



SILENCED DISSENT

by Cathal Sheerin

We are now at a point in history where level-headed, mainstream political commentators and respected historians are discussing whether or not U.S. President Donald Trump can be described as a fascist. And it's not just pundits and scholars pondering that question. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former Director of the National Security Agency Michael Hayden have both rung the alarm bells over what they see as echoes of fascism in Trump's demagoguery and populist politics. The historian of twentieth century totalitarianism in Europe, Timothy Snyder, has observed that—regardless of whether or not the president can accurately be described as a fascist—he has certainly adopted many of the tactics and “tricks of fascism.”

This can be seen in Trump's naked worship of strength, which goes far beyond his promotion of U.S. power and a desire for more military parades. The president's speeches and tweets are littered with references to being strong, and to others being weak (which is understood as something to be despised). The world leaders with whom he publicly gets along best, never criticizes, and plainly admires—President Putin of Russia, President Erdogan of Turkey, and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia—are authoritarians with dictatorial

tendencies: they embody an idea of strength that is identified with the capacity for violence, for control over their populaces, and for a brutal, sometimes lethal, intolerance of dissent.

Trump's own low tolerance of dissent, his promotion of false narratives, and his attacks on journalists (whom he has called "the enemy of the people") are daily features of U.S. politics with uncomfortable historical parallels. His ubiquitous use of the pejorative phrase "fake news" echoes "lügenpresse" ("lying press"), a German word made famous by the Nazi Party during Hitler's rise to power. Trump supporters were recorded shouting "lügenpresse" at the press pen during a 2016 rally in Cleveland, Ohio.

Hand in hand with this intolerance of dissent goes the portrayal of those whom you disagree with as "the enemy," and the promotion of violence. During his presidential campaign Trump encouraged supporters to intimidate and on occasion beat up opponents. At a 2016 rally in Virginia, photojournalist Chris Morris was assaulted by Trump's security staff; during a 2017 speech in Long Island, Trump encouraged police officers to rough up suspects when arresting them. (Police departments were quick to denounce his remarks.) Acts of terrorism by far-right groups and individuals have surged under Trump. In October 2018 eleven people were killed in a mass shooting at a Pittsburgh synagogue, and mail bombs were sent to the homes of Trump critics, including former President Barack Obama, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, liberal financier and philanthropist George Soros, and a range of high-profile Democrats.

Timothy Snyder has pointed to perhaps the most outstanding example of where the president's tactics overlap with those of history's fascists: the promotion of a sense of victimhood. In Trump's speeches, interviews, and tweets, the U.S.—the most powerful country the world has ever known—is continuously presented as having been unfairly treated, laughed at, undermined, and/or under attack. The twentieth century's worst regimes in Europe sold their peoples the same tale of betrayal and injustice, blaming ethnic groups (most often "the Jews") as the source of real or imagined

problems. Trump's scapegoats are people with brown skin—mainly Muslims and migrants from Central America. Before he became president, one of the many falsehoods that Trump propagated was that he had seen “thousands” of U.S.-based Muslims celebrating the attack on the U.S. on September 11. His first big political move after his inauguration was an attempt to ban travel to the U.S. from Muslim countries.

Trump's scapegoating of Hispanic migrants and asylum seekers has dangerous, far-reaching consequences. The process of dehumanization—associating these people with criminality and disease—began early on. Trump kicked off his presidential bid in 2015 saying of Mexican migrants: “They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” The fabricated threat posed by migrants is the president's ostensible reason to build a wall the length of the U.S.-Mexico border. The threat was also deployed to whip up hysteria before the mid-term elections in November 2018, when the Trump administration and its supporters pushed the idea that the U.S. was about to be “invaded” by a slow-moving caravan of asylum seekers more than 1,000 miles from the border. As his administration sent almost 6,000 troops to the border—authorizing lethal force—Trump speculated that “middle-easterners” might be among the migrants; meanwhile, heavily armed militia groups declared that they too were heading to the border to defend the U.S. By December 2018, after failing to persuade Congress to fund the border wall, the president declared (without evidence) that a new migrant caravan was forming in Honduras. Another attempt to secure funding—by declaring a national emergency in February 2019—failed when Congress voted overwhelmingly the following month to reject Trump's declaration. Trump responded with a veto on March 15, 2019.

The Trump administration's xenophobic rhetoric has concrete policy outcomes. On an average day in 2018, there were 42,000 undocumented migrants in custody in the U.S.—an almost 25% increase from the previous year. Currently, there are around 15,000

Central American children being held in U.S. detention camps. Under the president's zero-tolerance illegal immigration policy, at least 2,500 detained children were deliberately separated from their parents; the Trump administration only began to reunite families when a federal judge intervened. It still refuses to abide by a court settlement requiring the release of children from detention after twenty days.

Detained migrants are often held in overcrowded cells, plagued by frequent outbreaks of vomiting, respiratory infections, and other communicable diseases. Detainees complain of being denied food and medical treatment, and of being subjected to violence and taunts from the guards. Some say they have been called "invaders."

Given such conditions, fatalities were likely: December 2018 saw two Guatemalan children die in separate incidents in U.S. custody. Seven-year-old Jakelin Caal Maquin and eight-year-old Felipe Gómez Alonzo suffered from health conditions that they might have overcome with proper, timely treatment. The United Nations' special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants called for an independent probe into the deaths and demanded an immediate end to the detention of migrant children in the U.S. Trump's Homeland Security Secretary, Kirstjen Nielsen, blamed advocates for "open borders" and the children's "own parents." The president tweeted that the deaths were the fault of Democrats "and their pathetic immigration policies."

History shows that the "tricks of fascism"—the dehumanization of vulnerable groups, the promotion of lies, xenophobia, victimhood, and violence—inevitably results in the mass suffering of innocents. In December 2018, a poll conducted by PBS NewsHour, NPR, and Marist showed that 44% of Americans approved of President Trump's actions on immigration, illustrating another of history's lessons: a significant minority can always be persuaded to tolerate, if only for a time, this kind of politics.



Cathal Sheerin is a journalist, editor, and free-expression consultant.