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USA

Accusations of “Fascism” - Confusing for American Voters

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Fascism has now become a central issue in the U.S. presidential election largely as a result of recent statements by Donald Trump that he would use the military to suppress “the enemy within” made up of “radical left lunatics.” He is referring here to his rival Kamala Harris whom he has on several occasions called a “radical left lunatic.” He also named Democratic Party Congressman Adam Schiff, who led the first impeachment trial of Trump and is now a candidate for Senate as ‘the enemy within.’

Asked in a television interview if he thought the election process might be disrupted by outside agitators, he replied: “I think the bigger problem is the enemy from within. We have some very bad people. We have some sick people, radical left lunatics.” But, he added, “It should be very easily handled by, if necessary, by National Guard, or if really necessary, by the military, because they can’t let that happen.”

Several commentators pointed out that using the military to repress one’s political opponents sure seems like what we call fascism. And to many no doubt using this power against U.S. citizens seems to go beyond Trump’s earlier statements that he would use police and national guards to round up immigrants and put them into concentration camps and deport them.

Also contributing to this discussion is a remark by General Mark A. Milley, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Trump, that the former president was “fascist to the core,” as recounted in a new book by the famous American journalist Bob Woodward. Harris herself has quoted Milley’s statement and on other occasions agreed that Trump can be called a fascist. President Joe Biden had already called Trump’s movement “semi-fascist” back in 2022.

The claim that Trump is a fascist may not, however, move many American voters. The U.S. fight against Benito Mussolini’s fascists and Adolf Hitler’s Nazis in World War II is now ancient history. Only the 1 to 2% of Americans who are over 85 would have any first-hand memory of those events. Moreover, the American people have a notoriously vague knowledge of history and most have never given any thought to the question of fascism and what it means. For years among politicians and the press calling someone a fascist was seen as being in bad taste, while among the population in general calling someone a fascist just meant they were bad.

The situation is complicated too by the fact that Trump has routinely called Kamala Harris “a Marxist, communist, fascist, socialist.” Trump’s running mate, Senator J.D. Vance has stated that the Democrat’s claims that Trump is an authoritarian or a fascist have been responsible for the two assassination attempts against him.

The left has not always been helpful in clarifying fascism. In the 1960s and 70s, leftists tended to use the word indiscriminately: Southern racists were fascists, the Vietnam War was fascist, Chicago Mayor Daley was fascist, for some the entire American political system was fascist. For forty years after that the Communist Party and Maoist groups declared every presidential election that the Republican candidate was a fascist and that one had to vote Democrat.

Today, in groups like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), whose members tend to be college educated there is some discussion of fascism by academic leftists. Jacobin magazine, for example, ran an interview in 2019 with Enzo Traverso about his book *The New Faces of Fascism* and his theory of “post-fascism” to explain people like Trump. In the far left’s small socialist and anarchist organizations, here are serious and practical discussions. And popular e-newspapers like Truthout have published many articles. Still, to most Americans, the word fascism clarifies

nothing.

If Trump is elected, which is quite possible, and he proves to be the fascist we believe him to be, we will be both theoretically and practically unprepared.

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