

Fascism in America: It's Time to Use the 'F' Word to Describe Trump?

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Is Donald Trump a fascist? With each passing news cycle, more people here and abroad are asking the question.

On a trip to Berlin in early June, my wife and I were pressed for answers in spontaneous encounters with cab drivers, waiters, hotel clerks and sundry others. Regardless of occupation, everyone closely followed U.S. politics, and most had come to the conclusion that the American president had long ago crossed a dark ideological line.

The Berliners we spoke with (all fluent in English) were social-democratic types. Among them there were no members of the [Alternative for Deutschland](#), the ultranationalist group that is now the third largest political party in Germany.

None were alive during the Nazi era, although a tour guide disclosed that her 99-year-old grandfather was still ticking and remained very much an admirer of the Third Reich. Some, however, had lived on the east side of the city during the Soviet era, which they recalled as a period of austere, soul-crushing conformity. They weren't fans of capitalism, they said, but they understood the dangers of autocracy, past and present. How was it, they wondered, so many Americans did not?

We assured them that some Americans were, in fact, very worried about Trump, and a solid majority disapproved of him and his policies. I told the tour guide that as a columnist I had been comparing Trump with Benito Mussolini since the early days of his presidential campaign. Still, we conceded that for the most part, whether out of ignorance, timidity or a naive belief in the myth of exceptionalism, Americans were reluctant to consider whether their head of state actually is a fascist.

No more.

The issue of Trump's fascism has finally reached center stage in the U.S., sparked by the administration's shameful treatment of Central American refugees and its Gestapo-like "[zero tolerance](#)" policy on unauthorized border crossings.

On June 17, [protesters at a Mexican restaurant](#) in Washington, D.C., heckled White House aide Stephen Miller, widely credited as the principal architect of Trump's immigration crackdown, as a fascist. Two days later, another group hurled similar epithets at Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen, who like Miller had cluelessly chosen to dine Mexican.

Even liberal media pundits are throwing down the "F" word. Michelle Goldberg, for example, referred to "Trump's fascist instincts" in her June 21 New York Times column on the

separation of immigrant families.

In a [June 24 op-ed for the Duluth News](#), iconoclastic writer and entrepreneur John Freivalds, who was born in Latvia and now lives in Minnesota, went further, charging,

“[I]n every dictionary definition I have come across, the president is a fascist. This label is not so much a pejorative as a fact.”

It doesn’t get much more heartland than the Duluth News.

Not everyone agrees with Goldberg and Freivalds, of course. Trump’s approval rating among Republicans stands at [87 percent](#). By and large, Republicans still see him as a champion of grass-roots democracy and an antidote to predatory corporate globalism.

Ironically, the president also has [a small number of occasional defenders](#) on the progressive left, who continue to view him, as some did during the campaign, as more likely to steer the world away from nuclear Armageddon than his defeated Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton.

Because of the gravity of the issue, debates about Trump’s fascism invariably devolve into heated emotional affairs, cleaved along racial and politically tribal lines. You’re either a patriot and support Trump’s promise to “make America great again” or you’re the opposite for failing to condemn him.

It may be impossible to set emotions aside entirely, but it’s not impossible to arrive at the truth, or at least to search for it through honest discourse. Although fascism, historically, is a complex ideology, it is as real today as a mass movement and a theory of governance as it was when Mussolini popularized the term in 1919.

Any rational discussion has to begin with a definition, and when it comes to fascism, there are many to examine. Among the most instructive is the one proffered by political scientist Robert Paxton in his classic study “[The Anatomy of Fascism](#)” (Harvard University Press, 2004):

“Fascism may be defined as a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.”

Drawing on the work of Italian novelist and professor Umberto Eco, [Cameron Climie](#), a Canadian economist, listed 14 fluid characteristics of fascism in [an essay](#) published last year by the website Medium.com. They are:

- A cult of traditionalism.
- A rejection of modernism (cultural, rather than technological).
- A cult of action for its own sake and a distrust of intellectualism.
- A framing of disagreement or opposition as treasonous.
- A fear of difference. ... Fascism is racist by definition.
- An appeal to a frustrated middle class—either due to economic or political pressures from both above and below.

- An obsession with the plots and machinations of the movement's identified enemies.
- A requirement that said enemies be simultaneously seen as omnipotent and weak, conniving and cowardly.
- A rejection of pacifism. Life is permanent warfare.
- Contempt for weakness.
- A cult of heroism.
- Hypermasculinity.
- A selective populism, relying on chauvinist definitions of "the people" that it claims to speak for.
- A heavy usage of Newspeak—impoverished vocabulary, elementary syntax and a resistance to complex and critical reasoning.

Reasonable minds can differ about whether Trump, now in the middle of the second year of his presidency, is a full-blown fascist or, to be more precise, moving in a fascist direction.

In a May 2017 article in [Harper's Magazine](#), Paxton contended that Trump had even by then displayed numerous "fascist staples," such as his "deploring national decline, which he blames on foreigners and despised minorities; disdaining legal norms; condoning violence against dissenters; and rejecting anything that smacks of internationalism, whether it be trade, institutions, or existing treaties." Nonetheless, he concluded that Trump's pursuit of "unchecked executive power indicates generic dictatorship" and "plutocracy" rather than fascism in particular.

Perhaps the best way of understanding Trump's fascism is as a work in progress, or a form of "pre-fascism." As journalist Fintan O'Toole asserted last week in an [Irish Times column](#):

To grasp what is going on in the world right now, we need to reflect on two things. One is that we are in a phase of trial runs. The other is that what is being trialed is fascism—a word that should be used carefully but not shirked when it is so clearly on the horizon. Forget "post-fascist"—what we are living with is pre-fascism.

It is easy to dismiss Donald Trump as an ignoramus, not least because he is. But he has an acute understanding of one thing: test marketing. ...

Fascism doesn't arise suddenly in an existing democracy. It is not easy to get people to give up their ideas of freedom and civility. You have to do trial runs that, if they are done well, serve two purposes. They get people used to something they may initially recoil from; and they allow you to refine and calibrate. This is what is happening now and we would be fools not to see it.

I couldn't agree more. It's time to start talking about Trump's fascism, and holding him fully accountable under that rubric.

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