a murder charge against him on Tuesday.

Mr. Trump’s aggressive moves to target [only his political opponents](#) is a continuation of his attempts to wield power — through lawsuits, executive orders and public intimidation — to [punish people and institutions](#) that power the political left, or that he believes wronged him. In recent months, Mr. Trump’s aides and conservative activists have worked to shape the kind of crackdown that now appears to be coming to fruition.

“When the left has had power, it has gone after conservatives and their speech, so I am thrilled to see the administration promising to investigate the left-wing nonprofit sector, and hold people accountable,” said Scott Walter, president of the conservative watchdog group Capital Research Center, which monitors money in politics.

Mr. Walter has briefed senior White House officials in recent months on a range of donors, nonprofit groups and fund-raising techniques, while also providing research briefs, including one titled “Marching Toward Violence,” that purported to draw a connection between anti-Israel protests on college campuses and terrorism.

The plans that Mr. Trump and his aides have laid out since Mr. Kirk’s death have fueled fear among Democrats and free speech activists across the partisan spectrum, while energizing right-wing figures who see Democrats and the left more broadly as the enemy.

As a part of the crackdown, Mr. Trump’s aides are crafting an executive order to combat political violence and hate speech that could come as soon as this week, according to a senior administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to preview the action. The person declined to provide details.

Some on the right worry that targeting hate speech could backfire against them next time Democrats are in power by opening what Mr. Walter called “a Pandora’s box that we could all come to regret.” He argued that the administration would be better served investigating whether some of the groups ran afoul of provisions in the tax code.

But the focus on speech does appear to be a key tool for the administration. Attorney General Pam Bondi said the administration would “absolutely target” protesters engaging in “hate speech,” as well as businesses that refused to print memorial vigil posters for Mr. Kirk.

Image

Attorney General Pam Bondi in the Oval Office on Monday. Credit...Kenny Holston/The New York Times

And Vice President JD Vance encouraged Americans to report to employers anyone they noticed celebrating Mr. Kirk's killing.

Trump officials were also laying the groundwork to go after what Mr. Vance described as a network of nonprofit nongovernment organizations that "foments, facilitates and engages in violence."

Speaking as guest host on Mr. Kirk's podcast, Mr. Vance on Monday singled out Mr. Soros's Open Society Foundations and the Ford Foundation and said both benefited from a "generous tax treatment."

Targeting the tax-exempt statuses of nonprofits that are critical of Mr. Trump would most likely face legal challenges.

The Internal Revenue Service only takes that step after conducting a potentially lengthy audit, and an organization has several opportunities to appeal the decision. Federal law also prohibits the president from directing the I.R.S. to audit specific organizations, and I.R.S. employees can face criminal penalties if they obey an order from the White House to do so.

The Trump administration bumped up against these limitations earlier this year when Mr. Trump called for Harvard to lose its tax-exempt status. White House officials strained to argue that any I.R.S. audit of the university was independent of Mr. Trump's public statements.

But there is another method.

Any organization that the White House designates as a terrorist organization loses its tax-exempt status. Mr. Trump told reporters at the White House on Monday he would like to designate a range of unspecified groups as domestic terrorist organizations.

Since the loss of tax-exempt status is automatic, it is much harder for a nonprofit to challenge the decision under a terrorist designation than it is under the normal process.

"To my knowledge, the only way the president or administration could immediately revoke the tax exempt status of a tax-exempt organization would be to go to the terrorism designation route," said Jeff Tenenbaum, a lawyer who specializes in nonprofits.

Losing tax-exempt status can be very consequential for nonprofit groups. Not only may they owe taxes on any income, but donors would no longer be able to write off donations to the group on their own taxes. That could cause funding sources to dry up.

But the administration also cannot easily designate domestic groups as terrorists, according to law enforcement officials. While the State Department keeps a list of foreign terrorist organizations, there is no similar mechanism for designating domestic groups as terrorists.

“Unless I missed a law or a statute, I don’t think there’s something on the books right now,” said Javed Ali, a former senior director at the National Security Council in Mr. Trump’s first term. “I don’t think there’s any sort of provision that would allow the administration to do this.”

Mr. Vance also accused Mr. Soros’s foundations and the Ford Foundation of funding The Nation magazine, which he attacked over its coverage of Mr. Kirk’s death.

But neither actually appears to be a significant backer of the magazine. The Ford Foundation said its only recent gift was in 2019, when it donated \$[100,000](#) to support an internship program. The magazine’s president said that was less than 1 percent of its \$12 million budget for that year.

Both foundations also donated to a journalism nonprofit called Type Media Center, which was once closely affiliated with The Nation. Mr. Vance’s office said his statements were based on those donations, the most recent of which occurred in 2022.

But Type Media Center said those gifts were not used to fund The Nation. Instead, the nonprofit pays for fellowships for individual journalists who write for a variety of outlets, including The Nation.

Both the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundations issued statements condemning political violence.

“We oppose all forms of violence and condemn the outrageous accusations to the contrary,” Open Society Foundations said in a statement. “Our work is entirely peaceful and lawful.”

In its own statement, the Ford Foundation said that “the rise in politically motivated violence is a significant crisis in our society that all Americans need to join together to address.”

The Trump administration has also taken actions that stretch beyond the borders of the United States. Secretary of State Marco Rubio on Monday said the administration has “most certainly been denying visas” to people celebrating Mr. Kirk’s killing.

Mr. Trump’s aides have also said they plan on investigating people suspected of burning Teslas in apparent protest of Elon Musk and assaults against immigration agents. Officials are also exploring establishing links between those episodes and organized groups.

The threats of a crackdown have already taken a toll.

A culture of fear among prominent Democratic donors and groups concerned about retribution has pervaded liberal philanthropy, where foundation leaders have taken pains to avoid the [leaking of sensitive plans](#) that could be seen as opposing Mr. Trump.

Some major givers have privately expressed disinterest in gifts that would require their disclosure, such as those to help Democrats in the redistricting campaign in California.

Liberal foundation leaders have been in close touch with one another in recent days, beefing up security and discussing a letter of solidarity as they await any Trump administration action.

Theodore Schleifer and David A. Fahrenthold contributed reporting.

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