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## How Fascist Was Trump?

### The Answer Says More About Collective Memory than about History

*Editorial note: This speech was recorded on video at the University of Birmingham in November 2020. Due to its timing, the content does not reflect the events of 6 January 2021.*

As Trump's presidency draws to a close, it is time to move a heated debate into perspective that has reached a feverish crescendo in the weeks and months before the election: was this Fascism, American-style? In addition to plenty of commentary, we have quite a few books that view Trump through the lens of Fascism: from Yale professor Timothy Snyder and his book *On Tyranny* to the former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and her book *Fascism: A Warning*.<sup>1</sup> The following remarks seek to insert some historiographic cooling fluid into this discussion, but it is about more than correcting a clichéd understanding of Fascism, here defined as a transnational political movement of the interwar years. Viewing Trump through this lens is equally misleading with a view to democracy and what we need to do to keep it alive. In short, the comparison is bad history and bad politics.

Fascism remains the defining political trauma of Western democracy, and it shows in running commentary. In fact, it was difficult *not* to think in these terms at times. Who can watch the anger at Trump's rallies without thinking of the Two Minute Hate in George Orwell's *1984*? And who can overhear an echo of Hitler's last days in a Berlin bunker when we witness Trump's desperate post-election attempts to clinch to power? Memories of Fascism pervade our collective memory, and you can always find something that is vaguely reminiscent of current events.

But assessing a political regime should be more than an exercise in associate thinking. If we take a closer look, it becomes clear that the template does not really fit: Trump was a terrible political leader, but he was not a leader in the Fascist mold. There are at least ten important differences:

1: The economy. Fascist regimes grew in a world with limited international trade and with a capitalism that many viewed as moribund, which gave national governments enormous leeway to shape economies with everything from state-led industrialization projects to the Mefo bills that helped to fund the rearmament program of the Nazis. Today we live in a world of global capitalism for better or worse, and international trade is deeply ingrained into our economies. Trump tried to tweak the rules of the global economy here and there, but there was no push for the autarky model so dear to the heart of many Fascists. As a result, the fundamentals of the U.S. economy remain unchanged. When economic historians come to assess Trump's impact,

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017); Madeleine Albright with Bill Woodward, *Fascism: A Warning* (London: William Collins, 2018).

they will talk about the loss of fiscal revenue, the costs of his trade wars for U.S. consumers, and the pandemic and otherwise conclude that it did not make much of a difference.

2: The threat to capitalism (or lack thereof). Fascism grew against the backdrop of Bolshevism and the perceived threat of a communist revolution. Scholars have shown for numerous countries that the threat was often exaggerated – but it did exist and genuinely scared the bourgeoisie. But that fear subsided in the decades after World War Two, which saw the golden years of Western capitalism. People enjoyed the fruits of mass consumption while things went downhill for socialism: it gradually lost its shine, its legitimacy, and its hold on power, and no Western country seriously considered going socialist over the last 30 years. During the interwar years, Fascist and other governments had to reckon with a Soviet Union that spread its tentacles around the world, but that Soviet Union is no more since 1991, and there is nothing that can take its place. Venezuela and Cuba will not bring global capitalism down.

3: Demography. Trump thrived on the grievances in a white population that faces demographic marginalization in an increasingly multicultural society, which is unlike anything that underpinned Fascist societies. Hitler never feared demographic marginalization from Germany's Jews because they accounted for less than one percent of the population. Trump's hardline immigration policy was the exact opposite of the policy of Fascist Italy, which sought to curb *outward* migration of Italians to the Americas. To be sure, Trump's immigration crackdown is open to criticism on several grounds, but it's really small change compared to the Nuremberg Laws.

4: In the Western world, we are all children of the human rights revolution of the post-war years. There is plethora of laws, agreements and court decisions that counter discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, and disability, and it has created a new moral universe. We can see the consequences in the repeated efforts of the Trump administration to blame *others* for antisemitism, racism, gender bias, and in Trump's claim that he did more for the black community than any other president except Abraham Lincoln. Now that claim is patently absurd – but Hitler never claimed to have done *anything* for the Jewish community.

5. There is a global dimension to the human rights revolution that makes for another stark difference between Trump and Fascism. For all its ugliness, the impact of Fascist rule was largely limited to the places where they came into power and the places that they attacked or conquered. Trump resonated around the world, and while he has done enormous damage to the soul of American society, the real victims live elsewhere: in Egypt, in Hong Kong, in Duterte's Philippines, in Orban's Hungary, and in many other places where authoritarian regimes are eroding human rights. Nation-states are no longer distinct containers, and thanks to Trump, every crackpot dictator facing a tough election can point to this precedent.

6. The power of events that never happened. For the first three years, Trump did not face a major crisis that he did not cause himself, and when his luck changed in year four, the crisis came in the form of a pandemic that he was unable to use for political gain. There was nothing similar to the Reichstag on fire that allowed Hitler to suspend the rule of law, or the murder of Giacomo Matteotti that put Fascist Italy on the path towards Mussolini's dictatorship, though it is not difficult to imagine pertinent scenarios. What would have happened in the event of a 9/11-style terrorist attack, or a well-timed Russian invasion of a Baltic country, or if Iran had blocked the Strait of Hormuz? It will be impossible to know, but we can be glad that these events never happened.

7. While fate did not intervene in Trump's presidency until the pandemic, the rule of law did. There is quite a list of Trump affiliates who ended up in court: Michael Cohen, Rick Gates, Michael Flynn, Roger Stone, Paul Manafort. The president's own charity, the Trump Foundation, is undergoing court-ordered dissolution, and various lawsuits are on hold until Trump leaves the White House. Nothing similar happened to a Fascist leader. Quite the contrary, their rule built on a judiciary and an administrative state that went along. Hitler had the crown jurist of the Third Reich, Carl Schmitt, who published his infamous essay "The Führer Protects the Law" – *der Führer schützt das Recht* – after the Night of Long Knives. Trump has Rudy Giuliani. Case closed.

8. Money for the dear leader. Say what you will about Hitler and Mussolini, but at least they never tried to cash in with a posh hotel in the capital. For Trump, making money was clearly a prime motivation when he entered the race for the presidency in 2015, if not the only one, and one of the last remaining mysteries of the Trump presidency is about the extent of his personal corruption and whether it will ever be investigated in appropriate fashion. Fascist regimes had their share of corruption – it inevitably thrives in authoritarian regimes – but if you compare Trump's golden elevator with the legendary frugality of Portuguese dictator Antonio Salazar, the contrast speaks for itself.

As an aside, looking at Trump and his monetary interests makes for an interesting twist in a historical assessment. It is one of the ironies of calling Trump a Fascist that it finally vindicates the orthodox Marxist view that Fascism was mere camouflage for the rule of the bourgeoisie. It never really worked for Hitler and Mussolini, who clearly were more than mere stooges in the service of the capitalists. But if you have a billionaire who saves plenty of money with a big tax cut, supported by other billionaires like the Koch brothers who also profited in a big way, you can almost hear the Marxists of the interwar years shouting from their graves: see, that is what we were talking about all these years.

9. There was a glaring intellectual vacuum at the heart of Trump's rule. When Hitler, Mussolini, Salazar and Franco came to power, they knew exactly what they wanted to do. Trump never had an agenda beyond his own financial interests and his vanity, and into the vacuum came the

orthodoxy of the Republican party since the Reagan years: tax cuts for the rich, conservative justices for the judiciary, and the casual strangulation of the regulatory state. Trumpism is an ideology that never was, an empty signifier that provided thin camouflage for a ruler who never cared about his people. The Nazi Party was never too religious about its 25 point party platform of 1920 – but at least it had a platform. The Republican party declined to adopt a new platform at its 2020 convention and simply used their platform from 2016, and when Trump was asked about his goals for the second term, the answer was mushy even by his own generous standards.

These points come down to an obvious point: against the backdrop of Fascism in the interwar years, it does not make any sense to speak of Trump as a Fascist. But there is a second point that is perhaps less obvious. Viewing Trump through this lens also provides us with a terribly insufficient idea about democracy and what we need to do in order to save it. In his book *On Tyranny*, Timothy Snyder offers the following as one of twenty lessons from the twentieth century: “defend institutions.”<sup>2</sup> On first glance, it makes perfect sense. If it were not for civil servants like Alexander Vindman, the whistleblower on Trump’s shenanigans with Ukraine, and the checks and balances from the federal bureaucracy, the states, and the judiciary, we would probably be in a very dark place by now. But should we really heap praise on the American system of law and order? After all, this is the same judiciary that put more than two million American citizens behind bars, the highest incarceration rate per capita in the world, where access to a well-paid lawyer and the color of one’s skin makes a world of difference, and where decisions on many important matters are delayed ad nauseam. Is that an institution that we should *defend* in the name of democracy? If anything, we should seek to *change* it in the name of democracy.

Thinking about democracy and Fascism invites thinking in black-and-white mode: it’s about democracy or authoritarian rule, institutions or anarchy, Biden or Trump. But a living democracy is rarely about black and white. It is about compromise, about a balance between different interests, and that makes for many different shades of gray. Democracy is complicated, a kind of decathlon with different events that require different skills, and there is no guarantee that it all fits together. But you would not know that from looking at Fascism.

So is it wrong to call Trump a Fascist? The question misses the crucial point. The ghosts of the twentieth century are still with us, and so is the moral shame that goes along with that epithet. But while it may not be morally wrong to call Trump a Fascist, it is obviously not very clever, and maybe that matters more as we look to the future. The last four years have shown the weakness of democracy, particularly when it is challenged by someone like Trump. Democracy does not look as decisive as the strongmen of our times, it is not terribly entertaining (and often pretty boring), and democracy looks rather helpless in the face of widespread anger. But here is one thing that you can say in defense of democracy: it can be really smart – way smarter than the intellectual deadwood that was pervasive in the Trump administration.

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<sup>2</sup> Snyder, *On Tyranny*, 22.

So this is my tenth and final point by way of comparing the Fascists and Trump: unlike the outgoing president, the Fascists were not dumb – as shown in the fact that they were smart enough to set an entire continent ablaze. Being smart is not a privilege of democracies, but it works the other way around: it is hard to imagine a thriving democracy full of dumb people. And maybe that is something that we should keep in mind as we search for a path through the rubble that the last four years have left behind. If we want to keep the flame of democracy alive, we need to get smart about Fascism, get smart about Trump – and get smart about what democracy really is.