

450 years for Prairieland, Texas defendants as Trump expands “antifa” crackdown

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Eight people convicted in connection with the July 4, 2025 protest at the Prairieland Detention Center in Alvarado, Texas were sentenced on Tuesday to a combined 450 years in prison in one of the most draconian political prosecutions in modern American history.

The sentences expose the class character of the judicial system and the advanced stage of the assault on democratic rights under the Trump administration. The punishments handed down by federal judges in Texas far exceed those imposed on all of the fascist militants who participated in the January 6, 2021 coup attempt. While President Donald Trump pardoned more than 1,600 participants in the attack on Congress, including members of the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys convicted of violently assaulting police officers, anti-ICE protesters, the vast majority of whom did nothing but light fireworks and vandalize government property, have now been condemned to decades behind bars.

Benjamin Hanil Song received a sentence of 100 years in prison. Maricela Rueda was sentenced to 70 years. Cameron Arnold, Savanna Batten, Zachary Evetts, Bradford Morris, Elizabeth Soto and Daniel Rolando Sanchez-Estrada received sentences ranging from 30 to 50 years.

The sentence imposed on Sanchez-Estrada is particularly revealing. Although he was not present at the protest itself, he was sentenced to 30 years in prison for “corruptly concealing a document” after his wife Rueda, from jail, requested he remove some anarchist magazines the couple had in their home. His punishment alone exceeds the sentences received by numerous January 6 foot soldiers who were captured on video violently assaulting police officers while participating in an effort to overturn a presidential election. Fascists seeking to establish a dictatorship are rewarded, while opponents of mass deportations and state repression are branded “terrorists” and sentenced accordingly.

Celebrating the outcome, the Department of Homeland Security declared on social media, “We have been clear: anyone who attacks law enforcement will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. This is a win for law and order.”

In a Department of Justice statement, Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche said the sentences “make clear that Antifa terrorists who attack law enforcement and federal facilities will face swift and uncompromising justice,” and that their “violent extremism has no place in our country.”

The extraordinary punishments imposed in the Prairieland case stand in sharp contrast to the impunity enjoyed by agents of the state. More than six months after ICE agent Jonathan Ross murdered Renée Good and Border Patrol agents Jesus Ochoa and Raymundo Gutierrez gunned down Alex Pretti in Minneapolis, no federal officer has been

criminally charged. Instead, the Trump administration has blocked investigations, withheld evidence from state authorities and sought to shield the perpetrators from accountability. Nor have the Democratic state and local authorities brought charges against the killers.

The sentences handed down this week rest on a narrative that was never substantiated at trial. From the outset, federal prosecutors and the Trump administration portrayed the July 2025 protest as a coordinated terrorist attack aimed at carrying out a mass killing of law enforcement personnel. Yet no evidence presented during the proceedings established the existence of any such plan.

All parties agree that only two individuals fired weapons during the confrontation: Benjamin Hanil Song and Alvarado police officer Thomas Gross. No police officers, ICE agents, detention center employees or protesters were killed. The government’s own case established that Song and Gross exchanged gunfire amid a chaotic confrontation outside the detention center.

Song, a former Marine, has consistently maintained that he fired only after observing Gross raise his weapon toward a fleeing protester. According to Song, he believed the officer was about to shoot someone in the back who was running away and fired what he described as defensive shots in response. Regardless of whether one accepts Song’s account, it bears no resemblance to the government’s portrayal of a premeditated terrorist assault.

The prosecution’s “antifa terror cell” narrative rested not on evidence of a conspiracy to commit mass murder, but on guilt by association and political ideology. Defendants were prosecuted collectively for their alleged political sympathies, social relationships and participation in opposition to ICE and the government’s mass deportation apparatus. The extraordinary sentences imposed this week are aimed not merely at those convicted in the case. They are intended to intimidate all those who oppose the Trump administration’s anti-immigrant policies and attacks on democratic rights.

The political character of the prosecution was reflected in the conduct and backgrounds of the judges who oversaw the proceedings.

US District Judge Mark T. Pittman presided over the Prairieland case and played a central role in shaping the trial from its earliest stages. Pittman is not a neutral arbiter of the law but a longtime Republican operative. Prior to his nomination to the federal bench by Trump in 2019, he volunteered for the presidential campaign of George W. Bush and worked on behalf of former Texas Senator Phil Gramm. He is affiliated with the right-wing Federalist Society, which has supplied many of the judicial and legal personnel driving the administration’s assault on democratic rights.

Earlier this year, Pittman declared a mistrial after prospective jurors expressed opposition to ICE and criticism of the Trump

administration. In Pittman's court, opposition to mass deportations and hostility to the government's immigration policies are treated not as legitimate political views, but as disqualifying prejudices.

Pittman further revealed his own political outlook during jury selection, when he publicly confronted defense attorney MarQuetta "MarQ" Clayton over a shirt she wore beneath her blazer featuring images of Martin Luther King Jr. and Shirley Chisholm. Accusing Clayton of attempting to influence jurors, Pittman rebuked the attorney in open court, declaring, "I don't know why in the world you would think that's appropriate."

While Pittman oversaw the trial, sentencing duties were divided between Pittman and Chief US District Judge Reed O'Connor. O'Connor, who sentenced Cameron Arnold, Savanna Batten, Zachary Evetts and Daniel Rolando Sanchez-Estrada, is likewise a longtime member of the Federalist Society and a prominent figure within the Republican legal establishment. Nominated by George W. Bush in 2007, O'Connor has repeatedly used his position to advance right-wing political objectives from the federal bench.

According to supporters present in the courtroom, O'Connor stated that the lengthy prison terms were handed down because "the state wants to send a message to anyone who shares a similar ideology."

Among his most notorious rulings was an attempt to strike down Affordable Care Act requirements guaranteeing coverage for preventive health services, including cancer screenings, mental health treatment and HIV-prevention medication. In his ruling, O'Connor argued that such requirements infringed on the religious beliefs of employers who opposed what he described as homosexual behavior and sexual activity outside traditional marriage.

The Prairieland prosecution is part of a broader campaign launched by the administration to expand the use of "domestic terrorism" authorities against political opposition. Last year, Trump issued his so-called "antifa" executive order, directing federal agencies to intensify investigations and prosecutions targeting alleged anti-fascist activists. This was followed by National Security Presidential Memorandum-7 and then-Attorney General Pam Bondi's December memorandum, which vastly expanded the powers of federal law enforcement agencies while encouraging the treatment of left-wing political opposition as a national security threat.

The significance of these measures lies not only in their repressive content, but in the political fiction on which they are based. "Antifa" is not an organization. It has no membership rolls, leadership structure or national apparatus. The term denotes opposition to fascism. Yet federal prosecutors and law enforcement agencies increasingly invoke the label as though it were a coherent criminal enterprise, allowing them to transform political views and associations into evidence of conspiracy.

The Prairieland case is already being used as a model. Similar "antifa conspiracy" indictments have been brought against opponents of the federal occupation of Minneapolis and against anti-genocide protesters in Michigan. In each case, prosecutors seek to blur the distinction between protected political activity and criminal conduct, advancing the principle that opposition to government policy can itself be treated as evidence of terrorist intent.

The assault on democratic rights cannot be explained simply as the work of Trump and the Republican Party. Democratic Party officials have played an essential role in legitimizing and advancing the same framework.

In Michigan, felony charges against anti-genocide protesters were initially brought under the authority of Democratic Attorney General

Dana Nessel. In Minnesota, Democratic Governor Tim Walz, Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey and other leading officials have remained silent as federal prosecutors pursue sweeping conspiracy charges against opponents of the immigration crackdown. As of this writing, no leading Minnesota Democrat has demanded that charges against the 15 Minnesota anti-ICE protesters be dropped.

This bipartisan consensus reflects deeper class interests. While the Democrats occasionally criticize Trump's rhetoric and methods, they share his determination to suppress growing social opposition from below. The dispute between the two parties concerns tactics, not objectives. Both defend the interests of the financial oligarchy, the expansion of police powers and the preservation of the capitalist order.

Indeed, Trump is building upon foundations laid by the Democratic Party itself. The Biden administration responded to the mass movement against the genocide in Gaza with police repression, mass arrests and the slander of anti-war protesters as antisemites and extremists. University campuses were occupied by police, students and faculty were arrested, and constitutionally protected opposition to war crimes was increasingly portrayed as a threat to public safety. Democratic governors, mayors and university administrators collaborated in these operations, helping establish the precedent that political dissent could be treated as a security threat.

The Trump administration has inherited and expanded these methods. The Prairieland sentences establish a dangerous precedent. The Trump administration is systematically seeking to transform opposition to mass deportations, war, inequality and fascism into a form of criminal conspiracy. The target today is those accused of participating in a protest against an immigration detention center. Tomorrow it will be striking workers, students, anti-war protesters and anyone who challenges the interests of the financial oligarchy.



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