

IDEAS

Yes, It's Fascism

Until recently, I thought it a term best avoided. But now, the resemblances are too many and too strong to deny.

By Jonathan Rauch



Tom Brenner / Getty

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UNTIL RECENTLY, I resisted using the F-word to describe President Trump. For one thing, there were too many elements of classical fascism that didn't seem to fit. For another, the term has been overused to the point of meaninglessness, especially by left-leaning types who call you a fascist if you oppose abortion or affirmative action. For yet another, the term is hazily defined, even by its adherents. From the beginning, fascism has been an incoherent doctrine, and even today scholars can't agree on its definition. Italy's original version differed from Germany's, which differed from Spain's, which differed from Japan's.

I accepted President Biden's characterization of the MAGA movement as "semi-fascist" because some parallels were glaringly apparent. Trump was definitely an authoritarian, and unquestionably a patrimonialist. Beyond that, though, the best description seemed to be a psychological one propounded by John Bolton, Trump's first-term national security adviser: "He listens to Putin, he listens to Xi, he listens to how they talk about governing unburdened by uncooperative legislatures, unconcerned with what the judiciary may do, and he thinks to himself, *Why can't I do that?*" This doesn't amount to being a fascist, in my view, [or] having a theory of how you want to govern. It's just *Why can't I have the same fun they have?*"

Writing a year ago, I argued that Trump's governing regime is a version of patrimonialism, in which the state is treated as the personal property and family business of the leader. That is still true. But, as I also noted then, patrimonialism is a *style* of governing, not a formal ideology or system. It can be layered atop all kinds of organizational structures, including not just national governments but also urban political machines such as Tammany Hall, criminal gangs such as the Mafia, and even religious cults. Because its only firm principle is personal loyalty to the boss, it has no specific agenda. Fascism, in contrast, is ideological, aggressive, and, at least in its early stages, revolutionary. It seeks to dominate politics, to crush resistance, and to rewrite the social contract.

Over Trump's past year, what originally looked like an effort to make the government his personal plaything has drifted distinctly toward doctrinal and operational fascism. Trump's appetite for lebensraum, his claim of unlimited power, his support for the

global far right, his politicization of the justice system, his deployment of performative brutality, his ostentatious violation of rights, his creation of a national paramilitary police—all of those developments bespeak something more purposeful and sinister than run-of-the-mill greed or gangsterism.

WHEN THE FACTS CHANGE, I change my mind. Recent events have brought Trump's governing style into sharper focus. *Fascist* best describes it, and reluctance to use the term has now become perverse. That is not because of any one or two things he and his administration have done but because of the totality. Fascism is not a territory with clearly marked boundaries but a constellation of characteristics. When you view the stars together, the constellation plainly appears.

Demolition of norms. From the beginning of his first presidential run in 2015, Trump deliberately crashed through every boundary of civility; he mocked Senator John McCain's war heroism, mocked fellow candidate Carly Fiorina's face, seemingly mocked the Fox News host Megyn Kelly's menstruation, slurred immigrants, and much more. Today he still does it, recently making an obscene gesture to a factory worker and calling a journalist "piggy." This is a feature of the fascist governing style, not a bug. Fascists know that what the American Founders called the "republican virtues" impede their political agenda, and so they gleefully trash liberal pieties such as reason and reasonableness, civility and civic spirit, toleration and forbearance. By mocking decency and saying the unsayable, they open the way for what William Galston has called the "dark passions" of fear, resentment, and especially domination—the kind of politics that shifts the public discourse to ground on which liberals cannot compete.

Glorification of violence. Every state uses violence to enforce its laws, but liberal states use it reluctantly, whereas fascism embraces and flaunts it. Trump thus praises a violent mob; endorses torture; muses fondly about punching, body-slamming, and shooting protesters and journalists; and reportedly suggests shooting protesters and migrants. His recruitment ads for ICE glamorize military-style raids of homes and neighborhoods; his propaganda takes childish delight in the killing of civilians; and we have all seen videos of agents dragging people out of cars and homes—partly

because the government films them. Like the demolition of civic decency, the valorization of violence is not incidental to fascism; it is part and parcel.

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Might is right. Also characteristic of fascism is what George Orwell called “bully-worship”: the principle that, as Thucydides famously put it, “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” This view came across in Trump’s notorious Oval Office meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, in which Trump showed open contempt for what he regarded as Ukraine’s weakness; it came across explicitly, and chillingly, when Stephen Miller, the president’s most powerful aide, told CNN’s Jake Tapper: “We live in a world, in the real world, that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world that have existed since the beginning of time.” Those words, though alien to the traditions of American and Christian morality, could have come from the lips of any fascist dictator.

Politicized law enforcement. Liberals follow the law whether they like it or not; fascists, only when they like it. Nazism featured a “dual state,” where, at any moment, the protections of ordinary law could cease to apply. Trump makes no secret of despising due process of law; he has demanded countless times that his opponents be jailed (“Lock her up!” chants, with his endorsement, were a prominent feature of his 2016 campaign), and he has suggested the Constitution’s “termination” and said “I don’t know” when asked if he is required to uphold it. His single most dangerous second-term innovation is the repurposing of federal law enforcement to persecute his enemies (and shield his friends). No prior president has produced anything like Trump’s direct and public order for the Justice Department to investigate two former officials, or like his blatantly retaliatory prosecutions of James Comey and Letitia James. “At least 470 people, organizations and institutions have been targeted for retribution since Trump took office—an average of more than one a day,” Reuters reported in November (and today one can add others to the list, beginning with Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell). Had Trump done nothing else, his demolition of independent and apolitical law enforcement would still have moved the U.S. government closer than ever before to a fascistic model.

Dehumanization. Fascism draws its legitimacy from its claims of defending the people from enemies who are animals, criminals, brutes. Trump characterizes (for instance) political opponents as “vermin” and immigrants as “garbage” who are “poisoning the blood of our country” (language straight out of the Third Reich). Vice President Vance, as a senator, endorsed a book called Unhumans (a title that refers to the left). And who can forget his false claim that Haitians abduct and eat pet cats and dogs?

Police-state tactics. Trump has turned ICE into a sprawling paramilitary that roves the country at will, searches and detains noncitizens and citizens without warrants, uses

force ostentatiously, operates behind masks, receives skimpy training, lies about its activities, and has been told that it enjoys “absolute immunity.” He more than doubled the agency’s size in 2025, and its budget is now larger than those of all other federal law-enforcement agencies combined, and larger than the entire military budgets of all but 15 countries. “This is going to affect every community, every city,” the Cato Institute scholar David Bier recently observed. “Really almost everyone in our country is going to come in contact with this, one way or the other.” In Minneapolis and elsewhere, the agency has behaved provocatively, sometimes brutally, and arguably illegally—behaviors that Trump and his staff have encouraged, shielded, and sent camera crews to publicize, perhaps in the hope of eliciting violent resistance that would justify further crackdowns, a standard fascist stratagem. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem’s recent appearance with a sign reading ONE OF OURS, ALL OF YOURS seemed to nod toward another fascist standby, collective punishment—as did the administration’s decision to flood Minneapolis with thousands of officers after residents there began protesting federal tactics, a prioritization that was explicitly retributive.

Undermining elections. Trump’s recent musing that there should be no 2026 election may or may not have been jocular (as the White House has maintained), but he and his MAGA supporters believe they never lose an election, period. They went to great lengths to overturn the 2020 election, as the prosecutor Jack Smith’s indictment of Trump and subsequent report detail ad nauseam. Rigging, stealing, or outright canceling elections is, of course, job one for fascists. Although Trump is term-limited, we must not expect that he and his MAGA loyalists will voluntarily turn over the White House to a Democrat in 2029, regardless of what the voters say—and the second insurrection will be far better organized than the first.

What’s private is public. Classical fascism rejects the fundamental liberal distinction between the government and the private sector, per Mussolini’s dictum: “No individuals or groups outside the State.” Among Trump’s most audacious (if only intermittently successful) initiatives are his efforts to commandeer private entities, including law firms, universities, and corporations. One of his first acts as president last year was to brazenly defy a newly enacted law by taking the ownership of TikTok into his own hands. Bolton understood this mentality when he said, “He can’t tell the difference between his own personal interest and the national interest, if he even understands what the national interest is.”

Attacks on news media. Shortly after taking office in 2017, Trump denounced the news media as “the enemy of the American people,” a phrase familiar from dictatorships abroad. His hostility never relented, but in his second term, it has reached new heights. Trump has threatened broadcast licenses, abused his regulatory authority, manipulated ownership deals, filed exorbitant lawsuits, played favorites with journalistic access, searched a reporter’s home, and vilified news outlets and journalists. Although Trump cannot dominate news media in the United States in the

way that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has done in Hungary, he is running the Orbán playbook. No other president, not even Richard Nixon (no friend of the media), has used such blatantly illiberal tactics against the press.

Territorial and military aggression. One reason I held out against identifying Trumpism with fascism in his first term was Trump's apparent lack of interest in aggression against other states; if anything, he had seemed shy about using force abroad. Well, that was then. In his second term, he has used military force promiscuously. Of course, many presidents have deployed force, but Trump's explicitly predatory use of it to grab Venezuela's oil and his gangster-style threat to take Greenland from Denmark "the easy way" or "the hard way" were 1930s-style authoritarian moves. The same goes for his contempt for international law, binding alliances, and transnational organizations such as the European Union—all of which impede the state's unconstrained exercise of its will, a central fascist tenet. (Mussolini: "Equally foreign to the spirit of Fascism ... are all internationalistic or League superstructures which, as history shows, crumble to the ground whenever the heart of nations is deeply stirred by sentimental, idealistic or practical considerations.")

Sally Jenkins: What Leni Riefenstahl's work reveals about fascism

Transnational reach. Like authoritarians generally, fascists love company; the world is safer for them if there are more of them. In his second term, Trump has broken with long-standing U.S. policy by dialing back support for human rights while praising and supporting authoritarian populists and illiberal nationalists in Serbia, Poland, Hungary, Germany, Turkey, El Salvador, and Slovakia, among other places—and by being weirdly deferential to the strongman Russian President Vladimir Putin. Even more striking is his de facto alignment against America's liberal allies and their parties in Europe, which he holds in contempt.

Blood-and-soil nationalism. A fascist trademark is its insistence that the country is not just a collection of individuals but a people, a *Volk*: a mystically defined and ethnically pure group bound together by shared blood, culture, and destiny. In keeping with that idea, Trump has repudiated birthright citizenship, and Vance has called to "redefine the meaning of American citizenship in the 21st century" so that priority goes to Americans with longer historical ties: "the people whose ancestors fought in the Civil War," as he put it, or people whom others on the MAGA right call "heritage Americans." In other words, some Americans are more volkish than others.

White and Christian nationalism. While Vance, Trump, and MAGA do not propound an explicit ideology of racial hierarchy, they make no secret of pining for a whiter, more Christian America. Trump has found many ways to communicate this: for example, by making clear his disdain for "shithole" countries and his preference for white Christian immigrants; by pointedly accepting white South Africans as political refugees (while closing the door to most other asylum seekers); by renaming military

bases to share the names of Confederate generals (after Congress ordered their names removed); by saying that civil-rights laws led to whites' being "very badly treated." In his National Security Strategy, he castigates Europe for allowing immigration to undermine "civilizational self-confidence" and proclaims, "We want Europe to remain European," a rallying cry of white Christian nationalists across the continent. Taking his cue, the Department of Homeland Security has propagated unashamedly white-nationalist themes, and national parks and museums have scrubbed their exhibits of references to slavery.

Mobs and street thugs. The use of militias and mobs to harass, rough up, and otherwise intimidate opponents is a standard fascist stratagem (the textbook example being Hitler's Kristallnacht pogrom in 1938). As few will need reminding, the Trump-MAGA parallel is the mob and militia violence against the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Trump knowingly laid groundwork for this operation, calling on militia forces to "stand back and stand by" in September 2020 and later dog-whistling "Be there, will be wild!" to his supporters. His pardon of all of the Capitol attackers—more than 1,500, including the most violent—only proved what we knew, which is that they had his blessing. While Trump has found state violence adequate to his purposes so far in his second term, street violence is self-evidently in his repertoire.

Leader aggrandizement. Since 2016, when he declared that "I alone can fix it" and bragged that his supporters would remain loyal if he shot someone on Fifth Avenue, Trump has cultivated a personality cult. Although some of his efforts at self-aggrandizement can seem comical (the gilding of the Oval Office, the renaming of the Kennedy Center, the proposed triumphal arch), he understands the centrality of leader worship in a fascist-style regime. In sharp contradistinction to the American presidential tradition since George Washington, he makes no pretense of serving the people or the Constitution. His mindset, his symbolism, and his rhetoric all underscore the point he made to *The New York Times* this month: His own mind and morality are the only limits on his global power. This is Fascism 101.

Alternative facts. As Orwell, Hannah Arendt, and practically every other scholar of authoritarianism have emphasized, creating a reality-distortion field is the first thing a fascistic government will do, the better to drive its own twisted narrative, confuse the citizenry, demoralize political opponents, and justify every manner of corruption and abuse. While other presidents (including some good ones) have lied, none have come close to Trump's deployment of Russian-style mass disinformation, as I detail in my book *The Constitution of Knowledge*. From the start of his first term, Trump has made "alternative facts" a hallmark of his governing style, issuing lies, exaggerations, and half-truths at a rate of 20 a day. Predictably, his second term has brought more of the same. Following his lead, a MAGA-fied postmodern right gleefully trashes objectivity as elitism and truth as a mask for power.

Maria Ressa: Fight fascism before it's too late

Politics as war. A distinctive mark of fascism is its conception of politics, best captured by Carl Schmitt, an early-20th-century German political theorist whose doctrines legitimized Nazism. Schmitt rejected the Madisonian view of politics as a social negotiation in which different factions, interests, and ideology come to agreement, the core idea of our Constitution. Rather, he saw politics as a state of war between enemies, neither of which can understand the other and both of which feel existentially threatened—and only one of which can win. The aim of Schmittian politics is not to share the country but to dominate or destroy the other side. This conception has been evident in MAGA politics since Michael Anton (now a Trump-administration official) published his famous article arguing that the 2016 election was a life-and-death battle to save the country from the left (a “Flight 93” election: “charge the cockpit or you die”). In the speech given by Stephen Miller at Charlie Kirk’s memorial service, MAGA’s embrace of Schmittian totalism found its apotheosis: “We are the storm. And our enemies cannot comprehend our strength, our determination, our resolve, our passion ... You are nothing. You are wickedness.”

Governing as revolution. Although born in revolution, the American liberal tradition, especially its conservative branch, prizes continuity, stability, and incremental change guided by reason. Fascism, by contrast, “is not reactionary but revolutionary,” as Mussolini insisted. It seeks to uproot and replace the old order and embraces bold, exhilarating action unshackled to rational deliberation. MAGA embraces its own revolutionary ethos, what Russell Vought, the administration’s Office of Management and Budget director and probably its most formidable intellect, has called “radical constitutionalism,” a doctrine that would vitate many checks on presidential power. In pursuit of this vision, Vought told Tucker Carlson in a November 2024 interview, “The president has to move executively as fast and as aggressively as possible, with a radical constitutional perspective, to be able to dismantle that [federal] bureaucracy and their power centers” because “the bureaucracies hate the American people.” He predicted, “If you have a radical constitutionalism, it’s going to be destabilizing ... But it’s also exhilarating.” He said he would put federal agencies “in trauma,” an idea echoed by Christopher Rufo, an architect of Trump’s attack on universities, which Rufo described as a “counterrevolution blueprint” to put universities “in an existential terror.” As Trump shuttered a congressionally mandated agency, renamed an international body of water, arrested an op-ed writer, deported immigrants to a foreign gulag, terrorized American cities, threatened an ally, and more, he showed how it looks when a radicalized state abandons rational deliberation and goes to war against itself.

ONE CAN OBJECT that there are elements of classical European fascism that are not found in Trumpism (mass rallies and public rituals, for example)—or that there are additional elements of Trumpism that belong on the list (MAGA's hypermasculinity, misogyny, and co-option of Christianity all resemble fascist patterns). The exercise of comparing fascism's various forms is not precise. If historians object that Trump is not a copy of Mussolini or Hitler or Franco, the reply is yes—but so what? Trump is building something new on old principles. He is showing us in real time what 21st-century *American* fascism looks like.

If, however, Trump is a fascist *president*, that does not mean that America is a fascist *country*. The courts, the states, and the media remain independent of him, and his efforts to browbeat them will likely fail. He may lose his grip on Congress in November. He has not succeeded in molding public opinion, except against himself. He has outrun the mandate of his voters, his coalition is fracturing, and he has neglected tools that allow presidents to make enduring change. He and his party may defy the Constitution, but they cannot rewrite it, thank goodness.

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So the United States, once the world's exemplary liberal democracy, is now a hybrid state combining a fascist leader and a liberal Constitution; but no, it has not fallen to fascism. And it will not.

In which case, is there any point in calling Trump a fascist, even if true? Doesn't that alienate his voters? Wouldn't it be better just to describe his actions without labeling him controversially?

Until recently, I thought so. No longer. The resemblances are too many and too strong to deny. Americans who support liberal democracy need to recognize what we're dealing with in order to cope with it, and to recognize something, one must name it. Trump has revealed himself, and we must name what we see.

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