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The Resistance Libs Were Right

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For the last decade there's been a debate, among people who don't like Donald Trump, about whether he's a fascist.

The argument that he isn't often hinges on two things. First, when Trump first came to power, he lacked a street-fighting force like Benito Mussolini's Blackshirts, even if he was able to muster a violent rabble on Jan. 6. "Trump didn't proceed to unleash an army of paramilitary supporters in an American Kristallnacht or take dramatic action to remake the American state in his image," wrote the leftists Daniel Bessner and Ben Burgis in "Did It Happen Here?," a 2024 anthology examining the fascism question.

Second, Trump didn't pursue campaigns of imperial expansion, which some scholars view as intrinsic to fascism. "For all of Trump's hostility towards countries he perceives as enemies of the U.S., notably Iran, there is no indication that he sought a war with any foreign power, still less that he has been consumed by a desire for foreign conquest and the creation of an American empire," wrote Richard J. Evans in his 2021 essay "Why Trump Isn't a Fascist."

It's striking how much the arguments that Trump is *not* a fascist have suffered in just the first few days of this year, in which we've plunged to new depths of national madness.

Now that America has plucked the dictator Nicolás Maduro from power in Venezuela and announced that it would help itself to the country's oil, other nations are adjusting to a reality in which we're more predator than ally. European countries are contemplating stepping up their military presence in Greenland to protect it from the United States. An Economist headline proclaims, "Canada's Armed Forces Are

Planning for Threats From America.”

In the Midwest, Trump’s paramilitary forces killed a citizen in Minneapolis and now appear to be using her death to threaten other activists, barking at one observer, “You did not learn from what just happened?” Videos from the city show gun-toting men in masks and camouflage descending on people to demand proof of citizenship, pelting crowded streets with tear gas and sometimes attacking those who film them. Meanwhile, a new ICE recruiting ad declares, “We’ll Have Our Home Again,” which just happens to be part of the refrain of a white nationalist anthem.

Both ICE’s occupation of Minneapolis and Trump’s threatened seizure of Greenland are part of the same story: An increasingly unpopular regime is rapidly radicalizing and testing how far it can go down the road toward autocracy. If people had predicted back in 2024 precisely what Trump’s return to the White House was going to look like, I suspect they’d have been accused of suffering from Trump derangement syndrome. But the shrillest of Resistance libs have always understood Trump better than those who make a show of their dispassion. As the heterodox writer Leighton Woodhouse put it on X, “The hysterical pussy hats were right.”

Of course they were. From the moment he descended his golden escalator, Trump’s message, the emotional core of his movement, has been textbook fascism. In his 2004 book “The Anatomy of Fascism,” the eminent historian Robert O. Paxton described the “mobilizing passions” that form fascism’s foundation. Among them are a “sense of overwhelming crisis” that renders traditional solutions obsolete; a belief that one’s own group has been victimized, justifying almost any action in redress; “dread of the group’s decline under the corrosive effects of individualistic liberalism, class conflict and alien influences”; and the need for a strong male leader with instincts more powerful than mere “abstract and universal reason.”

The premonitions of our current regime in Paxton’s work don’t stop there. Fascism, in his telling, is marked by its contradictory attitude toward modernity: a hatred of atomized urban life combined with a fetish for technology. Fascist movements “exploited the protests of the victims of rapid industrialization and globalization,” he wrote, though in power, they doubled down on industrial concentration. And, of course, fascists “need a demonized enemy against which to mobilize followers.”

If Trump didn’t always act on his most fascistic predilections in his first term, it was because he was restrained by the establishment types around him. Mark Esper, Trump’s former defense secretary, said that Trump repeatedly broached the idea of bombing Mexico. In 2019, Trump canceled a meeting with Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen of Denmark after she refused to entertain the idea of selling him Greenland. His taste for violence against his political enemies has never been secret, and was made clearest on Jan. 6, the event that led a once-doubtful Paxton to conclude

that the word “fascist” applied to Trump.

None of this means that America is destined to become a fully fascist country. For now, we are trapped in the space between the liberal democracy most Americans grew up in and the dark, belligerent authoritarian state that our government seeks to impose. The important thing isn’t really the name we give to this political development, but our ability to see what’s happening clearly and make sense of its likely trajectory.

On the last page of “The Anatomy of Fascism,” Paxton offers a warning. “We know from tracing its path that fascism does not require a spectacular ‘march’ on some capital to take root,” he writes. “Seemingly anodyne decisions to tolerate lawless treatment of national ‘enemies’ is enough.”

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Michelle Goldberg has been an Opinion columnist since 2017. She is the author of several books about politics, religion and women’s rights and was part of a team that won a Pulitzer Prize for public service in 2018 for reporting on workplace sexual harassment.