

Robert Paxton's Opinion Piece in *Newsweek*, 1/11/21 (Selection)

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I [resisted](#) for a long time applying the fascist label to Donald J. Trump. He did indeed display some telltale signs. In 2016, a newsreel clip of Trump's plane taxiing up to a hangar where cheering supporters awaited reminded me eerily of Adolf Hitler's electoral campaign in Germany in July 1932, the first airborne campaign in history, where the arrival of the Führer's plane electrified the crowd. Once the rally began, with Hitler and Mussolini, Trump mastered the art of back-and-forth exchanges with his enraptured listeners. There was the threat of physical violence ("lock her up!"), sometimes leading to the forceful ejection of hecklers. The [Proud Boys](#) stood in convincingly for Hitler's Storm Troopers and Mussolini's *squadristi*. The MAGA hats even provided a bit of uniform. The "America First" message and the leader's arrogant swagger fit the fascist model.

But these are matters of surface decor. How did Trump relate to more profound social, political, economic, and cultural forces in American life? Like Hitler, among the first political leaders to master radio, Trump mastered electronic media like [Twitter](#) and won the support of America's largest television chain, [Fox News](#). Like the fascist leaders Trump understood the deep disaffection of parts of society for traditional leaders and institutions, and he knew how to exploit a widespread fear of national division and decline. Like Hitler and Mussolini he knew how to pose as the only effective bulwark against an advancing Left, all the more fearful because it took on cultural forms unfamiliar to provincial rural America—feminism, Black Power, gay rights.

But Trump and Trumpism also differ in some important ways from the historical fascisms. The circumstances are profoundly different. Although the United States has its problems, these are minor compared to those of the defeated Germany of 1932, with over 30 percent of workers unemployed, or the divided Italy at the brink of civil war in 1921. Most Americans are employed, or were until the pandemic, while those lucky enough to own stocks are in clover. American political institutions are not deadlocked, as were those of Germany in 1932, when President Hindenburg believed that only Hitler could stop the rapidly growing Communist Party. American circumstances are unlike those of Italy in 1921, where the King believed that the only way to stop the runaway take-overs of Italian cities by Mussolini's new nationalist and anti-socialist mass movement he called Fascism was to invite its leader into office. The crisis created by Trump's refusal to accept a legitimate electoral outcome seems almost trivial by comparison.

A further fundamental difference is Trump's relation to the world of business. Whereas Hitler and Mussolini, at least at the beginning, won their mass audiences with promises to shake up capitalist power, and whereas, once in power with the support of the same businessmen against Labor, the fascist leaders had subjected businessmen, often against their preferences, to the demands of forced rearmament, Trump gave American business what they wanted: the relaxation of regulations and access to world markets. It seemed to me better to avoid one more facile and polemical use of the fascist label in favor of a more unemotional term, such as oligarchy or plutocracy.

Trump's incitement of the invasion of the Capitol on January 6, 2020 removes my objection to the fascist label. His open encouragement of civic violence to overturn an election crosses a red line. The label now seems not just acceptable but necessary.