

Truth and Contradiction

Most Americans have at least heard of flat-earth believers. The idea can feel almost quaint — a curious remnant of premodern thinking lingering stubbornly into the satellite age. For many people, it sits comfortably between internet oddity and cultural joke, something closer to spectacle than serious epistemology.

As odd as it may seem, there are some people who sincerely believe that the earth is flat. In December 2024, a group flew to Antarctica to observe the midnight sun, a phenomenon their model said couldn't happen — at roughly \$35,000 a head. Others have built audiences, merchandise operations, and YouTube revenue on the premise that the globe model is a lie — whether or not they believe it themselves. Others still are less interested in the earth's shape than in the identity of being the person who refuses to defer. The community's response to Antarctica was not recalibration regardless. The believers on the trip were declared paid skills. The footage was filmed on a green screen. One pastor suggested Satan had manufactured a false sun. The claims extend across a sprawling catalogue: a dome seals the earth from above, atmospheric pressure cannot exist adjacent to the vacuum of space, no photograph from orbit is anything but CGI. A flight like Sydney to Johannesburg secretly reroutes through the northern hemisphere — a claim falsifiable by anyone with a booking app, and one that survives the falsification anyway.

What these examples share is a specific mechanic. Contradiction doesn't function as correction. Disconfirming evidence gets absorbed, reframed, redeployed — whether it arrives as satellite imagery, a booking app, or the testimony of community members who went to Antarctica and looked. And the institutions positioned to settle the question — NASA, ESA, NOAA — get discredited rather than consulted. Call them referees: the bodies whose specific function is to establish what is actually true. In the flat-earth ecosystem, the referees don't call the game. They become part of the conspiracy.

Durable Doubt

The flat-earth community remains a fringe, but the same mechanics, operating at far greater scale and with far greater consequence, have made their way into mainstream public life.

Consider vaccine skepticism. The controversy over vaccine safety and efficacy did not gain traction by overturning the evidentiary record. Large-scale epidemiological studies repeatedly failed to substantiate claims linking vaccines to autism or widespread neurological injury. Skeptical communities responded not by refining hypotheses but by contesting the credibility of the research apparatus itself. Clinical trials became compromised instruments. Regulatory agencies became captured institutions. Scientific agreement became coordination. What had been fringe mechanics — absorb contradiction, attack the referee, treat consensus as evidence of conspiracy — arrived in the mainstream.

Climate-change denialism has followed a similar trajectory. The evidentiary base for climate change expanded through decades of atmospheric measurement, temperature

records, and physical modeling. Yet disputes increasingly center not on instrumentation but on motive. The oil industry and allied politicians cast climate scientists as grant-seeking opportunists whose consensus is the product of coordination rather than evidence. A parallel track promotes contrarian researchers and industry-funded studies to argue the science is unsettled — that climate models are unreliable, that natural variation explains the data, that no scientific theory is ever truly proven. Manufacturing that doubt, at scale and with funding, is the point.

A swath of voters has bought it, training their skepticism on researchers whose grants depend on asking the right questions, while extending unlimited credulity to the executives whose profits depend on the public not believing the answers. In other words, doubt the motivations of the scientists flying coach, not the oil executives flying private. Internal documents have since confirmed that major fossil-fuel corporations understood the science decades before the public did — and funded the counter-narrative precisely because that science threatened their bottom line.

Across these cases — and others, from tobacco to asbestos to opioids — a recognizable repertoire emerged. Contradiction can be neutralized. Evidence can be reframed. Verification systems can be recast as partisan actors. Truth does not require refutation. It can simply be rendered negotiable. The mechanics of this erosion are well documented. What is less examined is what happens when they migrate from commercial strategy to political strategy — and when that political strategy turns not just to exploiting a degraded epistemic environment but to actively dismantling it from the inside.

From Erosion to Strategy

Political deception is hardly novel in American life. Administrations have long shaded inconvenient facts, defended questionable interpretations, and minimized damaging realities. Lyndon Johnson misled the public about Vietnam. Richard Nixon concealed Watergate. The Bush administration advanced false intelligence assessments about Iraq. Political actors have always operated within incentives that reward selective disclosure and strategic framing.

Yet even amid distortion, contradiction retained destabilizing force. Nixon did not abolish the special prosecutor; he fired one man, and the institutional response was severe. Johnson's credibility gap became a defining liability. Bush's intelligence failures produced years of congressional investigation and public reckoning. These actors lied, but they feared the referees. Factual tension remained a liability rather than an irritant to be ignored. The mechanisms of verification — imperfect, slow, and often politically compromised — still exerted pressure that eventually compelled recalibration.

The distinction that emerges from the Trump era is not between honesty and dishonesty. It is between actors who treated contradiction as a constraint to be managed and an actor who discovered it could be ignored entirely — and that ignoring it, at sufficient volume and with sufficient confidence, worked.

The innovation is not lying. The innovation is discovering that contradiction can be treated as nonbinding — and that doing so carries limited cost.

Assert First

The Minneapolis shootings offered a stark illustration of the strategy's most aggressive form. In the killing of Renée Good, bystander video showed the agent firing into the windshield, stepping aside as the car moved past him, then firing through the open driver's side window. He was no longer in the vehicle's path when he fired the shots that killed her. In the shooting of ICU nurse Alex Pretti, video captured him pinned to the ground holding a cell phone moments before agents opened fire. Federal officials — including the President and the Secretary of Homeland Security — immediately asserted threat-based justifications in both cases. When the recordings told a different story, the assertions held. Both were labeled domestic terrorists. Some officials subsequently shifted to 'wait for the investigation' — without retracting the original claims or explaining why they had been made before any investigation existed. The point is not that the assertions were wrong. It is that they were made — and held — before anyone looked. In each case, the assertion precedes investigation and persists independent of it.

The same pattern appeared in the opening days of the US war with Iran. On February 28, 2026, a missile strike killed 175 people, most of them children, at a girls' elementary school in southern Iran. Trump immediately asserted that Iran was responsible. Video footage analyzed by Bellingcat, the New York Times, and multiple independent munitions experts identified the weapon as a US Tomahawk cruise missile — a weapon Iran does not possess and cannot purchase. When pressed, Trump claimed Iran 'also has some Tomahawks.' When a reporter noted he was the only person in his own government making that claim and asked why, Trump replied: 'Because I just don't know enough about it.' He had asserted a narrative before he had any knowledge of the facts — and said so.

Don't Back Down

In the aftermath of the 2020 election, Trump and his allies asserted systemic voting fraud without presenting verifiable supporting evidence. Courts, election officials, and investigative bodies across administrations — many appointed by Trump himself — repeatedly examined those allegations and found them unsubstantiated. More than sixty judicial proceedings produced the same result.

Under traditional evidentiary norms, such a record would exert pressure toward revision. Instead, the absence of confirmation became further proof of concealment. Investigations no longer resolved dispute; they sustained it. Each failed proceeding became evidence of the depth of the conspiracy rather than evidence against the claim.

Six years later, the narrative persists. In Senate confirmation hearings as recently as 2026, nominees seeking administration approval have offered a carefully constructed evasion when asked whether Biden won the 2020 election: Biden was sworn in as president. Technically accurate. Deliberately useless. The true statement is deployed to leave the false one standing. Meanwhile, Trump himself continues to assert that the election was stolen — that everybody knows it — with the same confidence and volume as in 2020. The evasion at the bottom of the hierarchy and the aggressive assertion at the top are not in tension. They are coordinated. Subordinates keep the lie alive without technically repeating it; the principal keeps it circulating at volume. Neither recalibrates.

The claim persists not through persuasion but through a division of labor that insulates it from correction.

Assertions about widespread illegal voting follow a similar pattern. Trump has repeatedly claimed that millions of undocumented immigrants cast ballots in American elections. Decades of investigations, academic studies, audits, and reviews by election officials across administrations have failed to produce evidence supporting systemic noncitizen voting at meaningful scale. The allegation persists largely insulated from verification outcomes. Absence of substantiation has become, within the logic of the claim, further proof of concealment.

The documents case offers a starker variant: the assertion not merely unsupported by the record but directly contradicted by it. Trump has repeatedly claimed that the Presidential Records Act permitted him to retain classified government documents after leaving office. The statute does the opposite. It unambiguously requires the return of presidential records to the government and vests ownership in the United States, not the departing president. This is not a contested interpretation or an ambiguous provision — it is a straightforward reading of the text. Yet the claim circulates, is repeated with confidence, and is treated in many quarters as a live legal debate. When an assertion survives direct textual contradiction at that scale, the mechanisms of factual correction have weakened beyond what mere political polarization can explain.

Removing the Referees

Assertion without recalibration is a durable strategy only if the institutions positioned to compel recalibration can be neutralized. The third element of the emerging political strategy addresses exactly that: the systematic removal or delegitimization of the institutions whose function is to establish what actually happened.

This effort operates in two distinct but complementary ways. The first is delegitimization — casting the institution as a partisan actor before it produces findings, so that when findings arrive they can be dismissed as predetermined. The second is structural removal — eliminating the capacity to produce findings at all. Both are necessary. Delegitimization alone fails if institutions retain enough credibility to compel action. Structural removal alone fails if the institution's absence is itself legible as suppression. Together, they convert a political posture into a durable governing environment.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics illustrates the first of these — delegitimization — with unusual clarity. During the Obama years, Trump called jobs numbers "fake," "phony," or fraudulent at least nineteen times. Then he took office. The same trend that had been running through the Obama recovery continued — and Trump announced he now accepted the figures "very proudly." During the Biden years, positive jobs numbers were dismissed as fake while inflation figures were cited as evidence of Biden's failures. When he returned to office and a weak jobs report arrived in August 2025, he fired the BLS commissioner, asserting she had "faked" pre-election numbers to benefit his opponent. His own former BLS commissioner confirmed publicly that commissioners physically cannot alter the figures — the numbers are locked into the computer system before the

commissioner sees them. The pattern is clear: the data is real when it serves him and fake when it does not.

NOAA and NASA's earth observation programs illustrate the other side of this effort — not delegitimizing the findings but eliminating the capacity to produce them — and the limits of what Congress can protect against. NASA budgets have always involved genuine tension between science and exploration priorities, with Earth observation winning some cycles and losing others. What the Trump administration proposed was different in kind. Its FY2026 budget request sought a 50% cut to NASA Earth Science, elimination of all of NOAA's research laboratories, and cancellation of multiple earth-observing satellite missions already in development or orbit — concentrated specifically on the programs whose function is to generate observational records about the planet's climate. The policy document that shaped the proposal was explicit: it described NOAA as "the main driver of the climate change alarm industry." The institution was targeted because of what it measures.

Congress restored funding — but the administration had not waited. Hundreds of NOAA staff had already been fired, the Goddard Institute for Space Studies had its lease canceled, and its staff dispersed. The appropriations process can restore a budget line. It cannot reconstitute a workforce.

The FDA's dual function — drug approval and food safety inspection — has come under pressure on both fronts. On the approval side, the installation of figures hostile to established regulatory science corrupts the finding from within. On the inspection side, staffing reductions eliminate the capacity to find anything at all. One approach shapes what the institution can conclude. The other limits what it can see.

The removal of inspectors general across multiple federal agencies is perhaps the most transparent illustration of the underlying logic. Every other instance of referee pressure can be dressed in policy rationale — one can argue, however disingenuously, about BLS methodology or regulatory philosophy. Inspectors general have no such ambiguity. Their entire function is to establish what actually happened inside an institution. Removing them prospectively — before any specific investigation is opened — is not a policy choice. It is the elimination of accountability's fact-finding capacity before it can be exercised. On January 24, 2025, seventeen were fired in a single night, notified by identical two-sentence emails citing 'changing priorities.' The oversight function was gone.

The cases examined here were chosen for their clarity, not their uniqueness. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau was ordered to cease operations. The IRS saw enforcement capacity cut at the high-income audit level — the precise function that produces findings about powerful actors. Attorneys in the Justice Department's Public Integrity Section were removed or reassigned, and career prosecutors across the DOJ were pushed out for declining to pursue preferred cases. The pattern extends across the oversight architecture.

A skeptic might observe that political actors across both parties have always challenged institutions, maintained claims against contrary evidence, and shaped the regulatory environment to their advantage. That is true — and the behaviors described here are not categorically new. Prior administrations pressured referees, advanced convenient

narratives, and occasionally fired inconvenient officials. The tools are not new. What has changed is their scope, concentration, and cumulative effect. Seventeen inspectors general fired in a single night. A statistical agency's commissioner removed hours after an inconvenient report. Earth observation programs targeted because of what they measure. This administration has cut broadly — from foreign aid to cultural institutions to diplomatic capacity — but within that broader pattern, the verification and oversight layer has been targeted in ways that go beyond budget reduction. The trigger in each case is not excess. It is a specific finding, a specific measurement, a specific institutional function that produces results that cannot be controlled. When a difference in degree is large enough, it becomes — in any practical sense — a difference in kind. The mechanisms may still exist. The question is whether they retain the capacity to do their work.

Prior administrations had episodes. This is a pattern. When damage concentrates on the verification function specifically, and arrives at this volume and velocity, the effect — whatever the intent — is the systematic degrading of the mechanisms by which democratic accountability establishes facts. Remove enough referees, and it is no longer possible to call the game.

Conclusion

The erosion of contradiction's corrective force did not begin with any single political actor. It accumulated across decades, through the mechanics of motivated skepticism, the deliberate manufacture of doubt, and the gradual delegitimization of expertise and measurement. Flat-earth communities and anti-vaccine movements and climate denialism are not footnotes to a political story — they are the substrate on which a political strategy became possible.

What the current governing posture has added is the operationalization of that substrate at institutional scale. Assert first. Don't back down. And then remove the mechanisms that might otherwise compel you to. Each element reinforces the others. Preemptive assertion is more durable when contradiction immunity is established. Contradiction immunity is more complete when the referees have been discredited or eliminated. What emerges is not merely a tolerance for untruth, but a governing environment in which verification has lost much of its coercive force. A system under this kind of pressure can still function — but less reliably as a mechanism of correction.

And yet political gravity has not been fully repealed — at least not yet. Courts have ruled against executive overreach and blocked enforcement actions that contradicted the record. Congress restored NOAA and NASA funding. Barr contradicted Trump on election fraud. Krebs said what he saw. These are real instances of the system functioning — but whether they represent genuine resilience or the last reliable operations of institutions being hollowed from within is not yet knowable.

No functioning oversight apparatus currently operates at the scale that would generate sustained accountability — the mechanisms that would coordinate and compel it have themselves been weakened or removed. Some of the scientific and institutional capacity that has been dispersed or eliminated may prove difficult to reconstitute on any relevant timescale.

The mechanisms are still on the field. Whether they can hold is the question the current moment has not yet answered.

Truth has not disappeared from public life. Records persist. Measurements continue. Evidence accumulates. What has weakened is something quieter, but more foundational: the expectation that contradiction will exert pressure, that verification will compel adjustment, that assertions made by those in power must ultimately yield to the friction of reality. That expectation is worth defending — not because its survival is guaranteed, but because the mechanisms that embody it are still, for now, on the field.