Political Ineptitude Tempered Trump’s Fascist Behavior

There is nothing more fascist-like than Trump telling the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by.”

By Mabel Berezin

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A protester holds a placard reading “Trump Lost! Fascists Get out!” during the RefuseFascism March at Times Square. (Ron Adar / SOPA Images / Sipa USA)

In contrast to his multiple business failures, Donald Trump’s presidency spurred at least one growth industry: commentary on fascism. Academics, public intellectuals, and influencers on sites from Twitter to TikTok have been laser-
focused on Trump’s resemblance to a host of past and present unsavory leaders with a weak attachment to democracy.

As the events of January 6 signaled, Trump is at once a dangerous, amoral, and pathetic figure. Sequestered in the White House with only a fringe group of loyalists around him, he spent weeks tweeting and mounting improbable legal challenges to the election. Trump resembles a third-rate autocrat continually planning failed coups, while becoming ever more unhinged in the process. Trump’s power has always come from his combination of triviality and cruelty. Both characteristics made it difficult to imagine that he could win an election, and when he did, these qualities made him a source of endless media fascination. Trump is not out the door yet, so postmortems are premature. But it is not too soon to ask if fascism is the correct lens to understand the political meaning and consequences of the last four years.

Trump is a classic authoritarian personality with a fascist rhetorical style. That alone should ring alarm bells. Yet the label “fascist” can sometimes hide as much as it reveals about the illiberal tendencies in contemporary American politics. Trump’s presidency exposed the fissures embedded in our democracy, and concentrating only on his fascistic actions distracts from the unstable political landscape that led to his rise in the first place.
As a concept, fascism tends to serve as a metaphor for evil, violent, and authoritarian behavior, and Trump is certainly guilty of all three. His MAGA rallies and disregard for government norms and practices also evoke aspects of interwar fascist politics and practice. Even so, whatever his dictatorial proclivities, Trump's administration was not a fully realized fascist regime. I and other academics who have explored the similarities prefer to focus on the dangers posed by his fascist behavior.

In its original conception, fascism was a collectivist system of government that Giovanni Gentile, a philosopher and Mussolini's minister of education, described in tedious detail in *Foreign Affairs*. Fascism, he wrote, aspired to community, coherence, and eliminating the boundaries between the state and the person. Liberalism, with its soulless individualism, was as much its enemy as Marxism. Trumpism, with its affinity for isolationism and free trade and its antipathy to government regulation, has no common cause with collectivist isms—even the fascist ones.
Yet Trump’s style is fascistic. His attraction to violence to deal with dissent, his flagrant disrespect for the law, his affinity for making up his own facts, and his taste for public spectacle easily fit the fascist behavioral template. Thankfully, Trump is not a talented politician. Any astute aspiring autocrat should immediately have recognized the opportunity to consolidate power that the Covid-19 pandemic afforded. Even a half-hearted attempt to control the coronavirus in March could have erased Joe Biden’s margin of victory.

Still as the violence at the Capitol showed, Trump managed to do much damage during his four years in office. He has encouraged and given new legitimacy to networks of armed paramilitary “patriots” who intervene in local and national politics and showed up en masse in Washington, DC earlier this month. Paramilitary groups are not new, but they have existed on the margins. Trump invited them into mainstream politics, and they will not leave when he does. Charlottesville was the beginning, not the end, of a new genre of organized racism. Mussolini cleverly used armed squads (Squadristi), which roamed the Italian countryside fomenting violence and fighting socialists, to advance his own political ends. There is nothing more terrifying, or fascist-like, than Trump telling the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by” or inviting his supporters to convene in DC to “Stop the steal.”

At the same time, the fear that, although we dodged a bullet this time, a shrewder and craftier version of Trump may be in our future is overblown. Josh Hawley, the right-wing Republican senator from Missouri, is a name that frequently comes up on Trump 2.0 lists. He is active in the National
Conservativism movement, an international group of politicians, academics, and media people that aims to restore exactly what its name promises. Hawley's decision to challenge the presidential vote certification as well as his raised fist when he greeted the protesters outside the Capitol suggest that he is more a bungling opportunist than fledgling fascist.

But make no mistake, there is nothing to be sanguine about here. Trump and Trumpism have revealed a willingness among many leaders and citizens to capsize our long-established, if flawed, democracy. Trump’s phone call to Georgia’s secretary of state was more Don Corleone than Il Duce. His January 6 rally, which ended with him telling his supporters “the best is yet to come,” does not bode well.

Trump’s desire to stay in office likely has little connection to any grand fascistic political vision. Still the wrecking ball that Trump swung at our political culture should warn us of the fragility of our institutions, norms, and values. The last four years ought to remind us that our democracy will always require our vigilance.

To read the other side of The Debate, read Samuel Moyn’s “Allegations of Fascism Distract From the Real Danger.”

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Forget About ‘100 Days.’ These Are the 10 Days That Will Define Biden’s Presidency.
Biden should bury obstruction in a blizzard of executive orders.

By John Nichols

Today 5:45 AM

President Joe Biden sits behind the Resolute Desk in the Oval Office and signs a series of orders on the day of his inauguration as president. (Jim Watson / AFP via Getty Images)

Joe Biden knows he must work harder and faster than any president since Franklin Delano Roosevelt to restore the confidence of the American people in a government that his predecessor rendered dysfunctional in the face of a pandemic, turned against Americans who cried out for racial justice, and, finally, attacked by inciting his supporters to storm the Capitol on January 6. Biden recognized his responsibility with an inaugural address that announced, “We’ll press forward with speed and urgency for we have much to do in this winter of peril and significant possibilities. Much to repair, much to restore, much to heal, much to build, and much to gain.”
The American presidency provides the world's greatest bully pulpit, and Biden grabbed hold of it on a slightly snowy Wednesday, as he became the 46th president of a nation that has lost more than 400,000 of its own to a deadly virus and suffered the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. “I ask every American to join me in this cause. Uniting to fight the foes we face: anger, resentment, and hatred, extremism, lawlessness, violence, disease, joblessness, and hopelessness,” Biden declared on Wednesday. He promised: “With unity we can do great things, important things. We can right wrongs. We can put people to work in good jobs. We can teach our children in safe schools. We can overcome the deadly virus. We can reward work and rebuild the middle class and make health care secure for all. We can deliver racial justice and we can make America once again the leading force for good in the world.”

There was a measure of poetry in Biden's speech and in the moment of transition.

But at a point so perilous as this, words must be matched with deeds. Biden recognized this reality by acting on his inaugural day—via executive orders and agency directives—as no president before him in the 232-year history of the executive office. He began by doing what Trump never did: making the fight against Covid-19 the first priority of the administration and the nation. Trump's criminally negligent response to the pandemic earned an overwhelming rebuke from the American people, who swept the 45th president from office in November—giving Biden the highest
percentage of the vote for any challenger to an incumbent president since FDR defeated Herbert Hoover in the Great Depression election of 1932.

Roosevelt defined our modern understanding of an activist presidency. But the 32nd president did not issue his first executive order—a personnel clarification—until days after taking office. Biden moved immediately, issuing 17 orders and directions during his first hours in office. He also signaled that he would approve an array of additional actions over the coming 10 days.

This was the most important signal from his inauguration day—more vital than the speeches or the songs—because Biden was making real his promise that “the will of the people has been heard and the will of the people has been heeded.” The orders that Biden made on Wednesday were described as a “blizzard.” Good!

The Biden-Harris administration should bury Washington obstruction and inertia with a blizzard of executive orders.

That will inspire complaints, as Vice President Kamala Harris learned when she argued during her own bid for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination for an expansive view of “executive action.” She took hits for proposing executive orders on gun control and immigration reform—“Kamala Harris Can't Stop Promising To Do Things Via Executive Order,” griped Reason magazine.

But the radicalism of 2019 is emerging as the common sense of 2021.
Amid Wednesday’s festivities, which were tempered by the reality of a pandemic that remains unchecked and a vaccination program that has yet to hit warp speed, Biden initiated five executive actions to address the “national emergency” created by Covid-19. He established the position of “COVID-19 Response Coordinator” to manage the production of medical equipment and vaccines. He returned the US to the World Health Organization and dispatched Dr. Anthony Fauci to address Thursday’s WHO board meeting. He addressed the economic crisis by extending existing moratoriums on foreclosures and evictions until March 31 and pausing federal student loan payment requirements until September 30. He mandated masking and physical distancing in federal buildings and on federal lands; and he initiated a “100 Days Mask Challenge” that asks Americans to wear masks for the first 100 days of his tenure.

That reference to 100 days was, at once, practical and historical. It embraced the legacy of Roosevelt, whose first 100 days of activist governing set the New Deal benchmark for ensuing Democratic administrations. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, a 2020 Democratic presidential rival who became a key Biden backer in the fall, argues that the challenges plaguing America demand that Biden govern as “the most progressive president since FDR.” That’s a tall order for the new president, especially one who served in the Senate and the vice presidency as a centrist and who campaigned more as a humane alternative to Trump than a visionary change agent. But no matter what challenges arise on Capitol Hill, Biden has the power to govern in a dynamic and defining way. “Obviously, as Donald Trump has shown
us, the power of a pen on executive orders is very significant,” Sanders said after Biden’s election, “and I hope [the new Democratic president] utilizes it.”

Biden did that on Wednesday, issuing orders that combined urgent measures to combat the coronavirus with agenda-setting initiatives on climate change, immigrant rights, and racial equity. Reversing the Trump administration’s climate denialism, he re-embraced the Paris climate accord, canceled the Keystone XL pipeline, and initiated what League of Conservation Voters President Gene Karpinski hails as an “all-of-government approach to climate action, environmental justice, a clean energy economy, and a healthy democracy.”

Recognizing the need to bury Trump’s twin legacies of racism and xenophobia, Biden put an end to the anti-historic efforts of the 1776 Commission to make excuses for human bondage, ordered federal agencies to take steps to ensure racial equity, barred workplace discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation, and required that noncitizens be included in the Census. He halted construction of Trump’s border wall, reversed the former president’s expansion of immigration enforcement, and ended a Muslim ban that, in the words of Representative Ilhan Omar, stemmed “from a hateful ideology that justifies dividing people based on their religion and country of origin.”

Even as Biden issued Wednesday’s orders, however, evidence of the congressional obstruction he will face came into focus, as noxious Missouri Senator Josh Hawley blocked quick consideration of Homeland Security nominee Alejandro
Mayorkas. This Democratic president will have a Democratic House and Senate to work with, but the margins are so narrow that the fights on Capitol Hill will be difficult—especially with an impeachment trial in the offing. Biden, a veteran of 36 years in the Senate, is familiar with such difficulties. But he cannot allow obstructionists like Hawley and Texas Senator Ted Cruz—or reluctant Democrats like West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin—to delay action. The Biden administration must be prepared to govern by every means necessary. His administration is reportedly preparing to take additional action on coronavirus policies, economic relief, “Buy American” procurement standards, racial equity, climate change, health care, immigration, and international affairs and national security by February 1. It must do all of that—and more, including the gun violence issues that Harris proposed to address with executive orders.

Some vital initiatives will take 100 days, or longer. But the identification of this new presidency as an activist response to the failures of the past, and to the demands of the future, requires a first 10 days “blizzard” of executive orders—and it looks like that’s what’s going to happen.


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