

Nygaard Notes

Independent Periodic News and Analysis

Number 661

November 20, 2020

Trump's Call to Fascism in Bemidji

In 2018, Yale philosopher Jason Stanley published a book called "How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them." In this essay you'll see some excerpts in italics; these are quotations taken from an interview with Stanley that appeared in Vox in December 2018. In what I hope is a revealing contrast, you'll find other quotations here that appear inside quotation marks. These are the words of Donald Trump as uttered in a campaign speech to a rally in Bemidji Minnesota on September 18th. Bemidji is a small town in Northern Minnesota with a large (22 percent) Indigenous population. News reports characterized the rally participants as "nearly all white."

Any words not in quotation marks or italics are mine.

Extreme narcissism is perhaps Donald Trump's most identifiable feature. Beyond that, he does not appear to have any coherent philosophy or program. But this does not mean that he cannot still be an agent of fascism.

Stanley says, *I think of fascism as a method of politics. It's a rhetoric, a way of running for power. Of course, that's connected to fascist ideology, because fascist ideology centers on power. But I really see fascism as a technique to gain power... People are always asking, 'Is such-and-such politician really a fascist?' Which is really just another way of asking if this person has a particular set of beliefs or an ideology, but again, I don't really think of a fascist as someone who holds a set of beliefs. They're using a certain technique to acquire and retain power.*

recent efforts by protesters to remove various public monuments to our racist past. He specifically mentioned statues of Robert E. Lee and Andrew Jackson, saying "I signed a law. Ten years in jail if they [protesters] rip them down." Trump explained that "Ten years is a lot to rip down a statue, have a little fun, especially when they have no idea what they're ripping down. But we have an idea what they're ripping down. They're ripping down in many cases, greatness. They're ripping down our past. They're ripping down our history."

Stanley: *In the past, fascist politics would focus on the dominant cultural group. The goal is to make them feel like victims, to make them feel like they've lost something and that the thing they've lost has been taken from them by a specific enemy, usually some minority out-group or some opposing nation.*

Here's Trump, and recall that he is addressing a "nearly all white" crowd in rural Minnesota: "Your state will be overrun and destroyed, and Biden and the radical Left win. That's what's going to happen. I've been watching it for years. They haven't treated you right. They have not treated Minnesota right.... So this is going to be the most important election, in my opinion, in the history of our country. You got to get it right. Because if you don't get it right, we will not have a country anymore. You're not going to have a country. Not as we know it. You won't have a country anymore."

Stanley: *This is why fascism flourishes in moments of great anxiety, because you can connect that anxiety with fake loss. The story is typically that a once-great society has been destroyed by liberalism*

Speaking at the Bemidji rally, Trump referenced

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Greetings,

In 1964 Lyndon Johnson ran for president against Republican Barry Goldwater. Johnson won in a landslide, and many interpreted it as a resounding repudiation of the conservative values upon which the Goldwater campaign was based. Yet, four years later Republican Richard Nixon was elected, and 12 years after that the reactionary Ronald Reagan came to power.

I've been thinking about this as I consider the defeat of Donald Trump in his run for reelection. While his defeat was no doubt a victory for the country, there is much work to do if we want to assure that his defeat does not create the conditions for an even more fascist candidate to come to power in 2024.

What do I mean by "fascist"? It's a term that one hears a lot, but most people don't really know what it means. So I decided to study it a bit. And, as I listened to scholars of fascism talk about the conditions that gave rise to fascism in Europe 100 years ago, I was struck by the eerie similarities to conditions in the United States today.

This issue of Nygaard Notes features the words of a couple of these scholars, who explain what fascism is, and what political conditions give rise to it. These are perilous times. The struggle continues.

Persistently yours,
Nygaard

Bemidji *from page 1*

or feminism or cultural Marxism or whatever, and you make the dominant group feel angry and resentful about the loss of their status and power. Almost every manifestation of fascism mirrors this general narrative. Part of what fascist politics does is get people to disassociate from reality. You get them to sign on to this fantasy version of reality, usually a nationalist narrative about the decline of the country and the need for a strong leader to return it to greatness, and from then on their anchor isn't the world around them — it's the leader.

Trump assured the Bemidji crowd that he is that leader, one who will protect "us" from "them." He told the crowd in Bemidji, "Joe Biden is wholly owned and controlled by the left wing mob. But if you vote for me, I'm the difference, and I'm the wall. You know the wall that we're building on the southern border? I'm your wall between the American Dream and chaos."

Trump added: "We will stop the radical indoctrination of our students and restore patriotic education to our schools. We will. We will teach our children to love our country, honor our history, and always respect our great American flag. And we will live by the timeless words of our national motto, in God we trust."

Stanley: The thing is, people willingly adopt the mythical past. Fascists are always telling a story about a glorious past that's been lost, and they tap into this nostalgia. So when you fight back against fascism, you've got one hand tied behind your back, because the truth is messy and complex and the mythical story is always clear and compelling and entertaining. It's hard to undercut that with facts.

And in Bemidji Trump reinforced the "clear and compelling and entertaining" mythology, promising to "take back our country" and return it to the people with "good genes":

"From St. Paul to St. Cloud, from Rochester ↗↗↗

→→ to Duluth, and from Minneapolis, thank God we still have Minneapolis, to right here, right here with all of you great people, this state was pioneered by men and women who braved the wilderness and the winters to build a better life for themselves and for their families. They were tough and they were strong. You have good genes. You know that, right? You have good genes. A lot of it's about the genes, isn't it? Don't you believe? The racehorse theory; you think we're so different? You have good genes in Minnesota. They didn't have a lot of money. They didn't have a lot of luxury, but they had grit, they had faith, and they had each other. That's what you have now. You have each other. They were miners and lumberjacks, fishermen and farmers, shipbuilders and shopkeepers. But they all had one thing in common. They loved their families, they loved their countries, and they loved their God. Proud citizens like you helped build this country. And together we are taking back our country. We are returning power to you, the American people. With your help, your devotion and your drive, we are going to keep on working, we're going to keep on fighting, and we are going to keep on winning, winning, winning."

That reference to "the racehorse theory" may lack meaning for many readers. It's a code word for something called "eugenics." In an article published in October, the Center for Genetics and Society tells us that the "eugenic belief" is that "some people and groups are 'fit,' while others are 'unfit' – unworthy of being included, of having children, of living." Trump biographer Michael D'Antonio says that the Trump family "subscribes to a racehorse theory of human development, that they believe that there are superior people, and that if you put together the genes of a superior woman and a superior man, you get superior offspring." For more on this, Google "eugenics migrants" or "eugenics prisoners".

Stanley told the Vox interviewer in 2018 that "*I wouldn't claim — not yet, at least — that Trump is presiding over a fascist government, but he is very clearly using fascist techniques to excite his base*

and erode liberal democratic institutions, and that's very troubling. But the blame there is as much on the Republican Party as it is on Trump, because none of this would matter if they were willing to check Trump. So far, they've chosen loyalty to Trump over loyalty to rule of law."

Given how tempting it is to put the blame on someone else (like "Republicans"), I'll close with a quote from Stacy Becker. She wrote a piece entitled "The Wretched Genius of Trump" that was published in the online publication *Medium* in September:

"The strong man, Donald Trump or anyone else, can't just take over a democracy. It has to be a process of permission, whether that permission comes in the form of active support, coercion, fear, indifference, or silence. Backsliding occurs step by step; each instance of eroding a democratic value may cause alarm, but if allowed to stand, it opens the door for another and another... until what?"

Personally, I tend to agree with Barnard College political scientist Sheri Berman, who told Vox news last month that "of course, Trump is undermining various norms and institutions of democracy. But this doesn't make him a fascist, which means *much* more than these things. Indeed, I almost think calling Trump 'fascist' gives him too much 'credit' — he isn't strategic enough, ideological enough, or ambitious enough." And Berman reminds us that "as bad as things are today, we are still not in 1930s Germany."

That may be true, but as I look at what students of fascism have to say about the phenomenon, I can't help thinking about Trump. However unwittingly—and heaven knows that much of what this man does he does unwittingly—Trump, in his single-minded narcissistic pursuit of power and celebrity, may be fertilizing the soil in which a future fascism could take root. And that future may not be too far away. ♦

The “Mobilizing Passions” of Fascism

Robert Paxton is professor emeritus of social science at Columbia University in New York who has been called “the father of fascism studies.” In his 2004 book *The Anatomy of Fascism*, Paxton offers [Page 218] the following definition of fascism:

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.

Paxton, like others, stresses that fascism appeals more to the emotions than to the mind. As he puts it, “fascism is more plausibly linked to a set of ‘mobilizing passions’ that shape fascist action than to a consistent and fully articulated philosophy. At bottom is a passionate nationalism. Allied to it is a conspiratorial and Manichean [dualistic] view of history as a battle between the good and evil camps, between the pure and the corrupt, in which one’s own community or nation has been the victim. In this Darwinian narrative, the chosen people have been weakened by political parties, social classes, unassimilable minorities, spoiled rentiers [investors], and rationalist thinkers who lack the necessary sense of community. These ‘mobilizing passions,’ mostly taken for granted and not always overtly argued as intellectual propositions, form the emotional lava that sets fascism’s foundations:

- a sense of overwhelming crisis beyond the reach of any traditional solutions;

- the primacy of the group, toward which one has duties superior to every right, whether individual or universal, and the subordination of the individual to it;

- the belief that one’s group is a victim, a sentiment that justifies any action, without legal or moral limits, against its enemies, both internal and external;

- dread of the group’s decline under the corrosive effects of individualistic liberalism, class conflict, and alien influences;

- the need for closer integration of a purer community, by consent if possible, or by exclusionary violence if necessary;

- the need for authority by natural leaders (always male), culminating in a national chief who alone is capable of incarnating the group’s destiny;

- the superiority of the leader’s instincts over abstract and universal reason;

- the beauty of violence and the efficacy of will, when they are devoted to the group’s success;

- the right of the chosen people to dominate others without restraint from any kind of human or divine law, right being decided by the sole criterion of the group’s prowess within a Darwinian struggle.

This may all seem a bit academic, a bit abstract. I mean: Trump lost the election, so the worst is over, right? But Paxton has much more to tell us about the conditions that give rise to fascism. I hope the next essay—which discusses what Paxton calls The Five Stages of Fascism—might help us recognize some of the markers on the road we may, or may not, be traveling. ♦

Fascism: We'll Know It When We See It?

Six years before publishing his book *The Anatomy of Fascism*, Robert Paxton wrote a short 24-page article in *The Journal of Modern History* entitled *The Five Stages of Fascism*. (From which this issue's "Quote" of the Week is taken.) I found this article so helpful in understanding the potential for fascism in the United States in 2020 that I decided to summarize some of the main points here.

After acknowledging that "The term 'fascist' has been so loosely used that some have proposed giving it up altogether in scholarly research," Paxton maintains that "we cannot give up in the face of these difficulties" because "A real phenomenon exists. Indeed, fascism is the most original political novelty of the twentieth century, no less." If we don't study the phenomenon of fascism as a concept, says Paxton, "we risk being unable to understand this century, or the next." Paxton was writing in 1998.

Now, here we are in the next century, and I fear we are not understanding it very well. Are we in danger of a descent into fascism in the United States? In his twenty-two-year-old essay Paxton raises a number of red flags that seem, in some ways, even more worthy of attention now than they were at the time. Here's a brief review of some of those red flags.

Fascism Grows in Democratic Soil

Elsewhere in this issue of the Notes I say that Trump isn't capable of being an actual fascist leader. But to say that Trump is not himself a fascist is not to say that Trumpism does not contribute to the possibility of a future U.S.-style fascism.

Reflecting on the 20th Century (the "heyday" of fascism being the 1930s), Paxton notes that fascism "successfully gathered ... a popular following around hard, violent, antiliberal and antisocialist nationalist dictatorships." What was remarkable about that, Paxton says, is that these fascist projects developed "against all expectations, in certain modern nations that had seemed firmly planted on a path to gradually expanding democracy." He notes in this context that "Neither Hitler nor Mussolini took the helm by force."

Formally established first in Italy after World War I, fascism then "spread its 'politics in a new key' through much of Europe, assembling all nationalists who hated the Left and found the Right inadequate."

Paxton offers three strategies for those who wish to understand fascism.

#1: "Study fascism in motion, paying more attention to processes than to essences." That is, don't look for a "Fascist Manifesto"; rather, watch how fascism operates to gain and exercise power.

#2: "Study it contextually, spending at least as much time on the surrounding society and on fascism's allies and accomplices as on the fascist movements themselves. The more actively a fascist movement participates in the political life of its country, the less one can understand it in isolation. It is ensnared in a web of reciprocal influences with allies or rivals in its country's civil society." This is basic systems thinking: focus less on heroes and villains, and focus more on structures and alliances.

#3: Remember that fascism takes different forms in different times and different places, allowing us to compare very different political contexts in terms of their potential for developing into what we are calling "fascism."



Stages *from page 5*

Paxton suggests that there are various potential (“though not inevitable”) stages in the development of fascism. He identifies five of them: (1) the initial creation of fascist movements; (2) their rooting as parties in a political system; (3) the acquisition of power; (4) the exercise of power; and, finally, in the longer term, (5) radicalization or entropy [disorder].

The recent (ongoing?) election makes it impossible to deny that there exists today in the United States a powerful right-wing populist movement. I’m not going to quibble about whether or not this movement is a “fascist movement,” but under its umbrella we surely see overtly fascist groups. And this is entirely predictable, as late-stage capitalism has fostered massive insecurity and left millions of hard-working people feeling that they have no “place” in the modern economy. And those millions can see that it doesn’t seem to matter who gets voted in or voted out, as the real decisions are made by The Market, for which we don’t vote.

In such a period of alienation, Paxton argues, we find the seeds from which may grow a fascist movement: “Fascism can appear wherever democracy is sufficiently implanted to have aroused disillusion. That suggests its spatial and temporal limits: no authentic fascism before the emergence of a massively enfranchised and politically active citizenry. In order to give birth to fascism, a society must have known political liberty—for better or for worse.”

And thus we see the first stage in the development of fascism: the birth of a movement.

According to Paxton, “the second stage—rooting, in which a fascist movement becomes a party capable of acting decisively on the political scene—happens relatively rarely,” with success depending on “certain relatively precise conditions: the weakness of a liberal state, whose inadequacies seems to condemn the nation to disorder, decline, or humiliation; and political deadlock because the Right, the heir to power but unable to continue to wield it alone, refuses to accept a growing Left as a legitimate governing partner. Some fascist leaders, in their turn, are willing to reposition their movements in alliances with these frightened conservatives, a step that pays handsomely in political power...”

Read the preceding paragraph again, and see if you don’t think that these “precise conditions” do not exist in today’s United States. As to whether “conservatives” are frightened in 2020, consider what South Carolina Republican senator Lindsey Graham told Fox News on November 8th: “If Republicans don’t challenge and change the U.S. election system, there will never be another Republican president elected again.” That’s fear speaking.

The question we should be asking is, after Trump leaves the stage, will we have the conditions that will bring onto the stage a genuine “fascist leader” willing to ally himself with such “frightened conservatives”? Someone like Trump, but more competent?

Paxton warns us against trying to “describe” fascist movements, as simple description “does not explain much. We learn much more, he says, “if we focus our gaze on the circumstances that favor the fascists—polarization within civil society and deadlocks within the political system—and on the fascists’ accomplices and allies. It is in the surrounding conditions that one must seek the differences that count, for movements that sound rather similar in their rhetoric have arrived at very different results in different national settings.”

He offers a couple of examples: “An authentically popular fascism in the United States would be pious ↗↗↗

→→ and anti-Black; in Western Europe, secular and antisemitic, or more probably, these days, anti-Islamic; in Russia and Eastern Europe, religious, antisemitic, and slavophile. It is wiser to pay attention to the functions fulfilled by new movements of an analogous type, to the circumstances that could open a space to them, and to the potential conservative elite allies ready to try to coopt them rather than look for echoes of the rhetoric, the programs, or the aesthetic preferences of the protofascists of the last [century]... We may legitimately conclude, for example, that the skinheads are functional equivalents of Hitler's SA and Mussolini's *squadristi* only if important elements of the conservative elite begin to cultivate them as weapons against some internal enemy, such as immigrants.”

Paxton speaks of “the success of fascist movements in assembling new, broad catch-all parties that attract a mass following across classes and hence seem attractive allies to conservatives looking for ways to perpetuate their shaken rule. At later stages, successful fascist parties also position themselves as the most effective barriers, by persuasion or by force, to an advancing Left and prove adept at the formation, maintenance, and domination of political coalitions with conservatives.”

The massive protests in recent months demanding a racial reckoning in the United States have been terribly frightening for “conservative” leaders and those who follow them. Paxton explains what this fear has to do with fascism. He notes that both Hitler and Mussolini were “invited to take office as head of government by a head of state in the legitimate exercise of his official functions, on the advice of his conservative counselors, under quite precise circumstances: a deadlock of constitutional government (produced in part by the polarization that the fascists abetted); conservative leaders who felt threatened by the loss of their capacity to keep the population under control at a moment of massive popular mobilization; an advancing Left; and conservative leaders who refused to work with that Left and who felt unable to continue to govern against the Left without further reinforcement.”

Paxton concludes his prophetic essay with some questions that are surely relevant in the Age of Trump: “The right questions to ask of today's neo- or protofascisms are those appropriate for the second and third stages of the fascist cycle. Are they becoming rooted as parties that represent major interests and feelings and wield major influence on the political scene? Is the economic or constitutional system in a state of blockage apparently insoluble by existing authorities? Is a rapid political mobilization threatening to escape the control of traditional elites, to the point where they would be tempted to look for tough helpers in order to stay in charge? It is by answering those kinds of questions, grounded in a proper historical understanding of the processes at work in past fascisms, and not by checking the color of the shirts or seeking traces of the rhetoric of the nationalsyndicalist dissidents of the opening of the twentieth century, that we may be able to recognize our own day's functional equivalents of fascism.”

Recall Paxton’s definition of fascism that I offer elsewhere in this issue: *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.*

Trump’s greatest legacy may be that he has empowered a vocal and sizable minority that believes in the need for internal cleansing via redemptive violence without ethical or legal restraints. With Trump himself about to leave the stage, where will the MAGA crowd go? Is the United States on a path to a stronger, more inclusive democracy? Or are we on a path that brings us closer to fascism? I’m betting on democracy, but each one of us will have to do our part to make it happen. ◆

“Quote” of the Week: “Fascism Was Born in the American South”

Robert Paxton, sometimes called “the father of fascism studies,” in 1998 published a remarkable essay entitled **The Five Stages of Fascism** in the *Journal of Modern History*. Paxton acknowledges that fascism’s “heyday” occurred in the 1930s in Italy and Germany. Then he says:

But it is further back in American history that one comes upon the earliest phenomenon that seems functionally related to fascism: the Ku Klux Klan. Just after the Civil War, some former Confederate officers, fearing the vote given to African Americans by the Radical Reconstructionists in 1867, set up a militia to restore an overturned social order. The Klan constituted an alternate civic authority, parallel to the legal state, which, in its founders' eyes, no longer defended their community's legitimate interests. In its adoption of a uniform (white robe and hood), as well as its techniques of intimidation and its conviction that violence was justified in the cause of the group's destiny, the first version of the Klan in the defeated American South was a remarkable preview of the way fascist movements were to function in interwar Europe. It is arguable, at least, that fascism (understood functionally) was born in the late 1860s in the American South.

It’s clear from the context that the thing that Paxton is saying was “born” in the 1860s is the *specific* phenomenon that we call fascism, and certainly not white supremacy or organized state repression.

The full essay is a bit hard to access without being affiliated with an academic institution, but try this link:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-2801%28199803%2970%3A1%3C1%3ATFSOF%3E2.0.CO%3B2-3>

If you can’t download it, send me an email and I’ll send you a copy.

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