

Is Kamala Harris right to call Donald Trump a fascist?

The f-word helps explain him, but may not help beat him



Photograph: Getty Images

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ON OCTOBER 23RD Kamala Harris said that she considers Donald Trump to be a fascist. John Kelly, Mr Trump's former chief of staff, recently said his old boss "falls into the general definition of fascist". Mark Milley, a retired general who headed the joint chiefs of staff under Mr Trump, is quoted in a new book calling Mr Trump "fascist to the core". All this has reignited a debate that began during Mr Trump's run for president in 2016: is he a fascist? What does the term mean, and does applying it to Mr Trump help to explain the dangers he poses?

"Fascism" was the ideology of the National Fascist Party founded by Benito Mussolini, Italy's dictator from 1922 to 1945. (*The Economist* first used "fascist" in 1921, in an account of street clashes between right-wingers and communists.) But it is commonly applied to the Nazis and other right-wing authoritarian regimes of the early 20th century. Fascism's characteristics include contempt for procedural democracy and the rule of law; enthusiasm for political violence and war; use of paramilitary forces; ultra-nationalism; anti-communism; state control over society and the private economy; racism and xenophobia; conspiracy theories and resentment of elites; a fixation on reversing national decline; a mystical belief in the will of the people; and a cult of the supreme leader. Scholars have always debated which later right-wing authoritarian movements the term describes. "Fascist" has become a common insult hurled by leftists and liberals at the hard right, further muddying the waters.

In some ways Mr Trump's politics resemble political scientists' definition of fascism. His MAGA nostalgia echoes the Nazi myth that Germany was "stabbed in the back" by its elites during the first world war. His hyper-masculine personality cult, doom-laden jeremiads and claims that "I alone can fix it" are in the fascist tradition. So are his exploitation of racism against Muslims and Latin American migrants, his penchant for grotesque falsehoods (the "big lies" beloved of fascist propagandists) and his encouragement of conspiracy theories.

Ms Harris's description of Mr Trump as a fascist, like those of Messrs Kelly and Milley, focuses on his contempt for democratic norms and processes. Mr Trump was [impeached](#) for trying to compel Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's president, to help his re-election campaign; he then tried to fire the prosecutors who investigated him. Most brazenly, he sought to overturn the result of the election in 2020, which he had lost. He has suggested that he would use America's armed forces against "the enemy within". According to Mr Kelly, the former president also stated that he wanted generals personally loyal to himself, "the kind of generals that Hitler had".

Some experts (Jason Stanley of Yale University, Sarah Churchwell of the University of London and others) were convinced early on that Mr Trump fit the fascist bill. Others came around gradually. Robert Paxton, a historian of the Vichy regime in France, changed his mind after the January 6th insurrection: the then president's egging-on of a mob attacking the legislature matched the way that fascists of the 1930s gained power by channelling popular appetites for violence.

Yet others remain sceptical. Mr Trump did not dissolve Congress, ban the free press, nationalise industries or try to turn America into a single-party dictatorship. Unlike most of the fascists of the 1930s, he did not launch foreign wars (despite his initial bellicose rhetoric towards North Korea). The groups that have rioted on his behalf, such as the [Proud Boys](#), have employed nothing like the level of murderous violence used by the Italian blackshirts and German brownshirts of the 1930s. Mussolini and Hitler controlled those thugs directly; Mr Trump's relationship with the Proud Boys is arm's-length. Samuel Moyn, also a historian at Yale, thinks using the throwback term "fascist" interferes with efforts to come up with a better framing for a 21st-century campaign against MAGA-style politics.

For many Americans, fascism is inextricably linked to Adolf Hitler. When Democrats call Mr Trump a fascist, many people take them to be saying that he will seek to impose a Nazi-style totalitarian state like those in Hollywood movies. For many Trump supporters and independents that smacks of hysteria—and is thus easy to dismiss altogether. In fact it is reasonable to describe Mr Trump's violent authoritarian politics of xenophobia, nostalgia and contempt for the law as a modern iteration of fascism, and if elected he may do permanent damage to American democracy. But using the f-word may not be a good way to convince voters of that. ■