What 'Fascism' Talk Really Accomplishes

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Commentary

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The allegation that Donald Trump's presidency reflects the rise—or resurgence—of fascism in America has little basis in fact. But it is a sure way to amplify the scorn for Republicans gripping many on the left and the resentment of media and academic elites roiling many on the right. Such talk magnifies polarization and further debases American political discourse. It distracts from Trump's actual flaws and the serious challenges the nation faces. Yet intellectuals won't let it go away.

The days following Trump's election last November were marked by weeping and gnashing of teeth in Washington, D.C., New York City, Boston, and numerous other metropolitan centers as Democrats sought to come to terms with a turn of events that to many heralded America's irreversible descent into authoritarianism.

A month after the election, Michael Kinsley—a columnist for Vanity Fair, a contributing columnist for The Washington Post, and one of America's most respected center-left voices—told them they were right. Explicitly linking the president-elect to European fascism and Nazism of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, Kinsley maintained that "Donald Trump is a fascist" because he "sincerely believes that the toxic combination of strong government and strong corporations should run the nation and the world." Kinsley appeared not to notice that his vague definition easily embraced the party and the president who teamed up with insurance companies in 2010 to ram through the Affordable Care Act over the united, and still ardent, opposition of Trump's political party.

Donald Trump's arrival in the Oval Office fanned fears of fascism among the professors. In March, Yale's Timothy Snyder declared in Time magazine that so severe is the Trump administration's threat to overthrow the American constitutional system that "the prospect of children and grandchildren growing up under tyranny is terrifyingly real."

A scholar specializing in European history, Snyder observed that European fascism demonstrated that "politicians who emerge from democratic practices can then work to undo democratic institutions." Like the fascists, Snyder argued, Trump and his team "seek to destroy the concept of truth"; attack the press as "opposition" and "enemies"; do not expressly champion democracy or human rights; undermine the judiciary by criticizing

judges; and tighten their grip on power by exploiting "the threat or the reality of terrorism" in order "to encourage a Muslim terrorist attack within or upon the United States" and "to alienate and enrage Muslims."

Snyder is right that democracy is vulnerable to despots arising from within. At the same time, his cartoonish depiction of Trump's America illustrates the ease with which professors descend into demagoguery.

Truth is under siege in America, but Trump is late to the game. For decades in classrooms, learned journals, and newspapers and magazines our professoriate—through crusading advocacy of social science positivism, moral relativism, and postmodernism—have been waging war on the very idea of moral and political truth.

While it's unseemly for the Trump team to refer scornfully to the press as "opposition" and "enemies," this accurately describes much of the media's self-conception of its relation to the administration.

Likewise, the president's sharp criticism of the judiciary is discomfiting. Yet in blocking not only his first but his revised executive order restricting travel into the United States from countries singled out by the Obama administration as presenting a heightened threat of terrorism the federal courts overreached—and practically confirmed Trump's characterization. In any case, in a free country surely it can't be the right of everyone except the president to criticize the judiciary.

Finally, it is true that Trump has not eloquently praised democracy and rights. But his most controversial policies—stopping illegal immigration and temporarily halting the entry of foreign nationals from countries that pose terrorist threats—do not directly implicate either. Moreover, since the most fundamental human right is self-preservation and the president's most basic responsibility is to defend the nation, Trump's tough stance on the real threat of Islamist terrorism can be seen as essential to liberal democracy in America and serving the country's interest in promoting a stable international order.

It's not enough, though, to correct the intellectuals' overwrought assessment of Trump. It is also necessary, because of their promiscuous use of the term, to set the record straight about fascism.

To qualify as fascism, governing ideas and conduct would have to include a militarily aggressive and expansive nationalism, disdain for liberal democracy, commitment to embodying natural hierarchies in law, and subordination of individuals to the collective good.

Trump fails every prong of this test. He has expressed a determination to scale back America's role in the world, not mobilize. He wants to subject immigration and visitation to the rule of law, not to rule over other people. Far from disdaining liberal democracy, Trump

distinguished himself by bringing his case to the people and taking their legitimate concerns seriously; and while he has lashed out at adverse judicial judgments, he has obeyed them without hesitation. Trump ran against elites and he appointed successful men and women to his Cabinet to assist in dismantling the sweeping and intrusive regulation through which Washington elites seek to govern. Instead of subordinating individuals to collective goals, President Trump intends to make America great again by releasing the people from government tutelage to pursue their private interests.

Nevertheless, progressive Rick Perlstein, author of several books on conservatism, doubled down in the New York Times Magazine last month, claiming that Trump gives expression to fascist impulses and aims. In "I Thought I Understood the American Right. Trump Proved Me Wrong," Perlstein contends that Trump reveals an ugly truth about conservatism that historians, starting with Perlstein himself, have overlooked.

Trump's victory, according to Perlstein, shows that "the paranoid fringe" of conservatism—the racists, the anti-Semites, and the radical individualists—that William F. Buckley sought to expel from the movement in the 1950s forms a decisive faction within the contemporary right. With a recovery of "the neglected history in which far-right vigilantism and outright fascism routinely infiltrate the mainstream of American life," Perlstein maintains, "we might better understand the alliance between the 'alt-right' figures that emerged as fervent Trump supporters during last year's election and the ascendant far-right nativist political parties in Europe."

Perlstein, however, does not offer a shred of evidence to support the proposition that Trump owed his election to the rise of the alt-right. It is unlikely that anyone could.

The crucial contests took place in Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. These states, which went for Obama in 2012, shifted to Trump in 2016. Critical votes in these blue-states-turned-red were cast by whites without college degrees *who in 2012 supported Obama*. Many of these moderate swing voters suspect that big-city progressive elites despise them for daring to dissent from the progressive political agenda and moral catechism. Perlstein's smearing of them in the New York Times as fascists, if only by association, will confirm their conviction.

The high-profile smear also diverts attention from America's pressing problems. These include the deindustrialization of the greater Midwest and the flight of decent jobs; the unraveling of civil society; the weaponization of the federal bureaucracy and the rank politicization of the media; and the rebellion that our educational authorities have led or acquiesced in against freedom of speech, due process, and serious study of Western civilization. Our intellectuals should be summoning citizens on the left and right to concentrate on these urgent matters.

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