



Deny, Defend, Depose: Structuring Permission for Bureaucratic Indifference, Slow (Civic) Violence, and the Institutional Betrayal of DEI

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Technical Communication & Social Justice, Vol 3, No. 2 (2025), pp. 9-31

Abstract: Bullet-casings inscribed with “deny,” “defend,” and “depose” (DDD) were found at the scene of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson’s assassination. This symbolic act of technical communication shocked corporate America and catalyzed discourse about the harm caused by for-profit healthcare insurance. DDD is a commonplace in the insurance industry that rhetorically functions as a permission structure for denying claims, defending denials, and deposing claimants to delay care until they give up or die. As a case study of the DDD permission structure, we analyze political technical communication artifacts from the second Trump administration’s attack on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) infrastructure.

Keywords: anti-DEI policy, slow civic violence, bureaucratic indifference, institutional betrayal, deny-defend-depose permission structure, political technical communication, executive orders, presidential memoranda

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Introduction

The assassination of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson shocked corporate America. Three bullet casings found at the scene, inscribed with the words “deny,” “defend,” and “depose” (DDD), signaled a chilling ideological motive (Bohannon, 2024). Occurring just six weeks before Donald J. Trump’s second inauguration, the shooting prompted widespread condemnation and renewed public scrutiny of the for-profit healthcare industry. Online forums drew sharp parallels between the assassination and a system known for denying claims, delaying care, and profiting from patient suffering. In the U.S. healthcare insurance sector, DDD is a shorthand for the procedural strategy of denying legitimate claims, defending those denials through bureaucratic justifications, and deposing claimants until they give up or die (Feinman, 2010). Yet this structure is not confined to healthcare.

In this case study of the Trump administration’s campaign against diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), we reveal DDD as a broader rhetorical pattern structuring technical communication in the highest levels of government. Executive orders, presidential memoranda, and fact sheets issued during the administration’s first week in office laid the foundation for a permission structure that enables subordinates to inflict harm while evading moral accountability. Through a content analysis of these political technical communication artifacts (Cheek, 2023), we expose how DDD functions to authorize bureaucratic indifference and slow (civic) violence (Reinke, 2022; Sánchez, 2023). Our approach aligns with the field’s social justice turn (Walton et al., 2019) and demonstrates how content analysis can reveal how technical documents sustain injustice (Eldridge & Reinke, 2018; Sánchez, 2023).

DDD is a permission structure rooted in technical acts of suppression and control. In industries like healthcare, it provides a procedural and rhetorical logic that rationalizes exploitation. The heuristic inscribed on the assassin’s bullet casings reflects the industry’s routine mechanisms of harm. These strategies have become so normalized that they are easily transferred to other bureaucratic domains. As Feinman (2010), McClean (2019), Frenkel et al. (2018), and Miller and Ahluwalia (2022) show, DDD enables subordinates to carry out harmful practices without confronting their complicity, reinforcing a culture of moral disengagement.

Our analysis finds that the second Trump administration’s anti-DEI agenda mirrors the DDD pattern: denying systemic discrimination, defending institutionalized white supremacy, and deposing DEI infrastructure through executive fiat. The technical documents examined here not only legislate harm but also legitimize it rhetorically, creating a permission structure that extends beyond the state and into private enterprise. Even as these orders face legal challenges, their rhetorical and cultural effects have already begun to erode DEI commitments. Major corporations such as Facebook, Amazon, Walmart, and Target have since walked back their DEI initiatives, raising urgent questions about whether corporate America ever intended to uphold them meaningfully.

This article examines four key executive actions targeting DEI in the government, military, public education, and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). To guide our analysis, we ask the following research questions:

1. What is the rhetorical pattern structuring permission for the institutional betrayal of DEI?

2. How does DDD structure permission for attacking DEI principles?
3. How do administrative subordinates use DDD to rationalize their complicity in bureaucratic indifference, slow (civic) violence, and institutional betrayal?

In the next section, we explain our methodological approach and the analytical framework we use to interrogate these executive orders as political technical communication.

Methodology

In our case study of the anti-DEI presidency, we performed a qualitative content analysis of a small corpus of 9 documents composed of 4 executive orders, which we collected on the White House Webpage, 2 presidential memoranda, and 3 fact sheets. Content analysis is a systematic, flexible, and rigorous analytical tool that helps researchers to identify, quantify, and analyze specific “words, phrases, concepts, or other observable” (Huckin, 2004, p.14) features in text with an eye on discovering underlying rhetorical patterns or themes in the corpus. This analytical lens helped us to focus on micro features of the text, and it was helpful for us to answer our research questions.

After we gathered several executive orders, we began to read the corpus with an eye on reducing it further. We settled on 9 documents for analysis because we wanted a manageable chunk, but also, we wanted documents that would help us answer our research questions and advance our research goals. While we read the selected documents, we organized words, phrases, and concepts under three frameworks: deny, depose, and deflect. We categorized phrases which erase the existence of racism, diversity, and discrimination or refuse to acknowledge the relevance of DEI initiatives under “deny.” “Depose” was categorized by phrases that hints at eradicating or removing initiatives, such as Trump ordering the Secretary of Defense and the Department of Homeland Security to abolish every DEI office; while phrases were coded under the “defend” category when they make reference to instances or attempts made by Trump’s administration to ward off or portray DEI initiatives as disruptive to the aspirations of the American people. These categories are discussed in detail below.

The 9 documents we selected are unique political technical communication artifacts that serve distinct purposes. Executive orders are formalized interpretations of existing law that create legally binding directives to instruct agencies on how they ought to enforce the law. They are published in the Federal Register and have the force of law but are not actually laws—a point of confusion created by media framing. Executive orders are not electioneering documents per se, but several presidents in American history have used this genre to subvert the official policy making process and rather used them as a tool to exert their unilateral power (Deering & Maltman, 1999; Mayer, 1999) in ways that help them to stay committed to their electoral promises. For instance, in 1793, President George Washington, through an executive order, declared that America was not going to interfere in the war between France and England (Deering & Maltman, 1999); and on October 30, 2024, President Joe Biden signed an executive order (EO 14110) to communicate his administration's commitment to building a safe, secure, and trustworthy artificial intelligence. Hence, these documents have been co-opted, subverted, and deployed as an electioneering document. For Trump, the executive orders are a method for bypassing Congress to fulfill campaign promises.

Presidential memoranda are similar to executive orders in that they are directives to executive branch employees on how to execute the law, but they are less formal and carry less legal authority (Cooper, 2001). Memoranda attract less scrutiny from the press and public, making them more flexible tools for managing executive branch agencies and personnel. Fact sheets are short, concise, and precise documents intended to explain an administration's policy agenda and provide context for executive actions. We acknowledge that fact sheets are not the sole prerogative of presidents, but they can be used by other organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the United Nations to provide a quick-at-glance information about a global event such as COVID-19 or the war in Ukraine. Although the documents we selected are not election documents, they fulfil Cheek's (2023) classification that identifies political technical communication artifacts as tools deployed to advocate for partisan political outcomes.

Included documents were intentionally selected for inclusion in our corpus because they are focused on articulating the reasoning for and text of policy objectives in the second Trump administration's anti-DEI agenda. They are also examples of how technical communication, considered in a clear, concise, apolitical, and effective way, can be deployed to marginalize already vulnerable populations. The overall tone of our corpus is commanding and urgent, composed of formal, legalistic, and highly charged language that denounces DEI policies and practices as "illegal," "immoral," "discriminatory," "radical," "dangerous," and "wasteful." These negatively charged adjectives were paired with verbs like "rescind," "terminate," and "abolish." These words work together to delegitimize government programs promoting inclusion and equity in a diverse society.

In contrast, when the Trump administration wanted to justify their "patriotic" ideology as an alternative to what they've labeled as "Discriminatory equity ideology," they deployed verbs such as "protect," "defend," "restore," "uphold," and "reaffirm." The former is characterized as meritocratic and colorblind, and the latter pejoratively defined in the corpus as "an ideology that treats individuals as members of preferred or disfavored groups, rather than as individuals," preferring "immoral generalizations" over "agency, merit, and capability" (Exec. Order No. 14190, p. 8853). In this regard, Trump's administration sets up an antagonistic binary contrast between "illegal DEI," which is to be terminated, and administration's supposedly "color-blind" and "patriotic" interpretation of civil rights law, which is to be defended and restored.

An important exclusion from our corpus are the orders explicitly targeting "gender ideology" by federally defining a gender binary, mandating the erasure of trans-friendly policies, and banning transgender athletes from participating in university and high school sports. The denial of trans existence, defense of traditionalism, and orders deposing "gender ideology" by executive fiat certainly fit the DDD rhetorical pattern. These maneuvers also qualify as an attack on diversity, equity, and inclusion values and programs. However, the administration's separation of "gender ideology" and "equity ideology" does meaningfully distinguish between the two on the basis of who is targeted, what programs are eliminated, and how actions are justified. Given the constraints of publication, we've chosen to focus on the more explicit attacks against DEI infrastructure to provide the analytical depth necessary to expose its operations and effects. The

administration's attacks on trans communities and "gender ideology" deserve an article-length treatment to fully elucidate the similarities and differences in strategies, tactics, and rhetoric.

DDD as a permission structure

Permission structures control access to, and the exercise of, power

The phrase permission structure has a fuzzy genesis but likely originated as a technical term in the modern era in the development of computer systems and software that required access control mechanisms (circa 1960s). The term's traceable academic etymology since then spans disciplines ranging from film studies and ethics (Anderson & Benton, 1988) to game theory and computer science (Gilles et al., 1992; Khosla, 1988; and van den Brink, 1997). At its core, a permission structure denotes an organized framework for determining the conditions under which access (to computers, information, authority, etc.) or agency (to act, resist, express, etc.) may be granted. In the broadest sense, permission structures may be thought of as a framework for dictating who may act, how, and under what conditions.

For game theorists, permission structures are rigorously formalized as mathematical proofs to analyze and theorize how hierarchical arrangements may affect the cooperative behavior of players in the game—or subordinates in the organization. Scholars have tried to model scenarios where players must obtain permission from those above them (or preceding them) to participate in cooperative behavior (Gilles et al., 1992; van den Brink, 1997). Two key permission structures emerge in these games. Conjunctive permission structures, which require players to secure permission from all superiors (Gilles, Owen, & van den Brink, 1992); and disjunctive permission structures, which require players to obtain permission from just one of them (van den Brink, 1997). These formalizations attempt to unpack and reveal the mechanics of access in the broader sense of power dynamics and fairness within organizations.

"Permission structure" is a term of art for computer scientists engaged in designing and analyzing software (Burns, 2000; Khosla, 1988). In this domain, permission structures may be referred to as P-structures and they describe a set of access rules for permitting and prohibiting an operation in a particular scenario. In a much longer dissertation about methods for analyzing accident reports, Burns (2000) defines permission structures as the "set of permissions and prohibitions that hold in a particular scenario" which "persist until explicitly revoked" or "temporarily suspended in certain scenarios" (Burns, 2000, p. 27). This formalized definition of permission structures arises from the analysis of a technical communication genre (accident reports), making it a potent tool for revealing permission structures in technical communication artifacts.

Across these varied uses, the conception of permission structures has evolved beyond its etymological roots, emphasizing a simple act of allowance. Modern interpretations imbue the phrase with implications of power, hierarchy, accountability, and morality. Structuring permission is about more than just who has access; it's a rhetorical pattern for determining how that access is governed, negotiated, and manipulated. It is an analytical concept that is useful for exposing the power dynamics at work in the technical rhetorics of bureaucracy. The implications of power imbued in the deployment of permission structures is very important to technical and

professional communications, especially because Trump's unilateral show of might reproduces "oppression and injustice" (Walton et al., 2019, p. 117).

From an organizational perspective, DDD exists to convince subordinates to adopt the institution's ethical decision-making in lieu of their own. In the case of healthcare insurance, these subordinates are the claims agents, peer-to-peer doctors, customer service representatives, and lawyers (among others) who collectively and separately make-up the wealth transferring machine. Insurance executives depend on that machine to turn human health, welfare, and lives into an ATM for their investors. In our study, we identify how DDD operates as a permission structure for excusing and executing oppressive policies, practices, and procedures. For example, the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), led by Elon Musk, has been at the forefront of firing federal workers, deleting USAID, and crushing the Department of Education.

The DDD permission structure authorizing DOGE actions exhibits an ethic of expediency (Katz, 1992) and the institutional betrayal of the government's social contract with its citizens, legal residents, asylum seekers, visa holders, and the many vulnerable populations residing across the globe whose lifeline has capriciously and suddenly been revoked. As Katz's (1992) analysis of the Just memo demonstrated, the presumed neutrality and objectivity of well-crafted technical communication can obscure the author's complicity in facilitating injustice. Exposing the myth that technical communication is neutral and objective (Shelton, 2020, p. 21) is a critical part of developing a more skeptical workforce that is less likely to succumb to ignorant obedience. The myth of neutrality distances technical communicators from their ethical responsibility and makes them complicit in reproducing unjust systems, practices, and structures.

While originally noted in healthcare insurance contexts and more recently in relation to political violence, DDD is a discernible structuring principle in many industries, institutions, and governance frameworks. It is an insidiously effective rhetorical strategy for gaining compliance through slow (civic) violence, bureaucratic indifference, and institutional betrayal (Heckert, 2020; Reinke, 2022; Sánchez, 2023). Slow violence is "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). The concept refers to harm that is gradual and obscured, yet can have cumulative effects that, over time, can be as destructive as more overt and sudden forms of violence. Slow violence is difficult to detect because it is "neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2).

Building on Nixon's work, Sánchez has written that "arguments [circulating] around profitability and seeming technological impartiality are paramount in the perpetuation of slow civic violence" because "the [perceived] neutrality of profit language occludes" recognition of social injustice (Sánchez, 2023, p. 186-187). The common thread between Katz, Nixon, and Sánchez is in exposing injustices concealed by the sophisticated deployment of language. We pick up that thread here to expose DDD as a rhetorically concealed permission structure for bureaucratic indifference and violence (Eldridge & Reinke, 2018; Heckert, 2020). Like slow violence, DDD inflicts damage gradually through routine bureaucratic procedures that normalize and obscure the harm it permits. Technical communicators facilitate such damaging processes whether they acknowledge it or not because they "are seen as variously adding, deleting, changing, and

selecting meaning,” which means “they are always implicated in relations of power. Their work is at least complicit in the production, reproduction, or subversion of relations of power” (Slack, Miller, & Doak, 1993, p. 31).

Over time, the persistent use of DDD in organizational contexts contributes to what Sánchez (2023) calls slow civic violence. He argues that slow civic violence “encompass[es] indirect injuries inflicted on civic processes (such as but not limited to voting) which erode access to and confidence in such processes—particularly within marginalized communities” (Sánchez, 2023, p. 177). Admittedly, Sánchez’s use of “civic” focuses on public sphere institutions and narrowly applied in the context of government bureaucracies. However, as the healthcare insurance industry’s use of DDD demonstrates, large organizations outside the government, in both the public and private spheres, design similar regulatory regimes.

Technical communication powers DDD’s bureaucratization and attendant slow violence

Our study adds to the myriad of scholarly studies in the field that recognize the ideological and hegemonic work technical documents enact (Dorpenyo, 2024; Jones & Williams, 2018; Walton et al., 2019). We argue that technical communication is essential to the process of bureaucratization of DDD because it helps legitimate the authority of extreme actors through the subtle coercion and indoctrination of rule-bound subordinate actors. Drawing from Longo’s (2000) genealogy, technical communication can be a “spurious coin” that helps mint the authority bureaucratic organizations claim they already have. Organizations are structured by language and their flows of communication. Approximately 7500 words – about the length of an average journal article in our field – compose the U.S. Constitution and its 27 amendments. Not only have millions of people taken oaths to defend those words with their lives; hundreds of millions more are governed by them, and, as a global hegemon, billions are affected by them.

Words breathe life into human relationships, constituting the permissions and prohibitions of group membership, and organizing abstract ideations and discursive constructions into material realities and institutionalized bureaucracies. Technical communication manifests organizations through discourse, sustains them through control of information channels, and imbues the authoritative credibility that legitimizes a bureaucracy. As the visible infrastructure of a bureaucracy, rules and regulations are deployed to provide an appearance of legitimacy and fairness, often channeling dissent and resistance into bounded and manageable lanes to maintain the status quo. Such rules and regulations are technical communications facilitating the “processes of bureaucratization—slow processes that we can watch from the inside and outside” (Eldridge & Reinke, 2018, p. 97).

An illustrative example of bureaucratic violence manifested through presence is the practice of redlining, which describes a Jim Crow-era segregationist mortgage lending policy that prevented Black folks from owning desirable real estate and family homes in white neighborhoods. The active imposition of bureaucratic procedures like endless paperwork, rigid protocols, and default denials represents the “presence” of the bureaucracy. Such presence is often expressed through technical communication and adapted for various stakeholders. In using the term “bureaucratic violence,” we intend to call “attention to the ways that it is not always the law itself that causes harm but rather the enactment of law via bureaucracy” (Heckert, 2020, p. 35). This is why the

rhetorical strategies setting up permission structures for bureaucratic violence, like DDD, can be difficult to detect.

Bureaucratic violence “is administered through processes of decision-making, paperwork, knowledge production, inaction, and exclusion” (Eldridge & Reinke, 2018, p. 95). Although bureaucratic violence can be overt, like in the case of administering genocide (Katz, 1992), the term is more often applied to describe the way that harm is administered through complex procedural mechanisms. For Donald Trump, executive orders have overtly become part of the bureaucratic infrastructure of institutionalized racial segregation, built to “socially control a populace and regulate life itself” by “seed[ing] symbolic violence—an internalization of violence by the oppressed as normative” (Eldridge & Reinke, 2018, p.95). The presence of harmful policies has been overt and documented in technical detail, providing a permission structure for the subordinates of the Trump administration to discriminate on the basis of race and deny Black communities, families, and individuals the same rights and opportunities as their white counterparts. Technical writing, in the form of executive orders, has become the tool for upending unjust and illegal practices.

The flip side of presence is bureaucratic absence which can take the form of delays, inaction, apathy, and indifference toward the constituents and communities the organization is meant to serve. This indifference is a failure of institutions to recognize or remedy the harm inflicted by their own processes, passively resisting change and tacitly reinforcing structural violence in the status quo. Bureaucratic presence, absence, and indifference should be read through the framework of “institutional betrayal” to expose “the harms perpetrated by institutions that purportedly offer care (such as universities) and on which others (such as students) are dependent” (Reinke, 2022, p. 40). When an insurance company systematically denies coverage and then defends its denials by scapegoating its customers, or when an elected president overtly denies the existence of injustice, racism, and discrimination, they are actively betraying the expectation of fair treatment and support, not merely performing its fiduciary responsibility to shareholders.

Institutional betrayal occurs when organizations that are expected to protect and care for individuals and communities instead inflict harm through intentional inaction and neglect. Reinke (2022) theorizes institutional betrayal as imposing dual harm, arguing that the betrayal “can be pragmatic (i.e., production of inequality) and psychological (i.e., emotional distress), and it can stem from institutional actions and inactions that affect trauma and traumatic experiences” (Reinke, 2022, p. 40). Such betrayals can exacerbate trauma and reinforce cycles of disempowerment and marginalization. Economic loss, reduced access to resources, and institutional incompetence are pragmatic manifestations of institutional betrayal that have material implications for the safety, security, and survival of the institution’s constituent communities and individuals. Indeed, a majority of Americans feel this sense of economic loss and distress less than 100 days into Trump’s second term as president: families have lost their source of income because their partners, parents, or relatives have been unjustly fired from their work; there has been an attack on Social Security benefits; universities have lost billions of dollars in federal grants that support research; and immigrants are being unjustly deported without due process—increasingly resorting to ambush and abduction tactics to disappear targets of the state. The responses to the massive economic losses and emotional stress have been

massive as we have seen the rise in protest movements such as 50501—a single movement that is organizing 50 protests in 50 states; and electorates flooding town halls to question their representatives on what they are doing to stop Trump's administration from causing any further harm. This last example has led to calls on Republican representatives to avoid organizing or attending town hall meetings.

DDD is more than just a corporate strategy to maximize profits at the expense of people; the phrase exemplifies how institutional mechanisms can operate as vehicles of slow, bureaucratic, and legal violence. By methodically denying legitimate claims for redress, defending unjust practices through impenetrable policy documentation, and deposing opposition by any means necessary, DDD creates a system where harm is inflicted gradually, invisibly, and with a thin veneer of legality. DDD can be recognized in the communication patterns of institutions well beyond the healthcare insurance industry. The chaotic first phase of the second Trump administration has issued a number of orders, memoranda, pronouncements, fact sheets, press briefings, and more to subvert efforts across the federal government bureaucracy to be more inclusive of others, value diversity as an organizational strength, and treat its workforce and constituents equitably, with fairness and respect.

Considering Trump's aggressive approach to reshaping the federal bureaucracy, a particularly salient observation from Heckert (2020) is that “changing bureaucratic procedures does not necessarily require a change in law. This facilitates the state's ability to subvert legislative processes and exert power (and harm) via bureaucracy [...] [which] can subvert the goals of social programs and perpetuate inequalities that programs claim to address, reinforcing structural violence” (Heckert, 2020, p. 36). Through bureaucratic presence (imposition of harmful orders) and absence (withdrawal of support), the administration is perpetuating slow civic violence at a break-neck pace. We seek to bring attention to “the role of bureaucracy in the enactment of the law” including “how the law generates disproportionate harm for some groups of people” (Heckert, 2020, p. 40). In the next section, we reveal how DDD structures the second Trump administration's scorched earth approach to DEI programs in both the public and private sectors.

Case study of the anti-DEI Presidency

Before turning to the specific technical documents in our corpus, it's important to revisit the rhetorical implications of the Brian Thompson assassination, which publicly surfaced DDD as a permission structure for enacting and rationalizing harm. While the assassination was an act of political violence, it also functioned as a disruptive rhetorical intervention bringing to light the rhetorical framework permitting systematic abuse by corporate and governmental bureaucracies alike. In this sense, the inscribed casings were not only a chilling critique of the healthcare industry, but also a symbolic indictment of bureaucratic institutions that weaponize DDD to suppress equity and social justice. The technical documents we analyzed demonstrate that DDD isn't confined to isolated industries but instead operates as a transferable rhetorical strategy used to erase, rationalize, and destroy DEI infrastructure across all domains of public life.

Background

Trump's second inauguration brazenly revealed the true extent to which the United States had become the "tech-industrial oligarchy" that Biden warned about in his farewell address (Herman, 2025). The tech-elite were given prime seating to watch Trump take his oath of office. This included some of the world's richest men, billionaires who already control the most prominent technology companies in the world (Riccardi & Swenson, 2025), such as Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook), Elon Musk (Tesla, SpaceX, and X), Sunar Pichai (Google), Tim Cook (Apple), and Shou Zi Chew (TikTok). In hindsight, the inauguration was foreshadowing something more than just the tech-oligarchy to come; it was also an indicator of the "move fast and break things" ideology that has characterized the ethos of Silicon Valley start-up culture. The second Trump administration and the unofficial DOGE assumed power with vigor and zealotry, and perhaps more consequentially without respect for the rule of law. Starting just a few hours after taking his oath of office, Trump signed a flood of executive orders filled with bombastic rhetoric targeting the perceived enemies of the far-right, including all things diversity, equity, and inclusion in the federal government and everything it touches. The administration's executive orders targeting DEI are structured by DDD, providing a script for subordinates and surrogates to internalize as permission to become indifferent to the pain executing their orders may cause. In the next section, we reveal the role denial plays in the DDD permission structure as a refusal of oppression and discrimination as a reality experienced by historically marginalized and underrepresented communities.

DENY: the legitimacy and legality of diversity, equity, and inclusion

In the deny component of the DDD permission structure, a foundation is set to reject the legitimacy and legality of DEI initiatives. For example, one order asserts that the "Biden Administration forced illegal and immoral discrimination programs, going by the name 'diversity, equity, and inclusion' (DEI)" (Exec. Order No. 14151, p. 8339). Political enemies are scapegoated as ideologues said to be responsible for establishing the discriminatory regime of DEI. Denying ethical and legal legitimacy is more than a rhetorical flourish in a genre that lacks such things; such denial is a deliberate effort to offload blame for the status quo onto a party currently shut out of power. Tying DEI to the Biden administration helps the White House demonize diversity and Democrats at the same time. Negative messaging against DEI reinforces negative messaging against Democrats, and vice versa.

Another order continues the attack with an ahistorical argument that positions DEI as a threat to civil rights: roughly 60 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, critical and influential institutions of American society, including the Federal Government, major corporations, financial institutions, the medical industry, large commercial airlines, law enforcement agencies, and institutions of higher education have adopted and actively use dangerous, demeaning, and immoral race- and sex-based preferences under the guise of so-called 'diversity, equity, and inclusion' (DEI) or 'diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility' (DEIA) that can violate the civil-rights laws of this Nation (Exec. Order No. 14173, p. 8633). In this passage, the Trump administration recasts decades of civil rights work and progress as not only unnecessary, but inherently harmful to others. In addition to finding resonance in specious arguments like reverse racism and conspiracies like the great replacement theory, such fear-mongering is steeped in white supremacist logic and mythmaking. By denying the validity of DEI, the administration's rhetoric erases decades of efforts to address structural racism, sexism,

ableism, and other forms of structural discrimination and violence. This sets in motion a gradual erosion of protections for historically marginalized and underrepresented communities. Alongside DEI, accessibility too is claimed to be a “guise” used by a diverse range of institutions—from law enforcement and airlines to corporations and universities—to willfully violate civil rights law. The claim is counterfactual, but nonetheless dangerous.

Instead of acknowledging the structural issues that necessitated DEI, the denial phase shifts the burden of proof by positing that all of the measures, programs, or personnel addressing discrimination are, by default, unwarranted. In framing DEI initiatives and programming as radical, the deny component effectively erases the historical context that necessitated embedding and promoting DEI to begin with. The narrative shifts from redressing historical injustices to one arguing DEI policies “undermine our national unity, as they deny, discredit, and undermine the traditional American values of hard work, excellence, and individual achievement in favor of an unlawful, corrosive, and pernicious identity-based spoils system” (Exec. Order No. 14173, p. 8633). Here, DEI is framed as an affront to, and negation of, American national identity and morality. This move implicitly questions the validity of structural oppression as an empirical reality, asserting that inclusive policies aimed at rectifying injustice and inequality are really designed to protect a “corrosive” spoils-system for minorities. When the foundational premise of DEI is discredited, the ethical accountability that once compelled corrective action to ameliorate structural discrimination, oppression, and violence in the workplace evaporates.

Denial is a key element of Nixon’s (2011) description of slow violence—an incremental, almost invisible process of harm that accumulates over time. Denial here is about more than just rejecting a set of programs; it is a rejection of people. The White House’s rhetoric denies the competence of anyone who does not fit the narrow template representing the Trump administration’s ideal citizen: white, male, and cisgendered. The anti-DEI executive orders undermine institutional safeguards against discrimination in the workplace. Although the cumulative effect is not immediately dramatic, over time these orders reconfigure legal discourse so that what were once corrective measures against structural oppression are now portrayed as “illegal” or “immoral.” This creates a legal and ethical framework to pre-textually justify the subsequent actions ordered by the executive to dismantle DEI programs without any accountability for ameliorating the harm inflicted.

Trump’s anti-DEI executive orders also sidestep rigorous debate over specific programs and policies. By framing DEI as a violation of the constitution, the Trump administration justifies its bureaucratic maneuvering to reinterpret civil rights jurisprudence through an appeal to a higher authority and purpose. Congress, the people’s representative, is denied a chance to weigh in. As Heckert (2020) has argued, the transformation of bureaucratic procedures does not require changes to underlying law, making such procedures vulnerable to being hijacked by an overzealous executive branch (or c-suite in corporate contexts). Underscoring this point, within the first month of the second Trump administration, some scholars and pundits were already diagnosing the chaos as a constitutional crisis (Liptak, 2025; Shapiro, 2025).

Dismantling DEI infrastructure makes good on Trump’s culture war mandate while also providing cover for the administration to coerce, intimidate, downsize, eliminate, or otherwise render ineffective significant parts of the administrative infrastructure of the federal government.

A fact sheet about the anti-DEI executive order demonstrates this, arguing, without evidence, that “radical DEI has dangerously tainted many of our critical businesses and influential institutions, including the federal government” (The White House, 2025a, para 2). What is radical or dangerous about creating equitable and inclusive environments for employees and students hailing from a diversity of backgrounds and demographics? There is no evidence-based answer to that question from the second Trump administration, but there is the assertion of “the fact that DEI’s foundational rhetoric and ideas foster intergroup hostility and authoritarianism” and “creates and then amplifies prejudicial hostility and exacerbates interpersonal conflict” at an annual cost of “Billions of dollars” (The White House, 2025a, para. 2). Framed as an “immense public waste” (Exec. Order No. 14151, p. 8339), DEI’s efficacy and value are denied, paving the way for extreme cuts to personnel and programs across the government and in the private sector.

The rhetorical effect of the anti-DEI orders is an Orwellian delegitimization of programs aimed at fostering inclusive classrooms and workplaces. This is exemplified in one clause asserting, again without evidence, that “the American people have witnessed first-hand the disastrous consequences of illegal, pernicious discrimination that has prioritized how people were born instead of what they were capable of doing” (Exec. Order No. 14173, p. 8633). Denial, thus, permits private corporations to follow suit by slashing their own attempts at creating inclusive environments and diversifying their workforce. Corporations that resist pressure to dismantle their own DEI programs invite federal scrutiny from agencies who’ve been tasked with “combat[ing] illegal private-sector DEI preferences, mandates, policies, programs, and activities” (Exec. Order No. 14173, p. 8633). The result is a system that privileges narrow interpretations of merit and individualism at the expense of collective equity and social justice.

DEFEND: actions by framing DEI as a threat to national unity, public safety, and civil rights

As we indicated in our methodology section, the “defend” category focuses on instances where the administration rejects DEI by framing it as a threat to national unity, public safety, and civil rights. An extensive rhetorical apparatus is constructed in the corpus to justify the elimination of DEI programs and all associated personnel. The apparatus is composed of a series of defensive maneuvers positioning DEI as dangerous, subversive, and antithetical to American national identity. This framework positions the second Trump administration as defenders of traditionalism, patriotism, public safety, fiscal responsibility, and, ironically, civil rights.

The narrative constructed paints DEI infrastructure as divisive and radical—something to fear, not embrace. Specious claims connecting DEI initiatives to anti-American indoctrination of the nation’s youth help the administration further characterize themselves as defenders of the country’s future. For example, one executive order targeting public education asserts that: In recent years, however, parents have witnessed schools indoctrinate their children in radical, anti-American ideologies while deliberately blocking parental oversight. Such an environment operates as an echo chamber, in which students are forced to accept these ideologies without question or critical examination. In many cases, innocent children are compelled to adopt identities as either victims or oppressors solely based on their skin color and other immutable characteristics (Exec. Order No. 14190, p. 8853). In this passage, the reach and influence of DEI initiatives are deliberately and hyperbolically mischaracterized, enabling the escalation of the issue beyond policy disagreement. Instead, DEI is framed as a “radical” existential danger to

national cohesion and the nuclear family unit. Parents and their “innocent children” are the victims in the administration’s narrative because they are “compelled” to believe equity ideology. The administration claims that “Imprinting” DEI “on our Nation’s children” violates civil rights law and “usurps basic parental authority” (Exec. Order No. 14190, p. 8853).

Those who’ve participated in DEI programming may chuckle at the idea of it being so effective that it could be characterized as a threat to the status quo. Approaches to building DEI infrastructure vary widely in substance, form, and effectiveness; given the institutional human resources vibe of most DEI initiatives, it shouldn’t surprise anyone that the effectiveness of these initiatives is often overestimated and oversold (Torrez et al., 2024). That is not a reason to walk back the progress that has been made after many decades of institutionalization (Kratz, 2024), DEI is more regulatory than revolutionary. Still, DEI is perceived by a white American majority as a threat to their privilege in classrooms, workplaces, and other organizational contexts.

Some scholars have argued that the white majority’s defensiveness and resistance concedes DEI’s “transformative potential” to have a “positive impact at changing the status quo” in the long-term (Nittrouer et al., 2025, p. 191). DEI’s roots in social movements advancing civil rights, women’s equality, and disability justice are obscured by exaggerated and unsupported claims about how teaching children about “‘White Privilege’ or ‘unconscious bias,’ actually promotes racial discrimination and undermines national unity” (Exec. Order No. 14190, p. 8853). Such statements aim to rally opposition to DEI by invoking a narrowly constructed interpretation of patriotism and implying that DEI initiatives corrupt the national narrative and weaken the shared sense of American identity. If nationalism isn’t an appealing enough justification to defend America from DEI, the administration also claims that DEI “erode[s] critical thinking” while “sow[ing] division, confusion, and distrust” ultimately “undermin[ing] the very foundations of personal identity and family unity” (Exec. Order No. 14190, p. 8853). Here, DEI is framed as destabilizing at the much smaller level of the family unit and individual person.

Beyond ideological concerns about fracturing the national, familial, and personal identities of Americans, the administration asserts that DEI policies imperil public safety when it comes to certain matters like national defense, critical infrastructure, and aviation safety. For example, one of the executive orders claims that:

“illegal DEI and DEIA policies also threaten the safety of American men, women, and children across the Nation by diminishing the importance of individual merit, aptitude, hard work, and determination when selecting people for jobs and services in key sectors” such as “government, and the medical, aviation, and law-enforcement communities” (Exec. Order No. 14173, p. 8633).

This passage ignores the plain intent of laws like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 to prohibit discriminatory practices that have historically prevented equal opportunity and fairness in employment decisions. These discriminatory practices are often justified as a defense of vaguely articulated values of “individual merit, hard work, and determination” when, in reality, they lock people of color, people with disabilities, and many others who aren’t cis-white-males out of fair participation in the employment market. DEI is the result of institutions internalizing the lessons of (and co-opting) key social movements fighting

for the civil rights of historically marginalized communities. It is an umbrella term for many different approaches to addressing social injustices within institutions and the communities they operate in.

Positioned in response to “DEIs infiltration of the Federal Government” (Exec. Order No. 14151, p. 8339), the defensive rhetoric in the corpus appropriates the language of civil rights to “protect” a conservative vision of citizenship that is defined by the values of “individual initiative, excellence, and hard work” (Exec. Order No. 14173, p. 8635). DEI is cast as an ideological imposition on traditional institutions that shuts out “hardworking Americans” from their “shot at the American Dream” (Exec. Order No. 14173, p. 8633). Enthymematic logic is in play, eliding what the administration actually means by “hardworking Americans”—coded language for white American cisgender men. The implication is that in pushing institutions to be more inclusive and representative of non-majoritarian members of their organizations, DEI infrastructure has displaced the “real” Americans who are assumed to be more competent and qualified than those who have “replaced” them.

“Patriotic education,” an ahistorical version of U.S. history sanitized of its disunifying and ignoble features, is pitched as a defense to institutionalized DEI (Exec. Order No. 14190, p. 8854) and is embodied by the revival of the 1776 commission from the first Trump administration (Exec. Order No. 14190, p. 8855). The goal of “patriotic education” is nationalistic indoctrination via uncritical “celebration of America’s greatness and history” (Exec. Order No. 14190, p. 8854). It is a defense of America’s honor and unity. As Sánchez (2023) explains, slow civic violence involves the erosion of access and trust in civic institutions. This move situates the administration’s anti-DEI agenda within a broader ahistorical campaign to reestablish the cultural hegemony of white, Christian nationalism as core to American identity and purpose. By defending a narrative that DEI is a corrupting influence on the nation’s youth, the orders in the corpus rationalize slow civic violence in the public education system, contributing to a less informed and more docile public disinvested from the democratic processes that could challenge the administration and the movement that sustains it.

Orders in the corpus extend this narrative to the U.S. military, depicting DEI as an affront to the strength and readiness of the Armed Forces. The administration claims that by prioritizing race and sex preferences, DEI “undermine[s] leadership, merit, and unit cohesion, thereby eroding lethality and force readiness” (Exec. Order No. 14185, p. 8763). Putting aside the questionable desirability of “lethality” in any context, this portrayal of DEI’s effect on the military evokes an image of a military so compromised by internal mismanagement that it is incapable of defending the nation from external enemies. This compromise of military readiness is blamed on the supposed DEI practice of sacrificing merit-based considerations for the sake of meeting ideological quotas for underrepresented demographics.

Aviation is another domain that the administration claims to defend against the dangers of DEI, accusing the administration’s predecessors of jeopardizing the public safety of “MILLIONS OF AMERICANS [who] RELY ON SAFE, TIMELY AIR TRAVEL EVERY DAY” because they “prioritiz[ed] illegal DEI hiring” over competency (The White House, 2025b, para. 4). It is worth noting that the hiring policies of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) under the Biden administration were the same ones under the Obama and the first Trump administrations. One

order in the corpus demands a systematic review of hiring decisions at the FAA from the prior four years and ordering the Secretary of Transportation “to take such corrective action as necessary to achieve uncompromised aviation safety, including the replacement of any individuals who do not meet qualification standards” (Trump, 2025, para. 4). This order suggests any hiring mistake is more than just poor judgement on the part of a hiring manager but is instead the result of DEI and constitutes a tangible threat to public safety.

In defending the anti-DEI agenda, the administration asserts a strong bureaucratic presence (Eldridge & Reinke, 2018, p. 97) through commanding policy announcements and mandates. However, this visible imposition masks an absence of genuine engagement with or protection for the communities who will be affected by these orders. Despite the administration’s pre-textual claims to having increased the efficiency of the federal government by slashing the bureaucracy, what they have really done in these orders is rationalize hollowing out public infrastructure and services. This is not the defeat of bureaucracy being claimed; rather, the administration is creating a more hostile bureaucracy with a threatening presence coinciding with a newfound absence of infrastructure, personnel, empathy, and care. By framing DEI as a divisive and dangerous ideology, the administration authorizes bureaucratic maneuvers to assert an overbearing presence of executive power. It is a fast civic violence of a bureaucracy suddenly transformed into a direct extension of presidential will.

Indifference, apathy, and absence are momentarily concealed by the sudden vigor of the executive, but slow violence (Nixon, 2011) follows as the civic damage sets in over time (Sánchez, 2023). A false dichotomy between DEI and civil rights casts the former as the personified enemy of the latter. In defense of “traditional American values” (Exec. Order No. 14173, p. 8633), these orders vilify DEI as a threat to American identity, national security, and public safety. This paves the way for legal violence innocently characterized as a reconsideration of presidential priorities and recalibration of bureaucratic procedures — a guise signaling to subordinates that they have a duty to rid government of the DEI infrastructure that has infiltrated key institutions in the public and private sectors of American society. If successful, the government will retreat from many decades of progress toward inclusion and equity in its workforce and programming for the American people. A bureaucratic absence from civil rights enforcement causes a lot of harm that is incremental, insidious, and dispersed over time to a degree that such harm goes unnoticed until its cumulative effects on vulnerable communities becomes impossible to ignore. By then, it may be too late to build replacement defenses against the structural oppression and historical injustices DEI programming, broadly conceived, was intended to ameliorate.

DEI proponents are accused of betraying the nation’s core values and scapegoated for the failures of government institutions. As state power is turned against vulnerable groups who are demonized as undeserving beneficiaries of government care, the “institutional betrayal” (Reinke, 2022, p. 43) of the second Trump administration is revealed. Defense is about fending off the “infiltration” of DEI in critical American institutions with “unifying” and “ennobling” propaganda. There is a malicious nostalgia to this rhetoric that signals the administration’s desire to restore what it considers to be a more authentic (and whitewashed) American national identity that has been lost.

The rejection embodied by denial is complemented by a defense of an imagined past America, one that was whiter and more masculine than the DEI version that “penalizes hard-working Americans” because “they lack a requisite disability or skin color” (Keeping Americans safe in aviation, 2025, p. 8651). In the administration’s lexicon, DEI functions as a metonym for everything that has to do with race, sex, gender, ability, class, and anything else that is identity related. In the next section, we turn to the depose component of the DDD permission structure, which takes on a more forceful tone unleashing executive power (and fury) on the entire DEI infrastructure.

DEPOSE: DEI infrastructure through executive power

Deposing DEI means more than merely sidelining inclusion and equity programs; instead, the goal is to systematically eradicate DEI infrastructure so thoroughly that it cannot possibly recover. Uncompromising language throughout the corpus of executive documents overconfidently lays out the specious case against DEI. The second Trump administration doesn’t pull punches as they seek to supplant DEI training with “patriotic education,” which requires schools to “teach that America and its founding documents remain the most powerful force for good in human history” (Exec. Order No. 14185, p. 8764). However, anything more than a cursory examination of the administration’s blustery rhetoric reveals a startling lack of evidence and warrants for its hyperbolic claims. These claims about “illegal DEI” are deployed as justifications for revoking diversity policies, firing diversity officers, and reconfiguring federal employment practices into a white supremacist’s idea of a pure meritocracy.

“All so-called DEI initiatives, including all dangerous preferencing policies or practices” are juxtaposed with employment practices prioritizing “individual capability, competence, achievement, and dedication” (Keeping Americans safe in aviation, 2025, p. 8651). As a rhetorical strategy, antithesis constructs a false dichotomy between DEI and meritocracy. Implying programs targeting the historical injustices of racism and sexism are incompatible with merit-based employment willfully ignores the history of DEI as a corrective to the overrepresentation of white, able-bodied, cisgender men in desirable fields and positions of power (Kratz, 2024). The orders read like a manifesto, which may explain the poorly warranted claims used to justify such disruptive actions.

Deposing DEI is about more than a policy disagreement or a corrective to bureaucratic overreach; it is a bold repudiation of diversity, equity, and inclusivity as social values. DEI programs and the people who operate them are characterized as adversaries that need to be purged from the federal bureaucracy and private industry. In this vein, one of the orders explicitly targets the “DEI Bureaucracy” itself:

Sec. 4. Abolishing the DEI Bureaucracy. The Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of Homeland Security shall abolish every DEI office within the Department of Defense and the Department of Homeland Security with regard to the USCG, respectively, including any vestiges of DEI offices, such as sub-offices, programs, elements, or initiatives established to promote a race-based preferences system that subverts meritocracy, perpetuates unconstitutional discrimination, and promotes divisive concepts or gender ideology (Exec. Order No. 14185, p. 8763).

The deliberate erasure of DEI through executive fiat is a form of bureaucratic violence. Ordering the abolishment of “any vestiges of DEI” makes the presence of the chief executive felt and feared. However, this very presence highlights a stark and growing absence of institutional safeguards and practices protecting marginalized communities from the abuses of government and corporate power.

Removal of DEI programs has the simultaneous effect of erasing established channels for redressing discrimination in the federal workplace. Like others, the order to “Terminate, to the maximum extent allowed by law, all DEI, DEIA, and ‘environmental justice’ offices and positions” (Exec. Order No. 14151, p. 8339) uses clinical language to communicate callous instructions to depose entire offices and revoke protections for vulnerable communities without acknowledging the human impact. What is left is a bureaucratic void and an absence of safeguards that will, over time, contribute to slow civic violence (Sánchez, 2023) and a growing public feeling of institutional betrayal (Reinke, 2022). Persistent use of imperative rhetoric and legalistic phrasing lends a sense of credibility, urgency, and finality to the orders deposing “illegal DEI.”

As a structuring principle, depose authorizes a sweeping act of institutional re-engineering. It begins with the excision of all “references to DEI and DEIA principles, under whatever name they may appear,” and quickly escalates to the programmatic as agencies are ordered to “Terminate all ‘diversity,’ ‘equity,’ [...] and like mandates, requirements, programs, or activities, as appropriate” (Exec. Order No. 14173, p. 8634). Taken together, these moves redefine the parameters of the federal government’s role in civil rights enforcement and signal its abandonment of its responsibility to advance a more just, inclusive, and equitable society in an increasingly diverse nation. Within 24 hours of taking office, the administration published a fact sheet emphatically arguing that “FLIGHTS SHOULD BE SUPERVISED BY THE BEST EMPLOYEES” and blaming a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) system outage on DEI-associated hiring policies of the Obama and Biden administrations while celebrating Trump’s termination of “illegal and dangerous” DEI programs in the FAA (The White House, 2025b, para. 7).

Less than a week later, on January 29th, 2025, a military helicopter and a commercial jet collided over Washington D.C., killing all 64 people aboard the jet and another 3 people in the helicopter. The administration’s response was to blame DEI hiring policies at the FAA; Trump did this first in a press briefing, and then in a presidential memorandum blaming the “illegal decisions [made] during the Obama and Biden Administrations that minimized merit and competence in the [FAA]” (Trump, 2025, para. 2). In essence, the deposition of DEI in the FAA is being portrayed as a corrective to the “illegal and dangerous” ideological overreach of the administration’s predecessors, whose embrace of DEI led to a national tragedy. Truth is irrelevant to the administration’s aims. By rhetorically linking DEI to the loss of operational efficiency, employee competency, and a horrific accident, a permission structure is set for radically altering the FAA as an institution and employer.

Deposition is the culmination of the DDD permission structure. After first denying, and then defending against DEI, executive power permits the dismantling of the entire DEI infrastructure

that has “infiltrated” the federal government and private industry. This sets the stage for purging the ideological opponents of the administration, beginning with anyone who values diversity, equity, and inclusion. It also paves the way for a reconfigured bureaucracy characterized by the hostile exercise of executive power and a profound absence of the protections that once guarded against systemic discrimination, exploitation, and oppression.

With its explicit commands and unequivocal mandates, the deposition of DEI reveals the full power of a permission structure turned on itself—a structure that authorizes, through bureaucratic and rhetorical maneuvering, a form of legal violence. The second Trump administration has no intention of eliminating federal bureaucracy like they’ve claimed, but they have, at least so far, succeeded in reshaping and weaponizing it. Such bureaucratic violence and institutional betrayal (Reinke, 2022) is as much about the suppression of dissent as it is about the assertion of a singular, nostalgic, and exclusionary idea of what America was, and should be again.

Implications

In this article, we have argued that executive orders are technical documents that enact and sustain a permission structure for undermining decades of DEI progress. As system-maintaining texts (Seigel, 2014), these documents are not neutral, apolitical, or benign, they are imbued with ideological weight and rhetorical force. The “cultural” and “social justice” turns in technical communication have helped expose how such documents codify and reproduce systems of oppression (Walton, Moore, & Jones, 2019; Williams, 2010). The Executive Orders analyzed in this case reinforce this insight: they discursively structure permission to dismantle DEI infrastructure and shift blame for structural inequity onto DEI itself. Subordinates within bureaucracies cannot refuse these orders without risking their employment, highlighting the coercive nature of system-maintaining rhetoric.

What is the rhetorical pattern structuring permission for the institutional betrayal of DEI?

The rhetorical pattern structuring permission for the institutional betrayal of DEI relies on the strategic sequencing of denial, defense, and deposition. This DDD framework works cumulatively to delegitimize DEI by denying its legal and moral foundations, framing it as a threat to national cohesion, and then authorizing its erasure through executive mandates. By embedding these actions in a bureaucratic logic of compliance and order, the Trump administration transforms opposition to equity into a perceived civic and patriotic duty.

How does DDD structure permission for attacking DEI principles?

DDD structures permission for attacking DEI principles by creating a discursive architecture in which resistance to equity is framed as a defense of national identity, institutional integrity, and public safety. Denial recasts DEI as unconstitutional and discriminatory, defense positions anti-DEI action as morally necessary, and deposition operationalizes that logic through sweeping executive action. The cumulative effect is the construction of a permission structure that not only legitimizes harm but enlists the machinery of the state to implement and enforce it.

How do administrative subordinates use DDD to rationalize their complicity in bureaucratic indifference, slow (civic) violence, and institutional betrayal?

Administrative subordinates use the DDD framework to distance themselves from the moral consequences of their actions by aligning their roles with procedural compliance rather than ethical reflection. When denial of discrimination is encoded as policy, and defending that policy becomes a job requirement, individuals are positioned as enforcers rather than decision-makers. Deposition, then, becomes a task carried out in the name of institutional mandate rather than personal belief. This allows subordinates to rationalize their complicity in slow civic violence and institutional betrayal, transforming ethically fraught actions into ordinary procedural routines.

The executive orders analyzed above construct a narrative in which the pursuit of diversity, equity, and inclusion is reframed as an attack on fairness, national unity, and individual merit. This narrative is deeply racialized and gendered, steeped in white nationalist ideology. As Walton et al. (2019) define, “privilege” is the unearned advantage granted through alignment with dominant identity markers. The Trump administration’s rhetoric, including the Department of Education’s “dear colleague” letter and the labeling of Kamala Harris as a “DEI hire,” illustrates how DEI is weaponized as a slur to delegitimize individuals and communities. This rhetorical marking reinforces material deprivation, denying access to opportunity, power, and recognition. Executive orders blaming an aviation disaster on DEI hiring reflect the dangers of such rhetorical constructions. These texts signal a broader conversation about what counts as DEI and who is deemed legitimate within public and professional discourse. Walton (2016) reminds us of the need to consider how technical documents dehumanize and deny dignity. The removal of DEI initiatives with the stroke of a pen underscores the fragility of hard-won progress, and the urgency of designing policies that center justice, equity, and resilience.

Conclusion

Reflecting on Brian Thompson’s assassination clarifies a central implication of our analysis: permission structures like “deny, defend, depose” (DDD) are not abstract rhetorical devices—they produce tangible, often deadly outcomes. Thompson’s murder illustrates how such structures, when deeply embedded in institutional discourse, create conditions for extreme reactions to bureaucratic betrayal. Though exceptional, the act symbolizes the risks of normalizing structural injustice, especially as vividly mirrored in the Trump administration’s systematic dismantling of DEI policies. Our analysis calls technical communicators and social justice advocates to recognize and intervene in these structures to prevent both the slow harms of bureaucratic indifference and the potential for more explosive outcomes.

The oppressive nature of these executive orders underscores a critical opportunity identified by Jones and Williams (2018): to examine “how and why design of texts and technologies can be, have been, and are used for nefarious purposes” (p. 373). DDD structures a rhetorical environment rich with rationalizations that cast discriminatory dismantling as civic virtue. These texts do more than change policy—they reshape public discourse around race, gender, ability, and national identity, reinforcing bureaucratic indifference and slow violence in the guise of efficiency and order.

If the decades-old DEI infrastructure can be eliminated with a stroke of the president's pen, how durable and resilient was the progress made through these programs to begin with? This question speaks to both the power of language and the fragility of social order. As technical communicators, we must engage with this uncomfortable reality while working collectively to build more robust institutions, inclusive frameworks, and ethical practices. Jones and Williams (2018) urge us not only to examine what texts are designed to do, but how they function in practice—and where we are obligated to intervene (p. 384).

Collectively, the artifacts in our corpus seek more than policy change; they aim to reconfigure the civic landscape to privilege white Christian nationalism under the guise of meritocracy. DDD is not just a structure, it is a worldview. To counteract it, technical communication must continue engaging deeply with questions of justice, access, and rhetorical power. We must recognize, reveal, and reject the oppressive rhetorics and practices facilitated by political technical communication and reaffirm our field's commitment to equity, dignity, and systemic accountability.

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