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Trump Fuels March Toward Fascism With “Anarchist Jurisdictions” Edict

Mark Bray

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President Trump and his administration have taken several overt steps down the jagged path of fascism over the past week.

On September 17, Trump announced the creation of the “1776 commission” to establish “patriotic education” against what his administration has deemed unpatriotic influences such as The 1619 Project, a *New York Times Magazine* series about the history of slavery.

At a Minnesota rally on September 18, Trump lavished praise upon the “good genes” of his overwhelmingly white audience in a state known for its history of Scandinavian migration (i.e. the Minnesota Vikings), openly broadcasting his ongoing eugenics fixation. Meanwhile, in another report that reeks of eugenics, a whistleblower alleges that a doctor has been performing unwanted hysterectomies on migrants incarcerated by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement at the Irwin County Detention Center in Georgia.

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Then, on September 19, Trump casually suggested that he could sign an executive order prohibiting Joe Biden from being president, months after refusing to commit to leaving office if he loses the November election and weeks after “joking” about holding on to power beyond his term limit.

And on September 21, the Justice Department declared New York City, Seattle and Portland to be “anarchist jurisdictions,” in a move to withhold funding from cities with Democratic leaders whose decisions don’t meet with approval from the Trump administration.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court vacancy created by the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg has now also raised the specter of Trump further attacking reproductive rights and civil liberties.

Scholars and pundits have debated whether Trump is “really” a fascist for years now. But regardless of where one comes down in that definitional debate, analyzing Trump and Trumpism in relation to the shifting history of fascism (understood broadly), without necessarily applying that label unequivocally, lends significant clarity to many aspects of his ultranationalist, white supremacist authoritarianism.

The words of the renowned scholar of fascism Robert Paxton provide us with a clue for understanding how threats of “12 more years” are part of the same agenda as the “1776 commission” and forced sterilization. Paxton argues that “Fascism is a system of political authority and social order intended to reinforce the unity, energy, and purity of communities in which liberal democracy stands accused of producing division and decline.”

Along those lines, in his speech on “patriotic education,” Trump argued that “the Left is attempting to ... divide Americans by race.” He continued to claim that “Critical race theory, the 1619 Project, and the crusade against American history is toxic propaganda, ideological poison that, if not removed, will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together. It will destroy our country.”

Rather than allow towns and states around the country to vote for the educational policies and school boards that they choose, Trump asserts the need to step in to protect “our country” from the destructive results of liberal democracy which include “left-wing rioting and mayhem.”

Our political system is failing, the right argues, because “the Democrats are the antifa party,” as Ann Coulter phrased it. The right wing argues that local democratic leaders, no longer partners in American prosperity, condone “rioting” in “anarchist jurisdictions.” Trump mischaracterizes anarchism as chaos when in fact it is a form of anti-hierarchical revolutionary socialism. In order to protect property and maintain “order,” Trump sent federal officers to Portland and threatened to surpass the authority of governors and send in the National Guard — and is now threatening to withdraw funding from New York, Seattle and Portland.

If the opposition party is actually undermining the pillars of the nation, as such warped right-wing claims suggest, then it would follow that the right-wing defense of “democracy” could even entail the undemocratic refusal to relinquish power to Biden come November, since according to Trump, “the Nov 3rd Election result may NEVER BE ACCURATELY DETERMINED, which is what some want.” (His predictions of inaccuracy stem from his baseless claims that mail-in ballots are prone to fraud and tampering.)

Of course, that’s only the part that Trump feels comfortable saying out loud. Unlike interwar fascists, Trump can’t explicitly target democracy because the concept, though not its actual substance, is revered by most Americans. More fundamental, however, in this portrait of fascistic renewal to protect the “purity” of the community has been the far right lament at the country’s changing demographics and values. After all, according to Trump, who wanted to trade Puerto Rico for Greenland, “a lot of it is about the genes, isn’t it? Don’t you believe? The

racehorse theory. You think we're so different? You have good genes in Minnesota.”

The concept of a group having “good genes” only makes sense if one believes another group does not. As the right increasingly embraces a violent backlash against Black Lives Matter and accelerates its racist xenophobia, it is not difficult to envision the racialized foils that form a necessary contrast for Trump’s eugenicist rhetoric. Indeed, the association between ideological purity and demographic purity (articulated with varying degrees of openness) has been a mainstay of right-wing politics for generations. This rhetoric takes physical form in the cages that imprison migrant children and the unwanted surgical procedures that deprive migrants of their reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, and their humanity.

While such examples conjure the horrors of the Nazis for many readers, Nazis developed both their eugenicist theories and their plan to eliminate “undesirable” populations through the use of concentration camps and other means in part by studying the racist history of the United States. And so, while the history of fascism is certainly germane to analyzing the authoritarianism we are witnessing from the White House, we must never forget that, as Aimé Césaire famously argued, “Hitlerism” was a kind of European colonialism brought home to Europe.

Fascism has been but one facet of a larger and longer history of white supremacy, imperialism and genocide. The United States has played a prominent role in this history — a history that Trump doesn’t want us or our children to know about.