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BY ANTHONY DIMAGGIO

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Fascism by Gaslighting: Trump's Coup and the Grassroots Insurrection Strategy



Donald Trump's rolling coup attempt, which has been ongoing for months and reached a climax on January 6th, was a dramatic example of how demagogues manipulate their supporters in pursuit of fascist politics, while shrewdly trying to wash their hands of responsibility. This con has worked for much of Trump's base, with 52 percent of Republicans blaming Joe Biden, rather than the President, for the actions of the insurrectionists in D.C., and with 45 percent voicing support for the mob and their cause. Trump's ability to sell his coup to the base is a classic example of fascist gaslighting, via his efforts to farm out insurrection to supporters, while pretending to remain above the fray.

To better understand how this gaslighting works, it's important to recount what happened on January 6th, and to connect the dots between Trump's provocations and the actions on Capitol Hill. The story goes like this. Trump stoked baseless "election fraud" paranoia for months following the November election, and over the last few years, riling up his base, and especially its most reactionary, fascist, and paranoid elements. As he failed to pull off his coup through the courts and state houses, he became increasingly desperate, stoking rebellion

in the streets by calling for “wild” actions to overturn Biden’s election. This all reached a fever pitch in anticipation of Congress’s certification of the election results, which normally serves as little more than a ceremonial event to formally declare the next President. In his “Save America Rally” speech to supporters prior to the certification, Trump encouraged them to “stop the steal,” in reference to the election results, and warned them that “you will never take back our country with weakness.” He called on the crowd to “fight much harder” and told them that “if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore...Let the weak ones get out.” He goaded his supporters by declaring that “This is a time for strength.” While Trump promised to join them at the Capitol building, he threw supporters under the bus by refusing to show, leaving them to do all the dirty work in seeking to overturn the election certification.

Trump instructed the crowd at his rally to head over to Capitol Hill. There protesters became increasingly violent, overrunning barricades, breaking into the Capitol building, smashing glass, and charging and assaulting Capitol police. Many people I’ve talked with in recent days have framed what happened as non-violent, a minor incident, not really a coup, or blown out of proportion. Too many seem content to ignore (or perhaps downplay) all of the above reports about violence, in addition to other accounts of the gun-toting, zip tie carrying, howling “Where’s Mike Pence? Show yourself!” fanatics attempting to forcibly overturn a democratic election. They’ve also conveniently managed to miss video evidence of white rioters stalking a police officer of color, and violently targeting members of Congress who barricaded themselves in the House chamber, upon protection of Secret Service members with guns drawn. This is the kind of violence embraced by fascist thugs, not misunderstood patriots.

The Capitol building breach was not a spontaneous event. It had been planned for weeks by conspiratorial and fascist rightwing groups seeking to disrupt and put an end to Congressional efforts to certify Joe Biden as the winner of the Presidential election. The President’s role in motivating the mob was verified in a subsequent journalistic investigation, revealing that participants in Trump’s coup named their initiative “The Wild Protest,” after Trump’s tweet calling for militant action in the capital.

For those who would downplay the event’s significance, the human costs of the conflict are now on full display. A woman was shot in the neck and killed, and three others died in from “medical emergencies.” A police officer was killed after being struck in the head with a fire extinguisher. When the National Guard was finally activated by Vice President Pence, they and Washington Metro and Capitol police eventually pushed the mob out of, and away from the Capitol building. But the message was clearly delivered that the attacks were a success, considering the delayed police response and their refusal to engage in mass arrests.

Following President-elect Joe Biden’s call on Trump to condemn the violence, Trump told the mob to remain “peaceful” and “go home,” but fawned over their actions by telling them

“we love you,” and reminding them about how “very special” they are to him and his cause. And he undermined any sort of credible commitment to nonviolence when he rationalized the mob violence by announcing: “these are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide victory is so unceremoniously and viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly and unfairly treated for so long,” while encouraging the insurrectionists to “remember this day forever.”

When it became clear that Trump might face federal charges for stoking violence and endangering the lives of members of Congress, he delivered a statement with a full-throated condemnation of the violence and the mob. No doubt, the speech is intended to be used as “Exhibit A” in his criminal defense, in the unlikely event that he is ever charged with a crime in court. This is all vintage Trump gaslighting. Stoke the angry mob. Subvert basic democratic norms. And then refuse to take responsibility during the backlash by claiming you were never a party to any of it, that you deplore the violence, and that your critics are treating you unfairly.

These developments were straight out of the Charlottesville playbook, when Trump initially condemned violence upon pressure from reporters, and then undermined that condemnation by referring to white supremacist fascists as “very fine people,” and attacking the media for calling out his extremism as “fake news.” This gaslighting has empowered Trump to utilize the rhetoric of peace, while simultaneously romanticizing and celebrating extremism and violence.

Trump’s fascist rhetorical strategy isn’t new. He’s been pioneering the art of hate rhetoric, extremism, and eliminationist attacks against his critics for years. And he’s gotten away with it because of the longstanding trend in American political culture among academics, journalists, officials, and the public of mass fascism-denialism. But a close examination of his past rhetoric, when compared to previous presidents, leaves little doubt that this President has shrewdly employed fascist rhetoric as a tool for stoking extremism.

In line with his and the Republican Party’s emerging vision of one-party rule, Trump’s supporters who stormed the Capitol clearly embrace Trump’s eliminationist rhetoric depicting the Democrats as a dire threat to the nation’s survival. That eliminationism, when combined with Trump’s (and his supporters) white supremacist rhetoric, is comparable to the sort of fascist rhetoric developed under the Third Reich. This point is typically dismissed by people who haven’t taken a close look at Trump’s own speeches compared to previous presidents.

If people haven’t figured this all out yet, it may be time to take a closer look at what’s been building under the surface for the last few years, in terms of exposing Trump’s rhetorical strategy for imposing a fascist state. Drawing on the University of California Santa Barbara American Presidency Project’s database, I examined 89 speeches from three presidents – George W. Bush (25 speeches), Barack Obama (33), and Donald Trump (31) over the last 20

years from 2001 through 2020. I looked at critical conflict periods in these presidencies: the four years following the 9/11 attacks with Bush, the second term of the Obama administration, which was marked by Republican control of Congress, and Trump's entire term. I analyzed speeches in which presidents explicitly referenced the other political party – the Democrats in the case of Bush and Trump, and Republicans with Obama. I first examined the number of times that each president targeted the opposition party in terms of the number of references to that party, and then examined the substance of this rhetoric as related to the adoption of extreme language.

Based on the analysis below, Trump spent radically more time fixating on his partisan political opponents than did Obama or Bush. On average, when looking at cross-party references, Bush only mentioned Democrats 1.6 times per speech, compared to Obama's average of 2.9 references to Republicans per speech. In contrast, Trump on average referenced Democrats an incredible 10.1 times per speech, while fixating on the other party 3.5 times as often as Obama and 6.3 times as often as Bush.

Extreme Rhetoric by President (2001-2020)		
President	# of Cross-Party References Per Speech	Cross-Party Extreme Language (# of Descriptions Per Speech)
George W. Bush, Post 9/11 (9/2001-11/2004)	1.6	0.6
Barack Obama, 2 nd Term (2013-2016)	2.9	0.7
Donald Trump (1/2016-11/2020)	10.1	9.2

What did Trump say in all the time that he focused on the Democrats? Much of his energy was spent demonizing the party and depicting them as a threat to the nation. As documented above, Trump's use of extreme descriptions of the Democrats appeared, on average, 9.2 times per speech. By comparison, Bush and Obama used extreme language far less often, with 0.6 descriptions per speech for Bush and 0.7 descriptions per speech for Obama. But as I discuss below, there is really no comparison between Bush and Obama on the one hand, and Trump on the other, since nothing in the formers' rhetoric even remotely embraced eliminationism, as we routinely see with Trump.

Trump's use of descriptors was thoroughly extremist, as measured by the words he adopted in referring to Democrats and people of color [1]. As I describe below and in this report's appendix in greater detail, Trump's rhetoric can be broken down into five categories, thematically speaking. These include economic threats; threats to democracy; national security and conspiratorial-based threats; name-calling; and immigration-related threats.

The lists of words in the appendix provide comprehensive evidence of Trump's word choices, although a brief elaboration immediately below demonstrates just how frightening this President's messaging was throughout his term. This rhetoric is made all the more alarming

considering that he received the support of more than 74 million voters in 2020, and has consistently received a positive job approval rating from more than 40 percent of Americans. Some of the lowlights of Trump's eliminationist rhetoric include:

- * For alleged economic threats, references to Democratic efforts to "obliterate," "destroy," "raid," "rob," and "steal" from popular social programs like Medicare and Social Security, and to the "disaster" and "calamity" of the Affordable Care Act.

- * Regarding alleged threats to democracy, references to the "undemocratic," "dangerous," and "radical" Democratic Party, with Democrats intent on destroying America in their efforts to impose a "nightmare" vision of "socialism" or "communism," and to make the U.S. into "Venezuela."

- * Concerning national security, the embrace of law-and-order rhetoric and paranoid conspiratorial language, with blanket depictions of Black Lives Matter protesters as "mobs," as "rioting," "looting" "arsonists" who threaten to "destroy" the nation and endangering American security and law and order through "chaos," "mayhem," and holding the nation "hostage." Trump's rhetoric also included discussions of the "deep state" threat to his administration.

- * For name calling, depictions of the Democratic Party as "liars" (and "lying"), as "stupid" and "Low IQ" "fools," as "extreme/extremist," "fanatical," "crooked," "ruthless[ly]" "unhinged," driven by "hate/hatred," and as insane ("crazy").

- * Related to immigration, a multitude of references to immigrants as "killers," as "endangering" the country, to "vicious" immigrant gangs and the threat of drugs as related to immigrant gangs, to graphic, detailed descriptions of violent crimes perpetrated by unauthorized immigrants, to immigrants as "animals" that need to be put down by law enforcement, obsessive references to immigrants as "criminals," and the Democrats as "criminal" by association.

Immigration-related rhetoric was the most disturbing of all the eliminationist language that Trump embraced, as the examples below demonstrate the parallels with the language adopted by Hitler and the Nazis under the Third Reich.

- * References to the violence of the El Salvadoran street gang MS-13 (which originated in Los Angeles), via his repeated references to their "kidnapping, drugging, and raping" of victims, and their "stabbing," "murdering," "decapitating," "slaughter," and "disfiguring" of Americans. Trump's anti-immigrant message is generalized via his blanket claim that "sanctuary cities" are places where "violent criminals hide" in mass.

- * Dehumanization of LatinX Americans, via his references to MS-13 gang members as "ruthless animals" and "vicious gangs" of "predators" that "prey" on the public, and to ICE as a heroic militarized force that attacks immigrant criminal gangs via their assaults on gang "nests," and against their "infest(ation)" of American cities. These depictions, it should be remembered, are part of a larger framework Trump has embraced that envisions Mexican

immigrants as overwhelmingly “drug dealers, criminals [and] rapists,” qualified only by the premise that “some, I assume, are good people.”

* Attempts to criminalize the Democratic Party via claims that it embraces criminal immigrant-based gang violence. This includes Trump’s references to the Democrats as the “party of crime,” the party that is “okay with crime” and with “open borders, which means lots of crime.” In contrast Republicans and Trump “want tough, strong, powerful borders, and we want no crime.” Trump depicts Democratically-controlled “sanctuary cities” – “which the Democratic Party supports totally – they love them” – as the primary focal point “where crime pours in” to the country.

Trump’s use of animal metaphors, his depiction of LatinX immigrants as criminals, and his claim that immigrants bring in “tremendous infectious disease,” are indistinguishable from eliminationist Nazi propaganda, which characterized Jews as “rats,” as a “poison[ous],” “filthy” and “infected” people, as a “plague,” and as a criminal “arsonist” and “serpent[ine]” threat to public order and safety. That this simple yet damning comparison between Trumpian and Nazi propaganda is routinely downplayed in American political life is a sign of just how far our politics has deteriorated under Trump in the era of mass fascism-denialism.

For those seeking to redirect accusations of fascism against the Democratic Party, or who depict Trumpism as a seamless continuation of previous authoritarian presidencies, it’s worth pointing out that there is no comparison between the eliminationist-fascist politics documented above and the rhetoric of other modern presidents. My analysis of speeches from Bush and Obama reveal a relatively anodyne rhetorical strategy targeted at their political opponents, which mostly emphasized the need for the political parties to work together, cooperate, and compromise to achieve important legislative and political reforms and victories. Under Bush, most of his (infrequent) uses of extreme language – as related to the Democrats at least – focused on the “danger” of job loss following 9/11, the “threat” of “terrorism” in his efforts to target Iraq, and calls for Democratic and Republican officials to unite to protect the U.S. from foreign threats, and promote economic growth and recovery.

There was unquestionably an authoritarian bent to Bush’s rhetoric in the “War on Terror,” between the administration’s frequent lies for war, its (and its supporters’) efforts to depict war critics as anti-American, and the administration’s general contempt for reporters and those in the “reality-based community” who embrace evidence-based reasoning. But there is nothing in Bush’s speeches to suggest an effort to delegitimize the Democratic Party as a political entity, or to depict it as a fundamentally illegitimate threat to society. This aspect of Trump’s rhetoric ventures into full-blown eliminationism, via his efforts to construct a political culture that embraces one-state rule based on explicitly white supremacist, authoritarian, and xenophobic principles.

At times, Obama also utilized extreme rhetoric. But the amount of this language was miniscule compared to Trump. His references were at times oriented toward depicting

immigrants as “criminals” and as “threats,” although those references were targeted at specific individuals, rather than at entire groups and nations of people, as we see with Trump. This is not to excuse Obama’s own immigration policies, which were heavily reactionary and highly repressive, but to recognize that Trump’s own rhetoric represented a massive intensification of the racist anti-immigrant message that existed under previous presidents. Furthermore, Obama’s other uses of extreme language did not depict the Republican Party in total as an extremist entity or a threat to national security. Obama referred to the “threat” of economic crisis, in 2008 and following the 2011 government shutdown, to the “extreme” politics of one faction of the Republican Party in seeking a shutdown, to the larger danger of holding the nation’s economy “hostage” and to “ransom” via a failure to reach a budget deal to keep the government open, and as related to the impending economic “crisis” that could accompany a government shutdown.

Importantly, alongside Bush’s and Obama’s warnings about economic instability in the 2000s and 2010s, there were consistent efforts to depict the Democratic and Republican parties as needing to work together to transcend their differences for the good of the nation. And both presidents expressed confidence that such compromises were not only possible, but likely. We see none of this in Trump’s obsession with demonizing the Democratic Party, and in his portrayals of it as an existential threat to American democracy, prosperity, and security. While extreme words are at times part of each president’s lexicon, there is no modern parallel to the amount of extremist and fascist language utilized by President Trump.

There are going to be many people who continue to insist that warnings about fascism are tantamount to paranoia and exaggeration. They will point to the fact that the classic examples of fascist politics in the twentieth century are lacking in contemporary America. There are no gas chambers in the U.S. in which millions of Americans face the threat of genocide, they will argue. They will remind us that there is no corporatist regime, as in Mussolini’s Italy or Hitler’s Germany, by which the state institutionalizes a command-and-control economy over the private sector. They will point out that there is no major socialist or communist party in the U.S. that capitalist elites are seeking to suppress via the empowerment of fascist political leaders. And importantly, they will stress that Trump seems to have failed in his attempts to fully consolidate his unique brand of authoritarian-fascism.

But Fascism in America was always about more than Donald Trump. The conditions that gave rise to Trumpism have been building for the last few decades, concerning the steady and incremental radicalization of the Republican Party, and the rise of a deeply reactionary rightwing media apparatus that shrewdly and covertly smuggles authoritarian and white supremacist values into “mainstream” media coverage through talk radio, Fox News, and insurgent media such as Newsmax and Breitbart. The delivery of these messages, in an effort to normalize fascism, has been accompanied by denial of the extremist nature of this content. The U.S. may not have a fully consolidated, mature fascist political system like those that

formed in Germany and Italy prior to the Second World War. But it's also no longer possible, considering what has happened in the last week, to refer to the U.S. as a business-as-usual neoliberal society. The U.S. is now defined by a hybrid system that seeks to fuse the values of neoliberalism and fascism – into a neoliberal fascistic system. The old neoliberalism under previous presidents was marked by a bi-partisan commitment to electoralism and the rule of law, even as it was deeply racist against people of color, increasingly plutocratic in its political-economy, and imperialistic in its foreign policy. While those features remain, the subtle coded racism of the Clinton, Bush, and Obama years has given way to an openly embraced white supremacy under Trump, and this country's commitment to electoralism as a means of selecting our leaders is tenuous at this point at best.

Rising white supremacy and contempt for democracy are not going to disappear once Trump leaves office, because it has been steadily fueled over the decades by hateful ideology and political rhetoric on the reactionary right. Someone will pick up where Trump leaves off, carrying his fascistic mantle forward into 2024 and beyond. And one big risk moving forward is the acceleration of what happened in D.C. Trump is a coward who refuses to “own” his attempted coup. But his strategy has always been to get others to do his dirty work. The risk is that he and future leaders who take up his mantle will continue to stoke violence in the future, in “revenge” for fictitious “electoral fraud” and for other political purposes. This could end up including a combination of terrorist bombings and mass shootings, which is hardly outlandish considering the United States' long history of such attacks over the last few decades, which are strongly [linked](#) to the far right. The best way to combat this threat is to remove Trump from office as soon as possible, and for social media companies to permanently ban him, thereby preventing him a mass venue to convey his extremism and hate.

Furthermore, we can't fight fascistic threats if we succumb to denialism by refusing to admit that they exist. The sooner we recognize the danger of rising fascism, the sooner we can work to combat it through a relentless assault on prejudice, bigotry, and authoritarian efforts to undermine democracy and the rule of law.

End Notes

[1] My analysis of presidential speeches coded extreme and extremist descriptors that referred to the competing political party in the sentence in which the reference to the Democratic or Republican Party appeared, and in the subsequent four sentences, for a total of five sentences analyzed per party reference.

Appendix

Trump & the Language of Fascist-Eliminationism

Economic Threats (to Social Programs and America from the Democrats, ie. Medicare, Social Security, the economy)

Key words: “calamity”; “death spiral” “bankrupt”; “wrecking ball”; “catastrophic”; “obliterate”; “rob”; “kill”; “steal”; “disaster”; “destroy.”

Threats to Democracy (from the Democrats)

Key words: “democracy”; “undemocratic”; “socialism”; “communist/communism”; “Venezuela” (U.S. will become like); “radical” (Democrats).

National Security/Conspiratorial Threats (from Democrats and Black Lives Matter Protesters)

Key words: “mayhem”; “flag burners”; “riot/rioting”; “looting”; “arson”; “threat”; “dangerous”; “hostage” (holding country); “mobs”; “chaos”; “destroy” (2nd Amendment); “nightmare” (country as becoming one); “deep state.”

Name Calling (Against Democrats)

Key words: “liars/lies/disinformation”; “disgrace”; “ruthless”; “unhinged”; “fake”; “horrible”; “stupid”; “fanatical”; “crooked”; “Pocahontas”; “Low IQ”; “vile”; “extreme/extremist”; “crazy”; “fools”; “dishonest.”

Immigration Threats (from Immigrants and their Democratic Allies)

Key words: “endanger” (the country); “vicious” (gangs); “prey” (the public); “kill/killers” (immigrants/immigrant gang members); crime/criminal (immigrants/immigrant gangs); “kidnappings/rapings/murderings/stabbing/decapitating/beating; disfiguring/ripping out the heart”; “animals” (immigrant gang members); “slaughter”; “anarchy”; “blood thirsty”; “nest” (immigrant hideouts); “crisis”; “poisonous” (drugs); “deadly” (gangs/drugs).

Obama & Extreme Language

Immigration

Key words: immigrant “criminals”/“threats”; “fear” (of immigration reform).

Government Shutdown & 2008 Economic Crisis

Key words: “threat”/“danger”/“crisis” (of shutdown); “far-right” threat; “extreme” (faction of GOP); “crisis”; “ransom” (of country); “hostage” (country held); “extortion” (by seeking concessions through a shutdown); “crisis” (2008 economic crash).

Virus Threats

Key words: “threat” (Zika virus).

Bush & Extreme Language

Economy Post 9/11

Key words: “danger” (of job loss); “criminal” activities (corporations); “enemy” (of disease, hunger, and poverty); “kill” (jobs w/ recession).

Terrorism

Key words: “threat(s)” (from terrorism/Iraq/Saddam Hussein); “terror/terrorism”; “tyranny” (of terrorism).

Gridlock

Key words: “disgrace” (of blocking judicial appointments).

Anthony DiMaggio is Associate Professor of Political Science at Lehigh University. He earned his PhD from the University of Illinois, Chicago, and is the author of 9 books, including most recently: [Political Power in America](#) (SUNY Press, 2019), [Rebellion in America](#) (Routledge, 2020), and [Unequal America](#) (Routledge, 2021). He can be reached at: anthonydimaggio612@gmail.com. A digital copy of Rebellion in America can be read for free [here](#).

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