

# THE ARCHITECTURE OF EXCLUSION: HOW THIS ADMINISTRATION IS DISMANTLING CIVIL RIGHTS BRICK BY BRICK



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I have spent decades working at the intersection of diversity, equity, and inclusion — in corporate boardrooms, community organizations, and civil society. I have watched progress come slowly, painfully, and always against resistance. But what I am witnessing today is different in kind, not merely in degree. What is unfolding before us is not simply a policy disagreement or a change in political priorities. It is the deliberate construction of what I call an *architecture of exclusion* — a coordinated, multi-front assault designed to make civil rights not just politically unfashionable, but legally dangerous to defend.

To understand what is happening, you have to look at the whole structure, not just the individual bricks.

## **The Language Is Being Stolen First**

Every architecture begins with a blueprint. In this case, the blueprint is linguistic. The federal government has now banned or flagged more than 350 words and phrases from official communications, scientific research, and agency websites. I am not speaking of obscure technical jargon. I am speaking of words like *discrimination, inequality, diversity, equity, women, disability, Native American, mental health, racism, and even safe drinking water.*

PEN America, which tracks these erasures, notes that scientists are already self-censoring their grant proposals in response — not because the science has changed, but because they fear federal retaliation if they use the wrong words. When you cannot name a thing, you cannot fight it. That is not an accident. That is the design. “How can we have intelligent or difficult conversations,” PEN America’s Jonathan Friedman asks, “if we can’t even use the words, the most basic unit of meaning?” I share that concern deeply. This is not about preferred terminology. This is about making the very vocabulary of civil rights legally and professionally hazardous.

## **The Organizations Are Being Targeted Next**

Once the language is suppressed, the institutions that carry that language into action become the next targets. The indictment of the Southern Poverty Law Center is the latest and most alarming example of this pattern.

For over fifty years, the SPLC documented hate groups, took on the Klan, fought Christian nationalism, and protected communities that had no other advocate. Their offices were firebombed in 1983. Their people have faced threats that would silence most of us. They kept going. And now the DOJ has indicted them. This is not an isolated prosecution. This is part of a coordinated effort to criminalize the act of civil rights work itself. An administration that has pardoned January 6 insurrectionists — some with documented ties to white supremacist organizations — while indicting civil rights lawyers and advocates has made its values unmistakably clear. It is rewriting the moral ledger of this country, turning heroes into criminals and criminals into heroes.

### **The False Claims Act as a Weapon of Silence**

The third pillar of this architecture is financial terror. The administration's March 2026 executive order targeting DEI activities among federal contractors does not simply prohibit certain programs. It weaponizes the False Claims Act — a Civil War-era anti-fraud statute — against any contractor that continues to support diversity initiatives.

The FCA allows the government to seek treble damages and empowers private whistleblowers to file suit on its behalf. The recent \$17.1 million settlement with IBM — announced as part of a "Civil Rights Fraud Initiative" — was a warning shot. It signals to every company doing business with the federal government: support diversity, and you may be sued for fraud.

A coalition of civil rights and higher education organizations has now filed suit arguing this order violates the First Amendment's protections of free speech and free association. Their case is compelling. By equating all discussion of race and ethnicity with illegal discrimination, the order sweeps in lawful, protected activities: targeted recruitment, employee resource groups, speaker panels, even advertising in minority-owned publications. The National Association of Minority Contractors' DMV chapter has already reported that corporate sponsors are afraid to continue their support, threatening 90% of the organization's operating budget.

*That is not compliance with the law. That is the silencing of a community.*

### **The Pattern Is the Point**

Taken separately, each of these actions can be rationalized, litigated, or minimized. Taken together, they form something unmistakable: a systematic effort to defund, delegitimize, and ultimately dismantle the infrastructure of civil rights in America.

Ban the words. Indict the organizations. Threaten the funders. Purge the websites. The target in every case is the same: the ability of communities of color, immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, women, workers, and people with disabilities to advocate for themselves, to be seen, to be named, and to be protected.

*This is what I mean by the architecture of exclusion. It is not a single wall. It is a fortress, built brick by brick, designed to make justice structurally inaccessible to those who need it most.*

### **We Cannot Afford Silence**

I want to be clear about what is at stake. Civil rights organizations do not just file lawsuits. They train poll workers. They staff domestic violence hotlines. They stop discrimination before it destroys a family. When you dismantle these organizations, real people lose real protections in their real, daily lives.

The polling data is sobering but also clarifying: 72% of voters are concerned about rights and freedoms being taken away. 75% believe the government must do more to protect civil and human rights. The people of this country understand what is happening, even when their leaders refuse to name it.

We refuse to be silenced. Those of us who have dedicated our lives to this work did not do so because it was easy or because the political winds were favorable. We did it because the alternative — a country where the language of justice is outlawed, where civil rights defenders are criminalized, and where communities are left unprotected — is a country none of us should accept.

*An attack on one is an attack on all. The architecture of exclusion must be torn down. And we must be the ones to do it.*