

Living Under Fascism

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You may wonder why anyone would try to use the word "fascism" in a serious discussion of where America is today. It sounds like cheap name-calling, or melodramatic allusion to a slew of old war movies. But I'm serious. I don't mean it as name-calling at all. I mean to persuade you that the style of governing into which America has slid is most accurately described as fascism, and that the necessary implications of this fact are rightly regarded as terrifying. And even if I don't persuade you, I hope to raise the level of your thinking about who and where we are now, to add some nuance and perhaps some useful insights.

The word comes from the Latin word "Fasces," denoting a bundle of sticks tied together. The individual sticks represented citizens, and the bundle represented the state. The message of this metaphor was that it was the bundle that was significant, not the individual sticks. If it sounds un-American, it's worth noting that the Roman Fasces appear on the wall behind the Speaker's podium in the chamber of the US House of Representatives.

Still, it's an unlikely word. When most people hear the word "fascism" they may think of the racism and anti-Semitism of Mussolini and Hitler. It is true that the use of force and the scapegoating of fringe groups are part of every fascism. But there was also an economic dimension of fascism, known in Europe during the 1920s and '30s as "corporatism," which was an essential ingredient of Mussolini's and Hitler's tyrannies. So-called corporatism was adopted in Italy and Germany during the 1930s and was held up as a model by quite a few intellectuals and policy makers in the United States and Europe.

Fortune magazine ran a cover story on Mussolini in 1934, praising his fascism for its ability to break worker unions, disempower workers and transfer huge sums of money to those who controlled the money rather than those who earned it.

Few Americans are aware of or can recall how so many Americans and Europeans viewed economic fascism as the wave of the future during the 1930s. Yet reviewing our past may help shed light on our present, and point the way to a better future. So let's begin by looking back to the last time fascism posed a serious threat to America.

In Sinclair Lewis's 1935 novel "It Can't Happen Here," a conservative southern politician is helped to the presidency by a nationally syndicated radio talk show host. The politician--Buzz Windrip--runs his campaign on family values, the flag, and patriotism. Windrip and the talk show host portray advocates of traditional American democracy--those concerned with individual rights and freedoms--as anti-American. That was 70 years ago.

One of the most outspoken American fascists from the 1930s was economist Lawrence Dennis. In his 1936 book, *The Coming American Fascism*--a coming which he anticipated and cheered--Dennis declared that defenders of "18th-century Americanism" were sure to become "the laughing stock of their own countrymen." The big stumbling block to the development of economic fascism, Dennis bemoaned, was "liberal norms of law or constitutional guarantees of private rights."

So it's important to recognize that, as an economic system, fascism was widely accepted in the 1920s and '30s, and nearly worshiped by some powerful American industrialists. And fascism has always, and explicitly, been opposed to liberalism of all kinds.

Mussolini, who helped create modern fascism, viewed liberal ideas as the enemy. "The Fascist conception of life," he wrote, "stresses the importance of the State and accepts the individual only in so far as his interests coincide with the State. It is opposed to classical liberalism [which] denied the State in the name of the individual; Fascism reasserts the rights of the State as expressing the real essence of the individual."

In an essay coyly titled "Fascism Anyone?"¹ Dr. Lawrence Britt, a political scientist, identifies social and political agendas common to fascist regimes. His comparisons of Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Suharto, and Pinochet yielded a list of 14 "identifying characteristics of fascism." See how familiar they sound.

1. Powerful and Continuing Nationalism

Fascist regimes tend to make constant use of patriotic mottos, slogans, symbols, songs, and other paraphernalia. Flags are seen everywhere, as are flag symbols on clothing and in public displays.

2. Disdain for the Recognition of Human Rights

Because of fear of enemies and the need for security, the people in fascist regimes are persuaded that human rights can be ignored in certain cases because of "need." The people tend to look the other way or even approve of torture, summary executions, assassinations, long incarcerations of prisoners, etc.

3. Identification of Enemies/Scapegoats as a Unifying Cause

The people are rallied into a unifying patriotic frenzy over the need to eliminate a perceived common threat or foe: racial, ethnic or religious minorities; liberals; communists; socialists, terrorists, etc.

4. Supremacy of the Military

Even when there are widespread domestic problems, the military is given a disproportionate amount of government funding, and the domestic agenda is neglected. Soldiers and military service are glamorized.

5. Rampant Sexism

The governments of fascist nations tend to be almost exclusively male-dominated. Under fascist regimes, traditional gender roles are made more rigid. Opposition to abortion is high, as is homophobia and anti-gay legislation.

¹ Free Inquiry magazine, Volume 23, Number 2. www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/britt_23_2.htm

6. Controlled Mass Media

Sometimes the media are directly controlled by the government, but in other cases, the media are indirectly controlled by government regulation, or sympathetic media spokespeople and executives. Censorship, especially in wartime, is very common.

7. Obsession with National Security

Fear is used as a motivational tool by the government over the masses.

8. Religion and Government are Intertwined

Governments in fascist nations tend to use the most common religion in the nation as a tool to manipulate public opinion. Religious rhetoric and terminology is common from government leaders, even when the major tenets of the religion are diametrically opposed to the government's policies or actions.

9. Corporate Power is Protected

The industrial and business aristocracies of a fascist nation often are the ones who put the government leaders into power, creating a mutually beneficial business/government relationship and power elite.

10. Labor Power is Suppressed

Because the organizing power of labor is the only real threat to a fascist government, labor unions are either eliminated entirely, or are severely suppressed.

11. Disdain for Intellectuals and the Arts

Fascist nations tend to promote and tolerate open hostility to higher education, and academia. It is not uncommon for professors and other academics to be censored or even arrested. Free expression in the arts is openly attacked, and governments often refuse to fund the arts.

12. Obsession with Crime and Punishment

Under fascist regimes, the police are given almost limitless power to enforce laws. The people are often willing to overlook police abuses and even forego civil liberties in the name of patriotism. There is often a national police force with virtually unlimited power in fascist nations

13. Rampant Cronyism and Corruption

Fascist regimes are almost always governed by groups of friends and associates who appoint each other to government positions and use governmental power and authority to protect their friends from accountability. It is not uncommon in fascist regimes for national resources and even treasures to be appropriated or even outright stolen by government leaders.

14. Fraudulent Elections

Sometimes elections in fascist nations are a complete sham. Other times elections are manipulated by smear campaigns against or even assassination of opposition candidates, use of legislation to control voting numbers or political district boundaries, and manipulation of the media. Fascist nations also typically use their judiciaries to manipulate or control elections.

This list will be familiar to students of political science. But it should be familiar to students of religion as well, for much of it mirrors the social and political agenda of religious fundamentalisms worldwide. It is both accurate and helpful for us to understand fundamentalism as religious fascism, and fascism as political fundamentalism. They both come from very primitive parts of us that have

always been the default setting of our species: amity toward our in-group, enmity toward out-groups, hierarchical deference to alpha male figures, a powerful identification with our territory, and so forth. It is that brutal default setting that all civilizations have tried to raise us above, but it is always a fragile thing, civilization, and has to be achieved over and over and over again.

But, again, this is not America's first encounter with fascism.

In early 1944, the New York Times asked Vice President Henry Wallace to write a piece answering the following questions: What is a fascist? How many fascists have we? How dangerous are they?

Wallace's answer to those questions was published in The New York Times on April 9, 1944, at the height of the war against the Axis powers of Germany and Japan.

"The really dangerous American fascist," Wallace wrote, "is the man who wants to do in the United States in an American way what Hitler did in Germany in a Prussian way. The American fascist would prefer not to use violence. His method is to poison the channels of public information. With a fascist the problem is never how best to present the truth to the public but how best to use the news to deceive the public into giving the fascist and his group more money or more power."

In his strongest indictment of the tide of fascism he saw rising in America, Wallace added, "They claim to be super-patriots, but they would destroy every liberty guaranteed by the Constitution. They demand free enterprise, but are the spokesmen for monopoly and vested interest. Their final objective toward which all their deceit is directed is to capture political power so that, using the power of the state and the power of the market simultaneously, they may keep the common man in eternal subjection." By these standards, a few of today's weapons for keeping the common people in eternal subjection include NAFTA, the World Trade Organization, union-busting, cutting or elimination of worker benefits, security and pensions while increasing CEO pay, rapacious credit card interest, and outsourcing of jobs--not to mention the largest prison system in the world.

The Perfect Storm

Our current descent into fascism came about through a kind of "Perfect Storm," a confluence of three unrelated but mutually supportive schools of thought.

1. The first stream of thought was the imperialistic dream of the Project for the New American Century². I don't believe anyone can understand the past four years without reading the Project for the New American Century, published in September 2000 and authored by many who have been prominent players in the Bush administrations, including Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and Donald Kagan to name only a few. This report saw the fall of Communism as a call for America to become the military rulers of the world, to establish a new worldwide empire. They spelled out the military enhancements we would need, then noted, sadly, that these wonderful plans would take a long time, unless there could be a catastrophic and catalyzing event like a new Pearl Harbor that would let the leaders turn America into a military and militarist country.

² www.newamericancentury.org

2. A second powerful stream must be credited to Pat Robertson and his Christian Reconstructionists, or Dominionists. Long dismissed by most of us as a screwball, the Dominionist style of Christianity, which he has been preaching since the early 1980s is now the most powerful religious voice in the Bush administration.

Katherine Yurica transcribed over 1300 pages of interviews from Pat Robertson's "700 Club" shows in the 1980s. Her research shows how Robertson and his chosen guests consistently, openly, and passionately argued that America must become a theocracy under the control of Christian Dominionists. Robertson is on record saying democracy is a terrible form of government unless it is run by his kind of Christians. He also rails constantly against taxing the rich, against public education, social programs and welfare. He is clear that women must remain homebound as obedient servants of men, and that abortions, like homosexuals, should not be allowed. Robertson has also been clear that other kinds of Christians, including Episcopalians and Presbyterians, are enemies of Christ. (The Yurica Report. Search under this name, or "Despoiling America" by Katherine Yurica on the Internet.)

3. The third major component of this Perfect Storm has been the desire of some very wealthy Americans and corporate CEOs for a plutocracy that will favor profits by the very rich and disempowerment of the vast majority of American workers, the destruction of workers' unions, and the alliance of government to help achieve these greedy goals. It is a condition some have called socialism for the rich, capitalism for the poor, and which others recognize as a reincarnation of Social Darwinism. This strain of thought has been present throughout American history. Seventy years ago, they tried to finance a military coup to replace Franklin Delano Roosevelt and establish General Smedley Butler as a fascist dictator in 1934. Fortunately, they picked a general who really was a patriot; he refused, reported the scheme, and spoke and wrote about it. As Canadian law professor Joel Bakan wrote in the book and movie "The Corporation," they have now achieved their coup without firing a shot.

Our plutocrats have had no particular interest in religion. Their global interests are with an imperialist empire, and their domestic goals are in undoing all of FDR's New Deal reforms that enabled the rise of America's middle class after WWII.

Another ill wind in this Perfect Storm is more important than its crudity might suggest: it was President Clinton's sleazy sex with a young but eager intern in the White House. This incident, and Clinton's equally sleazy lying about it, focused the certainties of conservatives on the fact that "liberals" had neither moral compass nor moral concern, and therefore represented a dangerous threat to the moral fiber of America. While the effects of this may be hard to quantify, I think they were profound.

These "storm" components have no necessary connection, and come from different groups of thinkers, many of whom wouldn't even like one another. But together, they form a nearly complete web of command and control, which has finally gained control of America and, they hope, of the world.

What's Coming?

When all fascisms exhibit the same social and political agendas (the 14 points listed by Britt), then it is not hard to predict where a new fascist uprising will lead. The actions of fascists and the social and political effects of fascism and fundamentalism are clear and sobering. Here (in Loehr's view) is some of what's coming, what will be happening in our country in the next few years:

- The theft of all social security funds, to be transferred to those who control money, and the increasing destitution of all those dependent on social security and social welfare programs.
- Rising numbers of uninsured people in a country that already has the highest percentage of citizens without health insurance in the developed world.
- Continued loss of funding for public education combined with increased support for vouchers, urging Americans to entrust their children's education to Christian schools.
- More restrictions on civil liberties as America is turned into the police state necessary for fascism to work
- Withdrawal of virtually all funding for National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting System. At their best, these media sometimes encourage critical questioning, so they are correctly seen as enemies of the state's official stories.
- The reinstatement of a draft, from which the children of privileged parents will again be mostly exempt, leaving our poorest children to fight and die in wars of imperialism and greed that could never benefit them anyway.
- More imperialistic invasions: of Iran and others, and the construction of a huge permanent embassy in Iraq.
- More restrictions on speech, under the flag of national security.
- Control of the Internet to remove or cripple it as an instrument of free communication that is exempt from government control. This will be presented as a necessary anti-terrorist measure.

Doug's insertion

As a computer scientist, I take some issue with this point. The Internet was invented by the military to be distributed so that it could survive a nuclear attack. There is no central point of control! By now, the Internet has taken on a life of its own and it would be extremely difficult for any government, even the U.S., to take control of it. This may in fact be one of our last, best hopes.

- Efforts to remove the tax-exempt status of churches like this one, and to characterize them as anti-American.
- Tighter control of the editorial bias of almost all media, and demonization of the few media they are unable to control - the New York Times, for instance.
- Continued outsourcing of jobs, including more white-collar jobs, to produce greater profits for those who control the money and direct the society, while simultaneously reducing America's workers to a more desperate and powerless status.
- Moves in the banking industry to make it impossible for an increasing number of Americans to own their homes. As they did in the 1930s, those who control the money know that it is to their advantage and profit to keep others renting rather than owning.

- Criminalization of those who protest, as un-American, with arrests, detentions and harassment increasing. We already have a higher percentage of our citizens in prison than any other country in the world. That percentage will increase.
- In the near future, it will be illegal or at least dangerous to say the things I have said here this morning. In the fascist story, these things are un-American. In the real history of a democratic America, they were seen as profoundly patriotic, as the kind of critical questions that kept the American spirit alive--the kind of questions, incidentally, that our media were supposed to be pressing.

Can these schemes work? Loehr doesn't think so. He calls them "murderous, rapacious, and insane." But I don't know. Maybe they can. Similar schemes have worked in countries like Chile, where a democracy in which over 90 percent voted has been reduced to one in which only about 20 percent vote because they say, as Americans are learning to say, that it no longer matters who you vote for.

Doug's insertion

A few years back I came across a bumper sticker here in town that said, "Under the Republicans, man exploits man. Under the Democrats it's just the opposite."

Hope

So..., is there any hope, or do we just band together like lemmings and dive off a cliff? Yes, there is always hope, though at times it is more hidden, as it is now.

As some critics are now saying, and as Rev. Loehr says he has been preaching and writing for almost twenty years, America's liberals need to grow beyond political liberalism, with its often self-absorbed focus on individual rights to the exclusion of individual responsibilities to the larger society. Liberals will have to construct a more complete vision with moral and religious grounding. That doesn't mean "confessional" Christianity. It means the legitimate heir to Christianity. Such a legitimate heir need not be a religion, though it must have clear moral power, and be able to attract the minds and hearts of a voting majority of Americans.

And the new liberal vision must be larger than that of the conservative religious vision that will be appointing judges, writing laws and bending the cultural norms toward hatred and exclusion for the foreseeable future. Ironically, the conservatives deserve a lot of "grudging" admiration. They have spent the last thirty years studying American politics, forming their vision and learning how to gain control in the political system. And it worked; they won! Even if liberals can develop a bigger vision, they still have all that time-consuming work to do. It won't be fast. It isn't even clear that liberals will be willing to do it; they may instead prefer to go down with the ship they're used to.

One man who has been tireless in his investigations and critiques of America's slide into fascism is Michael C. Ruppert, whose postings usually read as though he is wound way too tight. He offers four pieces of advice about what we can do now, and they seem reality-based enough to pass on to you. This is America; they're all about money:

- First, he says you should get out of debt.

- Second is to spend your money and time on things that give you energy and provide you with useful information.
- Third is to stop spending a penny with major banks, news media and corporations that feed you lies and leave you angry and exhausted.
- And fourth is to learn how money works and use it like a (political) weapon - as he predicts the rest of the world will be doing against us.
(http://www.fromthewilderness.com/free/ww3/110504_snap_out.shtml)

Another bit of advice comes from sixty years ago, from Roosevelt's vice president, Henry Wallace. Wallace said, "Democracy, to crush fascism internally, must...develop the ability to keep people fully employed and at the same time balance the budget. It must put human beings first and dollars second. It must appeal to reason and decency and not to violence and deceit. We must not tolerate oppressive government or industrial oligarchy in the form of monopolies and cartels."

Still another way to understand fascism is as a kind of colonization. A simple definition of "colonization" is that it takes people's stories away, and assigns them supportive roles in stories that empower others at their expense. When you are taxed to support a government that uses you as a means to serve the ends of others, you are--ironically--in a state of taxation without representation. That's where this country started, and it's where we are now.

Doug's insertion

Recall the words of our responsive reading by Frederick Douglass. "Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice which will be imposed upon them. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress."

I don't know the next step. But whatever you do, whatever we do, I hope that we can remember some very basic things that I think of as eternally true. One is that the vast majority of people are good decent people who mean and do as well as they know how. Very few people are evil, though some are.

Those who want to live in a reality-based story rather than as serfs in an ideology designed to transfer power, possibility and hope to a small ruling elite have much long and hard work to do, individually and collectively. It will be neither easy nor quick.

But we will do it. We will go forward in hope and in courage. Let us seek that better path, and find the courage to take it--step, by step, by step. Let us make it so.

About Davidson Loehr, Ph.D.

His academic credentials include a doctoral degree from the University of Chicago in theology, philosophy of religion and philosophy of science, a master's degree from the same university in methods for studying religions, and a bachelor's degree in music theory from the University of Michigan.

Dr. Loehr is a regular contributor to the Austin American-Statesman and represents his church at activities and events sponsored by the Austin Area Interreligious Ministries.

Before becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister, Dr. Loehr was a combat photographer in Vietnam and a professional musician, playing clarinet and saxophone in road bands and combos. His office is lined with astounding photographs of places he has visited and people he has known.