

**“Don’t Call Donald Trump a Fascist” by Eliah Bures, *Foreign Policy*, 11/2/2019.  
(Selection)**

Elijah Bures is a historian of modern Europe and a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley’s Center for Right-Wing Studies. His forthcoming book is *Friends and Enemies: Ernst Jünger and the Countercultural Survival of the German Far-Right*.

Every age has its own fascism,” the Italian writer Primo Levi warned in a 1974 essay. Responding to the Vietnam War and the rise of military juntas in Chile and Greece, Levi worried that the dehumanization and domination of fascist politics had survived World War II and were now being revived in forms less obvious than the mass slaughter of Auschwitz, which he had witnessed firsthand.

“There are many ways of reaching [fascism],” Levi noted, “not just through the terror of police intimidation, but by denying and distorting information, by undermining systems of justice, by paralyzing the education system, and by spreading in a myriad subtle ways nostalgia for a world where order reigned, and where the security of a privileged few depends on the forced labor and the forced silence of the many.”

Levi feared we would be blind to fascism’s return. The truth, however, is that most of us are beset by the opposite affliction: We are not oblivious to the possibility of fascism; rather, we see fascism everywhere—including where it is not.

In the 45 years since Levi wrote, most U.S. presidents, for instance, have been maligned as fascists by their angriest critics. Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush were routinely denounced in such terms. So was Bill Clinton. And Barack Obama’s detractors had trouble deciding if he was more a secret fascist or a secret Marxist. In a December 1975 interview on *60 Minutes*, Reagan even claimed that American liberalism generally (in the left-progressive sense of that term) had fascist leanings.

The charge of fascism is always at the ready. Like the other F-word, “fascist” is marvelously flexible and emotive, but it is also an example of language that is more likely to alienate and enrage than promote dialogue—a rhetorical turn that makes people less, rather than more, open to the humanity of those they oppose. While demonization is an ancient political itch always better left unscratched, it is especially harmful to a liberal-democratic political culture since it legitimizes intransigence and extremism in return. Faced with the next Adolf Hitler, any opponent becomes an enemy.