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## The Shakedown: Trump's DOJ Pressured Lawyers to “Find” Evidence That UCLA Had Illegally Tolerated Antisemitism

by Peter Elkind, ProPublica, and Katherine Mangan, The Chronicle of Higher Education

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### Reporting Highlights

- **The “Playbook”:** Trump's DOJ threatened UCLA with discrimination lawsuits, demanded more than \$1 billion in fines and pressed for changes that had nothing to do with antisemitism.
- **An Internal Memo:** DOJ career lawyers warned that the case against UCLA was shaky. Many said they were glad to be leaving before they might be asked to sign the complaint.
- **Fettered Resistance:** UC's dependence on federal funds limited its ability to push back aggressively, insiders said.

These highlights were written by the reporters and editors who worked on this story.

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On the morning of Thursday, July 31, James B. Milliken was enjoying a round of golf at the remote Sand Hills club in Western Nebraska when his cellphone buzzed. Milliken was still days away from taking the helm of the sprawling University of California system, but his new office was on the line with disturbing news: The Trump administration was freezing hundreds of millions of dollars of research funding at the University of California, Los Angeles, UC's biggest campus. Milliken quickly packed up and made the five-hour drive to Denver to catch the next flight to California.

He landed on the front lines of one of the most confounding cultural battles waged by the Trump administration.

The grant freeze was the latest salvo in the administration's broader campaign against elite universities, which it has pilloried as purveyors of antisemitism and "woke" indoctrination. Over the next four months, the Justice Department targeted UCLA with its full playbook for bringing colleges to heel, threatening it with multiple discrimination lawsuits, [demanding more than \\$1 billion](#) in fines and pressing for a raft of changes on the [conservative wish list](#) for overhauling higher education.

In the months since Milliken's aborted golf game, much has been written about the Trump administration's efforts to impose its will on UCLA, part of the nation's largest and most prestigious public university system. But an investigation by ProPublica and The Chronicle of Higher Education, based on previously unreported documents and interviews with dozens of people involved, reveals the extent to which the government violated legal and procedural norms to gin up its case against the school. It also surfaced something equally alarming: How the UC system's deep dependence on federal money inhibited its willingness to resist the legally shaky onslaught, a vulnerability the Trump administration's tactics brought into sharp focus.

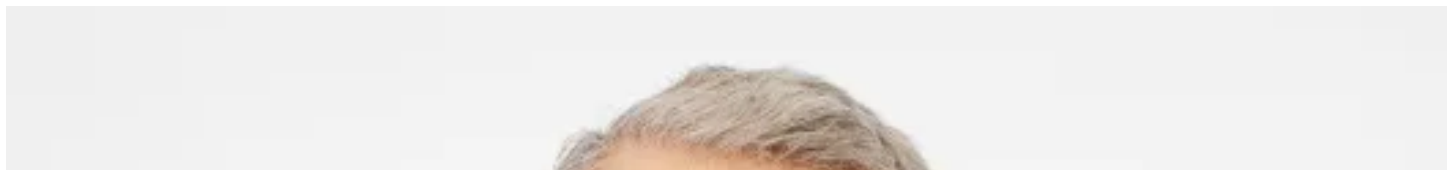
According to former DOJ insiders, agency political appointees dispatched teams of career civil rights lawyers to California in March, pressuring them to rapidly "find" evidence backing a preordained conclusion: that the UC system and four of its campuses had illegally tolerated antisemitism, which would violate federal civil rights statutes.

The career attorneys eventually recommended a lawsuit against only UCLA, which had been rocked by pro-Palestinian protests in the spring of 2024. But even that case was weak, the lawyers acknowledged in a previously unreported internal memo we obtained. It documented the extensive steps UCLA had already taken to address antisemitism, many resulting from a Biden administration investigation based on the same incidents. The memo also noted there was no evidence that the harassing behavior that peaked during the protests was still happening.

Nonetheless, investigators sketched out a convoluted legal strategy to justify a new civil rights complaint against UCLA that several former DOJ lawyers called problematic and ethically dubious. Multiple attorneys who worked on it told us they were relieved they'd left the DOJ before they could be asked to sign it.

UCLA seemingly had every reason to push back aggressively. Yet UC system leaders have resisted calls from faculty and labor groups to file suit, fearing the many ways the government could retaliate against not only UCLA, but the entire university system, which relies on federal funds for a full one-third of its revenue. The government has opened probes into all 10 UC campuses, including at least seven that target UC Berkeley alone. "Thankfully, they've only fucked with UCLA at this point," said one UC insider privy to the system's thinking.

To tell this story, ProPublica and the Chronicle reviewed public and internal records and interviewed more than 50 people, including DOJ attorneys who worked on the California investigations, UC officials and faculty, former government officials, Jewish leaders and legal experts. Some asked not to be identified, for fear the administration would retaliate or because they hadn't been authorized to discuss the conflict. The Justice Department and its top officials did not respond to detailed questions and interview requests.





James B. Milliken, a savvy academic administrator, stepped into the challenge of his career in taking over as president of the University of California system. Elena Zhukova/University of California

Over three decades leading public colleges, Milliken, 68, a dapper onetime Wall Street lawyer who goes by “JB,” has built a reputation as a pragmatist able to work with politicians of all stripes and navigate the culture wars. In an interview, he called the challenges facing the entirety of UC, and UCLA in particular, unparalleled in his career. “There’s nothing like this time,” he said. “This is singular. It’s the toughest.”

On Nov. 14, UC received a temporary reprieve. In response to a complaint brought by the American Association of University Professors, U.S. District Judge Rita F. Lin [issued a scathing opinion](#) finding that the Trump administration’s actions against UCLA had “flouted” legal requirements and ordered it to cease all “coercive and

retaliatory conduct” against the UC system. Lin had already ordered the release of UCLA’s \$584 million in frozen grant funding.

But those orders are preliminary and subject to appeal, and many people at UC fear that more attacks are coming. “Even if this holds, there will simply be another move from this administration,” said Anna Markowitz, an associate professor of education at UCLA and a leader of the campus faculty association, which is among the lawsuit’s plaintiffs. “They have not made it a secret what they wish to do.”

In interviews, UCLA researchers described the damage the school has absorbed so far. Even Jewish faculty members who endured antisemitism said they are aghast at the way the government has weaponized their complaints to justify cutting critical scientific research.

One of them is Ron Avi Astor, a professor of social welfare and education whose description of his treatment at the hands of pro-Palestinian protesters is a prominent part of the lawsuit President Donald Trump’s DOJ recommended against UCLA. But he is dismayed at the cuts to research funds. “These are things that save people’s lives. Why are we messing with that? It’s a tool that anyone who’s a scholar would abhor,” he told us. “It looks like we’re being used.”

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For Trump’s Justice Department, the University of California was a juicy target from the start.

With its 10 campuses, nearly 300,000 students, six medical centers and three national labs, UC is a crown jewel of a blue state — one whose governor, Gavin Newsom, has become one of Trump’s most prominent foes.

Its scientists have won 75 Nobel Prizes, including four this year alone. But as a high-powered science hub, it’s deeply dependent on federal funding, getting some \$17.3 billion a year in research grants, student financial aid and reimbursements from government health programs. UC also has nothing like the endowment wealth of the Ivy League colleges, including Columbia and Brown, from which the Trump administration has extracted penalties in the tens or hundreds of millions.

Some of Trump’s DOJ appointees arrived with UC already in their crosshairs. Harmeet K. Dhillon, Trump’s assistant attorney general for civil rights, had sued UC officials in 2017 on behalf of two conservative student groups, alleging unfair treatment of conservative speakers they wanted to bring to the Berkeley campus. (UC [settled the case a year later](#), agreeing to modify rules for speakers at Berkeley and pay \$70,000 in legal costs.) And Trump had named Leo Terrell, [the bombastic former Fox News commentator](#), to a top DOJ civil rights post where he heads the president’s Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism. A UCLA School of Law graduate, Terrell had publicly declared in mid-2024 that his alma mater was “a national embarrassment” over its handling of “criminal antisemitic conduct.” Dhillon and Terrell didn’t respond to requests for comment.

In early February, just two weeks after Trump took office, his new attorney general, Pam Bondi, issued a [series of directives](#) to the DOJ requiring “zealous advocacy” for Trump’s executive orders, attacks on all forms of “illegal DEI” and aggressive steps to combat antisemitism. Civil rights actions and investigations involving race and sex discrimination, historically the civil rights division’s chief focus, were largely abandoned.

On Feb. 28, Terrell’s task force [announced plans](#) to visit 10 U.S. campuses, including UCLA and UC Berkeley, that were alleged to have illegally failed to protect Jewish students and faculty members, to assess “whether remedial action is warranted.”

But by then, the new Justice leadership had [already decided](#) to investigate UC schools and already concluded that they were guilty.

In early March, Terrell [declared on Fox News](#) that students and employees in “the entire UC system” were “being harassed because of antisemitism.” The administration planned to “sue,” “bankrupt,” and “take away every single federal dollar” from such schools, he said, and the DOJ would file hate crime charges.

A team of about a dozen career DOJ lawyers had been assembled only days earlier to investigate the allegations of antisemitism against UC employees. Under the employment discrimination section of the Civil Rights Act, the occurrence of ugly antisemitic incidents or violence involving professors or staff wasn’t, by itself, enough to merit federal intervention. The legal standard was whether the university had engaged in a “pattern or practice” of tolerating antisemitism.

Before Trump took office, the civil rights division typically took more than a year to complete such a probe, according to DOJ veterans. Investigators would conduct interviews on campus, review reams of documents for compliance with various statutes and assess such complex matters as when hateful speech is protected by the First Amendment. Once a complaint was authorized, the civil rights division would seek voluntary compliance in a process that was meant to find solutions, not punish colleges.

In this case, the Justice Department’s political appointees demanded that investigators wrap things up in far less time — initially, a single month.

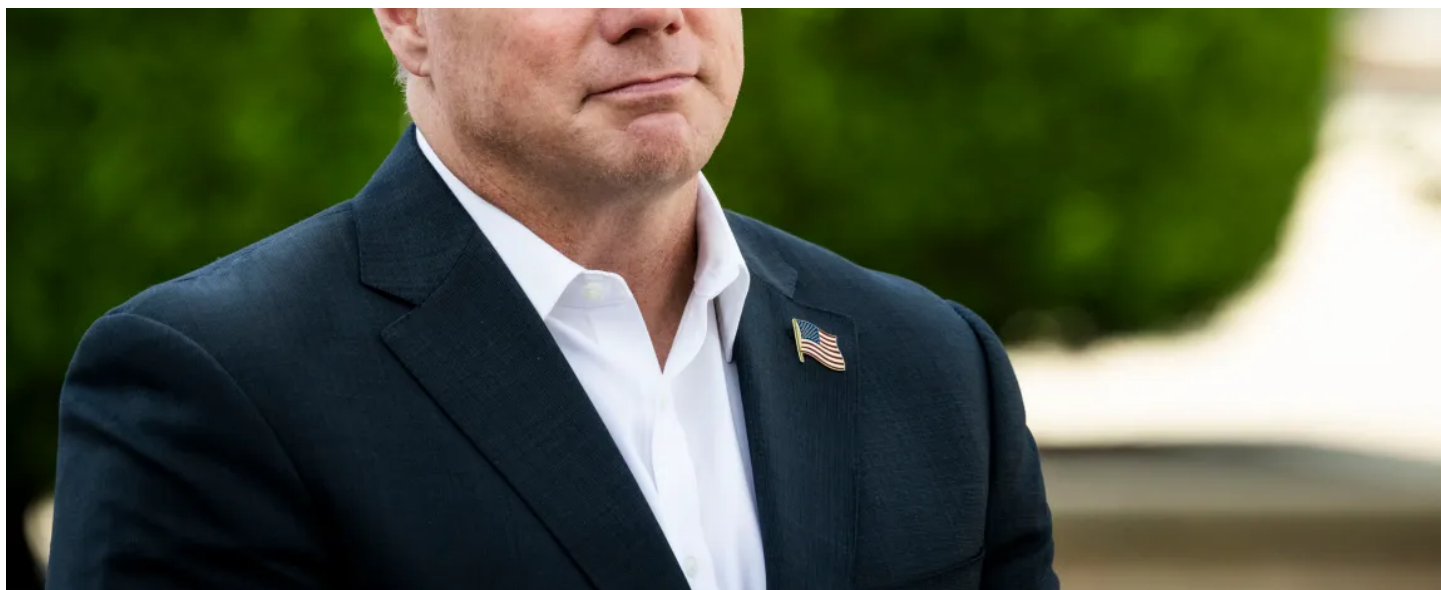
Career supervisors say they told their new bosses that they couldn’t, in one month, produce a case that could stand up in court. Still, “North” and “South” teams of lawyers were dispatched for multiday trips to California to dig up facts and interview officials at UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC San Francisco and UCLA.

“We were told what the outcome will be: ‘You have one month to find evidence to justify a lawsuit and draft a complaint against the UC system,’” said Ejaz Baluch, a senior trial attorney in the civil rights division who worked on the investigation before leaving the Justice Department in May.

“The incredibly short timing of this investigation is just emblematic of the fact that the end goal was never to conduct a thorough, unbiased investigation,” Jen Swedish, who was the deputy chief of Justice’s employment litigation section until May, said in an interview. “The end goal was to file a damn complaint — or have something to threaten the university.”

Trump’s appointee as deputy assistant attorney general for civil rights was [Michael Gates](#), formerly the city attorney in Huntington Beach, California, who assumed the DOJ post vowing to help “[win this country back](#).” “You guys have found a hostile work environment, right?” lawyers on the UC team recall him asking, just three weeks into the investigation.





DOJ investigators said Michael Gates, then deputy assistant attorney general for civil rights, asked them, "You guys have found a hostile work environment, right?" just three weeks into their probe of UC. Paul Bersebach/MediaNews Group/Orange County Register via Getty Images

"He seemed upset we were spending so much time investigating," Dena Robinson, a senior trial attorney, told us. "He didn't know what the holdup was in getting back to them on which university could be sued." In an email about six weeks in, Gates suggested there was easily enough in the public record to bring a complaint against at least one of the UC campuses — a notion that horrified the career lawyers. "Why did we even go out there if you'd already made up your mind?" another member of the UC team recalled thinking. Gates, who left the DOJ in November after just 11 months, declined an interview request and offered no comment on detailed questions from ProPublica and the Chronicle.

Lawyers on the team say it soon became apparent that there wasn't nearly enough evidence to justify an employment discrimination case against UC Davis, UC Berkeley or UCSF, much less the entire UC system. Fearful for their jobs, they agreed on a strategy to "feed the beast," as one attorney put it: to focus on UCLA, which had experienced the most troubling, and publicly explosive, episodes of antisemitism.

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Like many colleges across the country, UCLA had seen a spike in antisemitism amid protests over Israel's military response in Gaza following the brutal Hamas attack of Oct. 7, 2023.

The campus had experienced dozens of ugly incidents, including swastikas spray-painted on buildings and graffiti reading "Free Palestine, Fuck Jews." Muslim and Arab students and faculty also complained of harassment and that any speech critical of Israel was being branded as antisemitic.

Starting in late April 2024, hundreds of pro-Palestinian protesters set up a barricaded encampment in the center of the campus. Reluctant to summon outside law enforcement, UCLA administrators allowed the encampment to remain for a week, disrupting classes and blocking access to certain buildings. Protesters berated and occasionally physically assaulted anyone who refused to disavow Zionism.

On the night of April 30, masked counterprotesters, armed with poles and pepper spray and shooting fireworks, stormed the encampment, triggering a [three-hour melee](#) before police were finally brought in. Dozens of people were injured. It took until 6 a.m. May 2 for [Los Angeles police and sheriff's deputies](#) to empty the site.

Before Trump even took office, however, UCLA — and the federal government — had already taken action to combat antisemitism at the school.

Most significantly, in the waning days of the Biden administration, the UC system had reached a broad [civil rights settlement](#) with the Department of Education [resolving investigations](#) into student complaints that UC had tolerated both antisemitism and anti-Arab and anti-Muslim discrimination at UCLA and on four other campuses.

The settlement required UC to conduct more thorough investigations of alleged harassment and to submit reports on each campus' handling of discrimination complaints. Government monitoring was to continue until UC "demonstrated compliance" with "all the terms of this agreement."





Hundreds of pro-Palestinian protesters maintained a barricaded encampment in the center of the UCLA campus for a week in the spring of 2024, until a violent melee with counterprotesters finally prompted administrators to send in law enforcement to clear the site. Xinhua via Getty Images

The Trump administration disregarded all that. Even as the employee investigation was underway, it launched a new investigation of the same student complaints in early May.

On May 27 [on Fox News](#), Terrell, the head of the antisemitism task force, once again spoke publicly as if the DOJ's antisemitism inquiries had already been concluded. "Expect massive lawsuits against the UC system," he declared. "Expect hate crime charges filed by the federal government. ...We are going to go after them where it hurts them financially."

At the time, the lawyers working on the UC employment investigation were still racing to complete their recommendation. They were focused solely on UCLA, having determined there wasn't adequate evidence to pursue cases at other campuses. Many had distinctly mixed feelings even about bringing that case. "This was not something we would usually litigate," one lawyer on the team said in an interview. "But everyone understood the front office was demanding this."

By then, most of the remaining members of the UC team, amid a mass exodus from the civil rights division, were set to leave DOJ at the end of May after accepting the Trump administration's deferred-resignation offer. "It was comforting to know we were not going to be the ones signing any complaint," the lawyer said.

In the 47-page recommendation memo the UC team sent on May 29 to Dhillon, the assistant AG for civil rights, the lawyers spelled out their concerns. "We simply do not have strong evidence that the types of harassing acts that happened through spring 2024 are ongoing" — typically a legal requirement for bringing a complaint, the memo acknowledged. Some of the harassment complaints also involved protected First Amendment speech. And because, "as has been frequently noted," the investigation had been "truncated" to three months, there hadn't even been time to review some of the documents UC produced, the memo said.

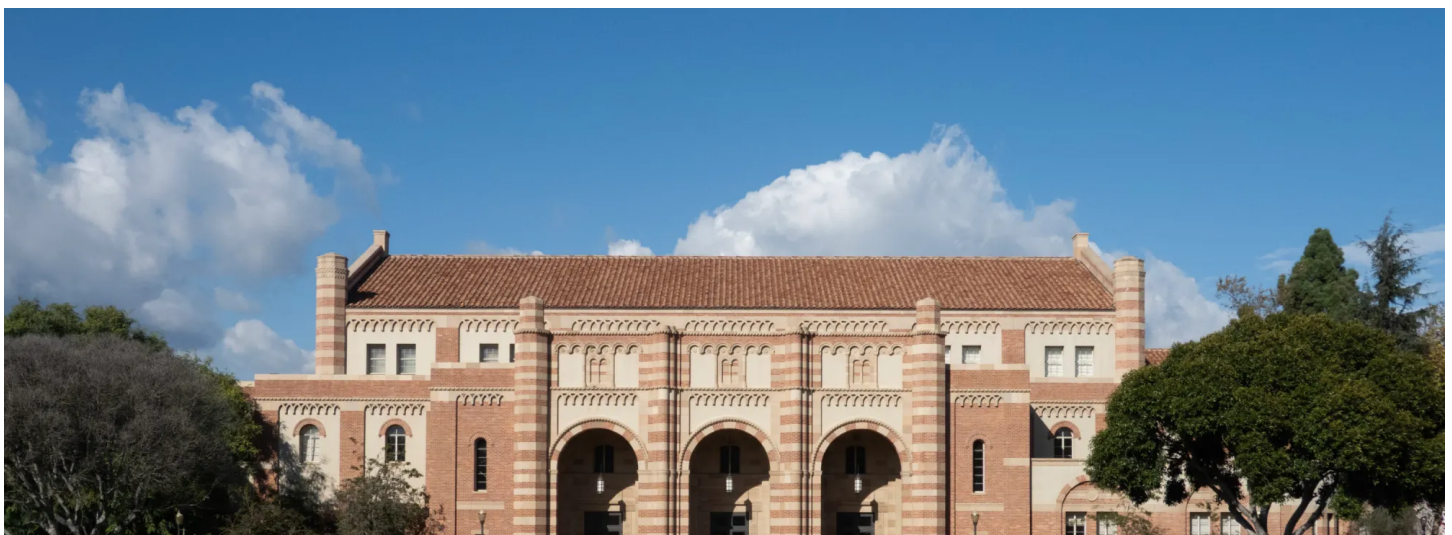
To shore up potential weaknesses in the case, the memo suggested an unusual "hybrid complaint" strategy that would rest partly on new allegations about the ineffectiveness of the university's complaint process (which was ongoing) and partly on three older faculty grievances.

One of the grievances cited was that of Astor, the professor of social welfare, who describes himself as both a Zionist and a "pro-peace researcher." His academic work, much of which takes place in Israel, involves studying ways to help students from different religious and ethnic backgrounds peacefully coexist. But after he signed an [open letter](#) from Jewish faculty criticizing some pro-Palestinian protesters' calls for violence, they accused him, in a widely circulated letter of their own, of supporting genocide. When he tried to enter the encampment to talk to students, he told us, a masked protester asked whether he was a Zionist. After he said he believed in Israel's right to exist, he was blocked from entering or crossing through the central campus.

Astor was targeted again last November, he said, when he and an Arab-Israeli researcher he'd flown in from Hebrew University of Jerusalem tried to discuss their research on preventing school violence in class. "A bunch of students got up and showed pictures of dead babies and chanted and didn't let us talk," he recalled. Later heckled on his way to his car, he said he felt threatened and depressed. He lost more than 60 pounds and was granted permission to work from home, but his repeated discrimination complaints to administrators went nowhere.

Astor's complaints, the employment-section attorneys believed, would support their proposal for a lawsuit against UCLA. Even so, they warned that their case might not hold up in court. In the memo, they recommended seeking a settlement before filing a complaint.

With that message delivered, most of the lawyers who had investigated the University of California departed the Justice Department.





UCLA's normally peaceful campus was roiled by dozens of ugly — and occasionally violent — incidents in the aftermath of Israel's response to the brutal Oct. 7 Hamas attack. Myung J. Chun/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images

On the morning of July 29, two days before Milliken's interrupted golf game, the University of California resolved what it surely hoped was among the last of the headaches from the 2024 encampment debacle: It announced [a \\$6.45 million settlement](#) of an antisemitism lawsuit brought by three Jewish students and a faculty member who said protesters blocked them from accessing the library and other campus buildings, creating a "Jew exclusion zone," and that the university did nothing to help them. UC agreed to an extensive list of new actions, and a chunk of the money went to eight organizations that combat antisemitism and support the UCLA Jewish community. The steps the university had taken, a joint statement declared, "demonstrate real progress in the fight against antisemitism."

The Trump administration had a different view. That afternoon, it announced that it had sent UC a [notice letter](#) saying the Justice Department had found UCLA's response to the encampment had been "deliberately indifferent to a hostile environment for Jewish and Israeli students," in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. Bondi warned in a [press release](#) that UCLA would "pay a heavy price" for "this disgusting breach of civil rights." The antisemitism finding had been reached less than three months after the investigation had begun.

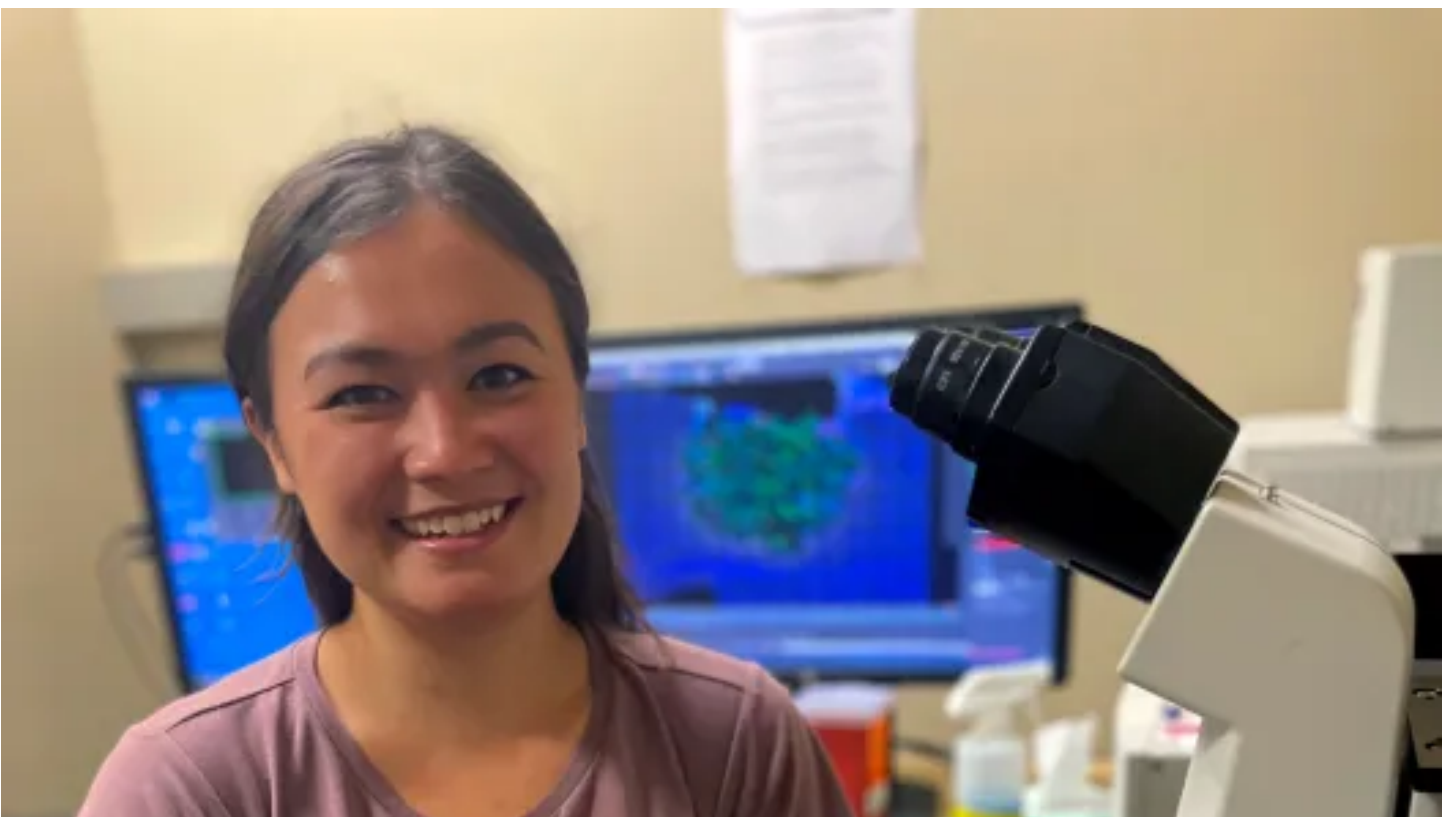
The letter, which acknowledged that it relied significantly on "publicly available reports and information," ignored all the previous actions meant to put the events of 2024 to rest.

"The violations they described all predate the December agreement," said Catherine E. Lhamon, who oversaw the Office of Civil Rights at the Education Department under the Obama and Biden administrations. "They've made no showing for why the agreement was defective or why anything else was needed to ensure compliance going forward."

The July 29 letter ended with an invitation to negotiate a settlement but warned that the department was prepared to file a lawsuit if there was no "reasonable certainty" of reaching an agreement.

Instead, the next day, the Trump administration began freezing UCLA's research money from the National Institutes of Health, National Science Foundation and Defense Department. The agencies cited the campus' handling of antisemitism as well as "illegal affirmative action" and allowing transgender women in women's sports and bathrooms.

UCLA was one of at least nine universities to be hit with grant suspensions, but the first public institution.





UCLA neuroscience researcher Elle Rathbun was stunned to learn that the Trump administration was freezing her hard-won \$160,000 grant to study how brains recover from stroke. Courtesy of Elle Rathbun

David Shackelford, whose medical school lab develops personalized treatments for lung cancer, said his phone “blew up” when colleagues began receiving stop-spending orders. Three NIH grants, totaling \$8 million over five years, had supported the lab’s work. “These are experiments and animal models that take years to develop,” Shackelford said. “It’s not like you can go to your computer and click save and walk away.” He scrounged together stopgap university funding and outside donations to keep the operation running “on fumes,” vowing “to go down swinging.”

Elle Rathbun is not sure she’s up for the fight. A 29-year-old sixth-year doctoral student in neuroscience, Rathbun was halfway through a three-year NIH grant to study how brains recover from strokes when she got the news: Her \$160,000 award was on the long list of suspended UCLA grants.

She found substitute funding for some of her work but now has doubts about whether a career in academic science is worth the stress. Like hundreds of her colleagues, she’d gone through a monthslong competitive process to win the grant, only to have the Trump administration halt the taxpayer-funded research midstream, a move she called “incredibly disappointing and wildly wasteful.”

A group of UCLA researchers filed a lawsuit seeking to reverse the cuts and won two court orders largely restoring them. But even after those victories, the flow of new science grants had slowed to a trickle. In a July 30 email later introduced in court, the National Science Foundation’s acting chief science officer wrote that, in addition to freezing existing grants, he had been ordered to not make any further awards to UCLA.

In nearly 500 pages of personal statements to the court, some faculty members said they’re censoring their speech and changing their courses to avoid topics that might trigger even more cuts to the university. Amander Clark, a professor who heads a reproductive sciences center, no longer talks about the ways her research on infertility and the effects of hormones on human bodies could help gay and transgender people. “I am afraid that because UC is in the spotlight, 20 years of work could be dismantled at the stroke of a pen,” she wrote.

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In selecting Milliken as their new system president, the UC regents had picked a veteran at managing large public university systems with vastly different political climates, ranging from the City University of New York, which he ran from 2014 to early 2018, to the University of Texas system, which he led from late 2018 until May 2025.

At UT, Milliken had championed some progressive steps, including expanding free tuition and safeguarding tenure, but he had also quickly shut down the system’s 21 offices related to diversity, equity and inclusion in response to a new Texas law. “He knows what is a winning hand and what is not,” said Richard Benson, who worked with Milliken as president of UT Dallas.

On Aug. 1, his first day on the job at UC’s system office in Oakland, Milliken issued a measured [public statement](#) that addressed the “deeply troubling” UCLA grant cuts

and affirmed the critical importance of UC's "life-saving and life-changing research."

That same week, the Justice Department, days after Bondi's declaration blasting UCLA for antisemitism against students, delivered a second notice letter, declaring that UCLA had illegally tolerated antisemitism against its employees and threatening to bring the "hybrid" lawsuit that the DOJ's UC team had recommended in May.

Eager to turn up the pressure on UC, political appointees at the Justice Department had planned to issue another press release assailing UCLA for the employee-related antisemitism findings, according to former agency officials. But Kacie Candela, a well-regarded employment-section lawyer and the last survivor from the dozen who had worked on the administration's UC investigations, warned that under federal law, it would be a criminal misdemeanor to publicly disclose details involving Equal Employment Opportunity Commission charges before filing a lawsuit. After a heated dispute, her argument prevailed and the UCLA letter went unannounced. She was terminated days later. (Candela, who is pursuing legal action to challenge her firing, declined to discuss the matter for this story. DOJ officials didn't respond to questions from ProPublica and the Chronicle about the episode.)

After receiving the two DOJ antisemitism notice letters, [Milliken quickly affirmed](#) UC's willingness to "engage in dialogue" with the administration. But that did nothing to forestall the next blow two days later: the Justice Department's [\\$1.2 billion settlement demand](#), which also asked for policy changes in areas where there'd been no findings of wrongdoing, including admissions practices, screening of foreign students and transgender students' access to bathrooms. Within hours of UC's receipt of the 27-page demand letter on Aug. 8 — which the DOJ had marked "confidential" — [CNN](#), [The New York Times](#) and [Politico](#) had all posted stories saying they'd obtained a copy from undisclosed sources. (A DOJ spokesperson declined to comment on whether the administration had leaked the letter, which UC spent weeks battling in court to keep private.)

All this was without precedent, due process or clear legal justification, civil rights experts noted. Agreeing to the DOJ's demands, the Aug. 8 letter said, would release UC from claims that it had violated laws banning discrimination against students, employees and women, and that its civil rights violations constituted fraud. "They were trying to overwhelm," said Swedish, the former civil rights deputy section chief. "They were spraying the fire hose at the university."



UC administrators faced intense pressure to respond to the Trump administration's attacks on UCLA by filing suit. But they were wary that an aggressive response might prompt fresh retaliation against the system's nine other campuses, which are all also under investigation. Juliana Yamada/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images

Strangely, Justice demanded another \$172 million for employees who'd complained of antisemitism discrimination, even though only a handful had filed such grievances with the EEOC and such awards are capped at \$300,000.

Former U.S. Attorney Zachary A. Cunha said a possible rationale for such unprecedented financial demands is that, under Trump, the DOJ is experimenting with using the [False Claims Act](#) in civil rights cases. This would permit triple damages and encourage complaints from whistleblowers, who would share in any financial recovery. "It's hard to know where these large and somewhat arbitrary numbers are coming from," Cunha said of the administration's settlement demands. But "if there's a pattern that's emerged thus far, it's that [every tool in the toolbox](#) is on the table."

Kenneth L. Marcus, an antisemitism watchdog and a former assistant secretary of education for civil rights under Trump, acknowledged that the government has pursued "eye-catching" penalties "with a speed that suggested" normal civil rights enforcement and due-process procedures ["have not been utilized."](#) But Marcus insisted the response was appropriate because of the "national crisis" of antisemitism. "When a situation is extraordinary and unprecedented," he said, "the response needs to be as well."

In media interviews, [officials in the Trump administration acknowledge](#) that its "whole-of-government" attacks on universities seek to bypass normal, slow-moving civil rights procedures by instead treating alleged discriminatory practices as contract disputes where the government is free to summarily cut off funding and demand

headline-grabbing, seemingly arbitrary fines. "Having that dollar figure, it actually brings attention to the deals in ways people might not otherwise pay attention," former White House deputy May Mailman, a key architect of the administration's higher education strategy, [told The New York Times](#).

This approach is "flagrantly unlawful" and "incredibly dangerous," said Lhamon, the former assistant education secretary, who is now executive director of the Edley Center on Law and Democracy at the UC Berkeley law school. "There's a long set of steps that are written into statute that must occur first before funds can be terminated."

Lhamon said the Trump administration was operating "like a mob boss."

"That is not the federal government doing civil rights work," she said.

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Milliken has found himself caught between the Trump administration's demands and those of his new constituency in California, which vocally opposes any hint of capitulation.

Newsom, who serves on the UC Board of Regents, has threatened to sue the federal government, calling its demands "extortion" and vowing to "fight like hell" against any deal.

The advocates of direct legal combat include Erwin Chemerinsky, dean of UC Berkeley's law school. "The university should have immediately gone to court to challenge this because what was done was so blatantly illegal and unconstitutional," he told ProPublica and the Chronicle. "I wanted the University of California to be Harvard in fighting back and filing suit. I didn't want them to be Columbia and Brown in capitulating."

But Milliken, backed by the UC regents, resisted calls for confrontation, wary of provoking retaliation against the nine other system campuses also under investigation. The damage to date at UCLA is "minor in comparison to the threat that looms," Milliken noted in [a mid-September statement](#). "We are in uncharted waters."

So UC has pursued settlement discussions with the government. According to a person familiar with the matter, it has retained William Levi, who served in Trump's first administration as a special assistant to the president, counselor to the attorney general and chief of staff at the Justice Department, to lead the talks.

If UC's leaders have preached restraint, its faculty has opted for open defiance. In addition to the suit that prompted the federal judge, Lin, to restore UCLA's frozen research grants, a complaint filed in September by the [American Association of University Professors](#) and other faculty groups challenged the legality of the Trump administration's entire assault on UC. At a hearing on Nov. 6, the government's lawyer acknowledged that the administration's "hodgepodge" of actions against the system hadn't followed established civil rights procedures but said the administration had the right to direct funding based on the Trump administration's "policy priorities."

Lin didn't buy it. A week later, in an [unusually sweeping preliminary injunction](#), she barred all of the Trump administration's actual and threatened moves to punish UC, including the \$1.2 billion payment demand. The Trump administration's "playbook," she wrote, citing comments by Terrell and others, illegally used civil rights investigations and funding cuts as a way of "bringing universities to their knees and forcing them to change their ideological tune."

Although Lin ordered the Trump administration to lift the ban on new research grants to UC, approvals were slow to resume. In public remarks before the Board of Regents on Nov. 19, Milliken said that more than 400 grants across the system remained suspended or terminated, representing "more than \$230 million in research activity on hold." He and others at UC have expressed concerns that the system's pathway to new grants will be blocked.

In our interview, Milliken defended how UC has responded to the Trump administration, saying the university has held its ground on its governance, mission and academic freedom.

"We recognize the differing opinions on how UC should engage with the federal government," he said. "Our efforts remain focused on solutions that keep UC strong for Californians and Americans."

[Doris Burke](#) contributed research.

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**2 A Judge Worried a Proposed Settlement Doesn't Do Enough to Help Victims. The DOJ Is Still Moving Forward.**

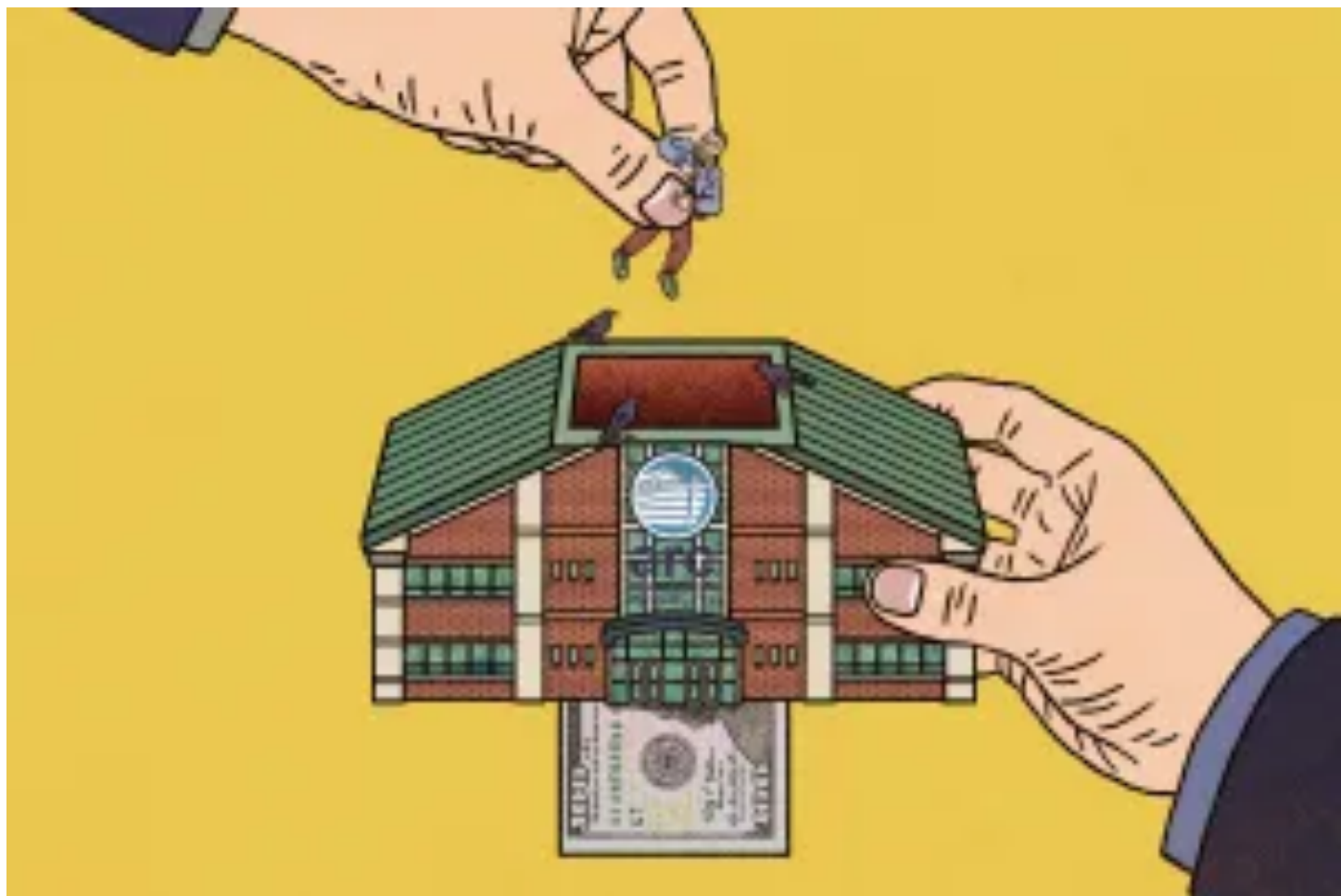


3 "The Alarm Bell": Arizona's Drop in SNAP Participation Signals Potential Nationwide Impact of Trump Legislation





**4 "A Slap in the Face": Trump's DOJ Plans to Settle Predatory Lending Case Without Compensating Victims**



**5 They Needed Treatment for Drug Addiction. The Company They Turned to May Have Used Them to Commit Fraud.**