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## *Latin Americans Can Call Fascist Coup Attempts Fascist but US-Americans Can't*



Image by Scott Umstatt.

Behold last January 8<sup>th</sup>'s mob assault on Brazil's top government offices by "protesters" claiming that their nation's most recent presidential election was "stolen" from its last chief executive Jair Bolsonaro. The rioters hoped to provoke the Brazilian military into intervening to carry out a coup that would put Bolsonaro, "the Trump of the Tropics," back in power. The parallels with the United States' January 6, 2021, Capitol Riot are eerily stark:

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- + An election lost the previous fall by an eco-cidal and pandemicist *fascist* incumbent (Donald Trump in 2020 and his tropical counterpart Bolsonaro in 2022) who is habitually and moronically called a “*populist*” by journalists and academics.
- + An early January mass physical attack on government offices in which security forces are oddly “overwhelmed” despite abundant advance warning.
- + August government structures inadequately protected and then trashed by *fascist* thugs and maniacs.
- + “Stop the steal” rioters’ purported passion to “take back our country” from the supposed “radical Left.”
- + Pervasive Christian and evangelical white nationalism among a large and disproportionately fair-skinned mob.
- + A dearth of the kind of lethal state force that would certainly have been deployed had seriously “radical left” and/or dark-skinned people attacked government buildings.
- + Attack planners’ hope for a state of emergency and military intervention that would halt, prevent, or reverse (Brazil) the peaceful transfer of power from one president to another.
- + The belated arrival of troops to clear the rioters and secure government buildings.
- + Statements of outrage at home and abroad over the assault on (unmentionably bourgeois) democracy and rule of law.
- + The fascist election loser (Trump in 2020, his confederate Bolsonaro in 2022) trying to distance himself from the putschist madness he provoked with false claims of a stolen election and a previous history of legitimizing political violence

In both cases the unelected former presidents spent their time in office channeling core neo-fascist and authoritarian “them and us” narratives and features strongly indicating (among other things) from the start that they would not leave office peacefully just because they lost an election: white supremacy and victimhood, open sexism, vengeful palingenetic nationalism, approval of violence against political enemies, demonization of those supposedly “radical left” and liberal enemies, paranoid anti-Marxism, a personality cult built up around a maximalist male leader, praise for past and current dictators, anti-intellectualism, constant assaults on truth and facts, hostility to science, embrace of magical and conspiratorial thinking, brazen indifference to public health, intolerance of dissent, a deep commitment to the destruction of livable ecology (mainly through the embrace of escalated US fossil fuel extraction and burning with Trump and chiefly by the razing of the environmentally critical Amazonian rain forest to expand the corporate agro-industrial complex in Bolsonaro’s case), Social Darwinism,

pretend populism cloaking service to the (supposedly superior) rich, corrupt and brutal lawlessness in the name of law and order, and the sadistic embrace of sheer cruelty.

### **Some Obvious Differences**

There are obvious differences, of course. Trump's election opponent, Joe Biden, had not yet been certified as the victor when the January 6th riot broke out. Bolsonaro's opponent, Lula da Silva, was already in office when last Sunday's January 8th disturbances occurred. The United States is encumbered with a bizarre and long delay between its presidential elections, the official certification, and then the formal inauguration of those elections' winners. Brazil and other nations have no such ridiculous and (as we have seen) dangerous interregnum.

Trump was physically present in his nation's capital and sparked the attack on the US Capitol with a volatile in-person speech (telling his backers to "fight like Hell or you won't have a country anymore" and claiming he would join in the "protest") within short marching distance of the legislative branch. Bolsonaro was in his fellow fascist and fast-food enthusiast Trump's home state of Florida when Brazil's January 8th riot took place. (It is widely suspected that his presence in the US was meant to provide legal protection from charges that he was personally involved in the mayhem in Brasilia.)

Hundreds of US Congresspersons and congressional staff people along with US Vice President Mike Pence were placed in direct physical danger by the January 6th "insurrection." No massed group of elected officials faced potential physical harm in Brasilia last Sunday.

The US Capitol Riot assault targeted just the legislative branch of the national government but the Brazilian one hit all three branches – legislative, executive, and judicial – of Brazil's state.

### **"Fascism Decides to Conduct a Coup" (Latin America)**

One interesting difference of central significance for the present commentary is that Brazil's re-elected center-Left president Lula and other Latin American heads of state immediately and correctly denounced the putschist riot in Brasilia as the work of "*fascists*."

Columbian president Gustavo Petro tweeted this: "All my solidarity with Lula and the people of Brazil. *Fascism* decides to conduct a coup." Petro compared the attack to the 1973 Chilean-fascist coup against Salvador Allende. "Today there are those who'd like to bring us back to the times of Allende," Petro said, noting past and present resistance to left-leaning governments in Latin America. "We just saw it in Brazil, but it's not just in

Brazil,” Petro added. “It’s time to say what happened here in this place 50 years ago won’t happen again.”

Bolivian president Luis Arce wrote this: “*Fascists* will always seek to take by force what they failed to achieve at the ballot box. Our solidarity with the Brazilian people and the president @LulaOficial.”

“We categorically reject the violence generated by Bolsonaro’s neo-*fascist* groups which have assaulted Brazil’s democratic institutions,” said Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro.

Organization of American States General Secretary Luis Almagro said this: “We condemn the attack on the institutions in Brasilia, which constitutes a reprehensible action and a direct attack on democracy. These actions are inexcusable and *fascist* in nature.”

Notice the ease and lack of idiotic embarrassment with which some top Latin American politicians use the obviously appropriate “F-word” – *fascism* – to describe the coup attempt in Brazil (the word also applies to the “counter-coup” being conducted by the far right in Peru right now, and to a US-backed evangelical coup regime that ruled Bolivia in 2019 and 2020).

### **Fascism-Denial Persists (the United States)**

Things are different in the Yankee imperial homeland. You won’t hear “fascism” mentioned by top Democrats or Republicans in the United States, home to the 2021 fascist coup attempt that inspired last weekend’s madness in Brazil. The USA is also home to the fascist international leader and January 6th and January 8th defender Steve Bannon, a key putschist Trump advisor who is close to the Bolsonaro family and advised Bolsonaro and the Brazilian right to refuse to accept Lula’s 2022 election victory.

The USA is now also currently home to, well... Bolsonaro. The “Trump of the Tropics” has been seen eating at a KFC in the suburbs of Orlando, Florida, where he is supposedly seeking medical care.

Florida, which just resoundingly re-elected the sadistic neofascist Ron DeSantis, is a longtime haven for retired, recovering, and resting fascists, including Trump, who lurks in a white supremacist resort just a two-hour drive south of Orlando. We can be quite sure that Bolsonaro and his sons have visited the “wolf’s lair” Mar a Lago complex more than once.

But I digress. In a refreshing bit of candor, the United States’ possibly (and not-so) leftmost Congressperson Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) tweeted the following while rightly calling for Bolsonaro’s U.S. visa to be revoked four days ago: “Nearly 2 years to

the day the US Capitol was attacked by *fascists*, we see *fascist* movements abroad attempt to do the same in Brazil.”

Quite so! Sadly, such accurate language is pitifully scarce in the mainstream US media, politics, and intellectual cultures.

U.S. president Joe Biden naturally rebuffed Ocasio-Cortez, Lula, Petro, Maduro, Almagro, and Arce’s appropriate word choices, condemning only “the assault on democracy and on the peaceful transfer of power in Brazil.”

Let’s not kid ourselves. Democrats from Obama (who in 2016 warned Tim Kaine and Hillary Clinton of the need “to keep a fascist out of the White House”) and Biden down to the House January 6 committee co-chair Jamie Raskin know very well that their own country’s Capitol Rioters were *fascists* acting on behalf of a *fascist* president (Trump) in the interests of a *fascist* coup. But the dreaded “F-word” word is rarely and barely used in public by mainstream or even more progressive Democratic politicians and pundits. There are occasional exceptions, like AOC’s welcome outburst and when Raskin referred to the Capitol Rioters as “fascist traitors to our country” and when Biden sheepishly told a group of wealthy campaign donors last year that “the MAGA Republicans” philosophy” is “like semi-fascism.”

But even limited, passing, and/or qualified (“semi-”) references to fascism are more exception than rule. We now have a remarkable example of mainstream fascism-denial. You can search the recently released US House Select Committee report on the January 6th Capitol Riot. It is overfocused on Trump himself, downplaying the broader authoritarian, white-palingenetic-nationalist, Christian fundamentalist, anti-intellectual, patriarchal, and Amerikaner-fascist movement that Trump stood and still stands atop as the Republicans’ 2024 presidential frontrunner (and as a key player in the recent Republican House Speaker election fiasco). *Neither “fascism” nor “fascist” appears once over the report’s 845 pages.* This even as the “Proud Boys” get 149 mentions across 89 pages. The “Oath Keepers” get 131 mentions across 86 pages. The “Three Percenters” merit 111 mentions across.

*Think about that: despite its plentiful mentions of openly fascist groups like the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, and the Three Percenters, the Select Committee could not use the words “fascism” or “fascist” even once in even just a passing and/or descriptive way. They couldn’t attach the obviously accurate terms “fascist” or “neo-fascist” to these groups, one of which (the Proud Boys) had rampaged in Washington DC just weeks before the Capitol Riot with members wearing t-shirts saying “6MWE” (meaning “six million*

*Jews killed during the Nazi Holocaust wasn't enough") and "[the Chilean fascist dictator Augusto] Pinochet [who overthrew the democratically elected socialist government of Salvador Allende and murdered thousands of leftists] Did Nothing Wrong." Many in these groups came to Washington armed with military-style weapons, assault rifles that the wannabe fascist strongman Donald "I Don;t F'ng Care That They Have Weapons Take Down the Metal Detectors" Trump wanted included in the Attack on the Capitol.*

Commenting recently on the deep connections between the US-American fascists Bannon and Trump and the Brazilian fascist Bolsonaro as well as Brazil's January 8th, the media-acclaimed authoritarianism expert and New York University historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat followed her longstanding practice[1] of keeping "the F-word" essentially out of the discussion. In an interview on the imperialist "P"BS "Newshour," she used (certainly highly relevant) words like "machismo," "strongmen," and "authoritarianism" but not fascist (or even racist, white-supremacist or Christian white nationalist) to describe far-right politicians and parties who are "dedicated to destroying democracy at home" and abroad and who are ready to use violence to do so. It was good of her to include the US Republican Party among those unmentionably fascist parties, though it was odd to her her conclude that "authoritarianism" is weakening around the world. It is doing no such thing. This is consistent with a wider foolish and cowardly academic and intellectual refusal to fully acknowledge the Amerikaner fascism that was staring the nation and the world in the face from the planet's most dangerous and destructive office between January 20th, 2017 and January 20th 2021 – moral and intellectual surrender that I documented at length in the fourth chapter (titled "The Anatomy of Fascism Denial") of my most recent book *This Happened Here: Amerikaners, Neoliberals and the Trumping of America.* Briefly and partially dented by Trump's openly fascistic response to the George Floyd Rebellion and by the Capitol Riot, the media denialism seems quite resurgent two years out from the Capitol Riot. The radical and fascisized, post-republican Republican Party is routinely and absurdly described in US mainstream media as merely "conservative." Its more "extreme" fascist elements – like the hyper-white-nationalist Freedom Caucus that just executed a coup of sorts within the majority Republifascist US House of Representatives Conference – is called "populist" while more middle of the road fascists like the lethal neo-Nazis Marjorie Taylor Green and Paul Gosar became part of the "moderate" camp during the House Speaker madness.

As on January 6, 2021 itself, the leading national strikebreaker and dedicated neoliberal state capitalist Joe "Sleeping Car" Biden still today refuses to forthrightly acknowledge



the nature and name of the political pathology that took physical putschist form (in the tradition of Hitler's failed Beer Hall Putsch) on that day – this despite the fact that his opening campaign advertisement for the 2020 election likened the terrible right-wing Charlottesville violence that he claimed compelled him to run to (without saying the dreaded word) fascist Germany in the 1930s.

### **The US-American Exceptionalist Belief That “It Can’t Happen Here”**

Whence the difference between Latin American leaders and their US counterparts when it comes to honestly and directly acknowledging and denouncing fascism in their region, hemisphere, and home countries? The simple answer is that Latin Americans have a much stronger grasp of the political pathology and menace in question because they have lived through actual “Third World Fascist” dictatorships in Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Brazil, and Honduras (readers more expert in Latin American history than I can expand and elaborate on this list, no doubt). With the crucial and important exception of the horrible terrorized Black experience under Jim Crow southern rule, perhaps, the United States, by contrast, has never experienced true fascist and authoritarian rule. The nightmare of fascist takeover depicted in Sinclair Lewis's bestselling novel 1935 *It Can't Happen Here* has never quite unfolded in the USA. We've never experienced life under a Pinochet (Chile, 1973-1990), a Stroessner (Paraguay, 1954-1989) a Trujillo (Dominican Republic, 1931-61), a Somoza (Nicaragua, 1936-79), a “Dirty War” military junta (Argentina, 1976-1984), a “United States of Brazil” (the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil between 1964 and 1985), or a coup-imposed Robert-Micheletti-Pepe Lobo Sosa-Juan Orlando Hernandez junta (Honduras, June 2009-November 2021).

Yes, but there's more to the difference than that. Another part of the contrast is the doctrinal “American exceptionalist” belief that the United States is just too damn democratic and freedom-loving to ever let political “extremism” (of either right or left) take power on its soil. In Sinclair Lewis's mocking words, “it can't happen here.”

“The Hell it can't” (Lewis). Yes, “it,” meaning a fascist takeover of the USA, didn't happen in the middle 1930s, when the American System bent far enough left to save capitalism under the corporate liberal quasi- Keynesianism of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal – this as the USA stood within a decade of astonishing global military-industrial hegemony and a generation's worth of previously unimaginable mass affluence and partial socioeconomic leveling. But “it” sure as Hell could happen in different and historically distinct ways in the first third of the 21st Century, half a century into the financialized

neoliberal unwinding of the Fordist and New Deals eras – and as US hegemony fades before an increasingly multipolar world created by the ongoing half-millennium anarchy of capital. This is for complex reasons including but hardly limited to political-economic shifts – the declining white percentage of the US populace is a key part of the story – discussed by a host of scholars and commentators including Anthony DiMaggio, Henry Giroux, Jason Stanley, David Neiwert, Carl Boggs, Bob Avakian, Robert Reich, Adam Gopnik, Chris Hedges, Jeff Sharlett, myself and others. Trump and Bolsonaro’s fellow Floridian Ron DeSantis is an arguably more dangerous tribune and carrier of the deadly pathology going forward but other Dear Leaders besides DeSantis or the malignant, tangerine-tinted Mar a Lago reptile can certainly emerge to stand atop the “late fascist” (Andreas Malm) political pandemic that the intertwined and mutually multiplying diseases capitalism, racism, sexism, religious fundamentalism, nativism, ecocide, pandemic and manufactured mass idiocy have combined to let loose across the land and the world.

Biden thinks that Trump, Trumpism, and fascist “MAGA Republicanism” – what he once briefly dared to call something “like semi-fascism” – are alien and aberrant to, and anomalous for the US national experience. He insists that (not-so semi-) fascism is contrary to what he calls “the soul of this nation.” *He’s full of shit*. Read the sixth chapter of *This Happened Here*, titled “America Was Never Great: On ‘the Soul of This Nation.’” It is a chilling short catalogue of giant historical crimes and holocausts that help explain, among other things why Adolph Hitler drew vast inspiration from United States history and named his wartime train *Amerika*: brutal ethnic cleansing and genocide, mass racial enslavement and torture, bloody suppression of radical and labor activists, ruthless territorial expansion and massive violent theft of others’ sovereign territory. To quote the Chicago Revolution Club, whose catchy chant appears as an epigraph atop that chapter “One, two, three, four, slavery, genocide and war; five, six, seven, eight, America was never great.”

### **A Different Kind of Blowback**

Let me add another part of the US American fascist source equation: imperialism. Readers with some knowledge of US “foreign policy” and “diplomatic” (imperialist) history may have noticed something about the Latin American fascist regimes I mentioned above: most if not all those regimes were backed and supported by the hemisphere’s self-appointed imperial masters in Washington DC. Within and beyond Latin America, 20th Century Third World Fascism (to use Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman’s term) was largely funded, equipped, trained, and otherwise underwritten and



backed by the Washington- and Wall Street-run PAX Americana in service to US capitalists' interest in exploiting natural and human resources – “cheap nature” in the form of low-cost raw materials, energy, and human labor power in the words of the brilliant eco-socialists Jason Moore and Raj Patel – abroad (during the Cold War, this service to US capital included keeping “underdeveloped” “Third World” nations and regions out of the international communist movement and socialist bloc[s]).

As is suggested by the work of the historian Alfred McCoy, the difficulties that result for the US citizenry from their ruling class's relentless imperialism goes beyond complicity in the moral hypocrisy of backing mass-murderous authoritarian terror and war crimes abroad while proclaiming liberty and democracy at home. There's also the risk of being targeted for retribution-seeking violent “blowback” from by understandably angry victims of the US Empire. And then there's another and different form of blowback: the importation back to the supposedly glorious and “free” homeland of the methods, techniques, and technologies of repression and control that have been tested and honed abroad.

That is one of the more clearly top-down and richly bipartisan paths among the various mutually reinforcing routes to a fascist America in the 21st Century. It *can* happen here. It arguably is happening here.

**This essay appeared initially on *The Paul Street Report*.**

#### **Note**

1. See Paul Street, *This Happened Here: Amerikaners, Neoliberals, and the Trumping America*, (London: Routledge, 2021), Chapter 4, “The Anatomy of Fascism Denial,” pp. 136, 148-49, 151, 168-59.

**Paul Street's** latest book is *This Happened Here: Amerikaners, Neoliberals, and the Trumping of America* (London: Routledge, 2022).

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