

Trump, Hitler And Mussolini: Some Frightening Similarities

and a few differences

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The temptation to compare contemporary political figures with the infamous dictators of the twentieth century is not new. But in the case of Donald Trump, such comparisons have taken on a distinct urgency, especially in the wake of the January 6th, 2021 Capitol insurrection and the frightening pace of democratic backsliding that has characterized his present term of office.

While it would be intellectually dishonest to equate Trump directly with Adolf Hitler or Benito Mussolini—leaders who orchestrated mass atrocities and plunged the world into war—the parallels in style, rhetoric, and institutional subversion warrant serious scrutiny.

This post compares Trump with Hitler and Mussolini across key political dimensions: ideology, leadership style, use of propaganda, respect for democratic norms, relationship to violence, scapegoating and identity politics, foreign policy, and institutional control. You'll see some striking echoes. There is little doubt that Trump has studied (what little studying he has ever done) his predecessor dictators.

Ideology

Hitler and Mussolini governed according to rigid, revolutionary ideologies: Nazism and Fascism, respectively. Hitler's worldview was grounded in a doctrine of Aryan racial supremacy and a belief in violent struggle as the engine of national revival. Mussolini's fascism centered on ultranationalism, the supremacy of the state, and the rejection of liberal democracy.

Both ideologies sought the total reorganization of society under authoritarian rule. Trump, by contrast, has never espoused a coherent ideology. His brand of politics—"America First" nationalism—is rooted more in personal grievance, populist resentment, and transactional power-seeking than in any well-developed doctrine. Yet, like his fascist predecessors, he has drawn on nationalist, anti-elite, and xenophobic themes that mobilize identity-based support and undermine democratic norms.

Leadership Style

All three dictators demanded intense personal loyalty and projected a singular authority over their political movements. Hitler ruled through the Führerprinzip, where his will was law. Mussolini similarly consolidated power under the persona of Il Duce, the sole figure of national direction.

Trump governs less through ideology than through brand—an omnipresent personality cult enforced through social media, public spectacle, and the demand for unwavering loyalty. Like his fascist counterparts, Trump values allegiance over expertise, utterly disregarding institutional process in favor of personal control.

Propaganda and Media

Each leader leveraged the dominant media of their time to cultivate a personal cult and manipulate public perception. Hitler employed the Nazi propaganda machine under Goebbels to saturate German life with party ideology, eliminating all dissenting voices.

Mussolini, a former journalist, mastered newspapers and newsreels to broadcast his image of vigor and authority.

Trump has modernized the authoritarian media playbook by weaponizing social media—particularly Truth Social (and formerly Twitter/X)—as a direct channel to his base, bypassing traditional media and establishing an alternate reality.

While he lacks the total control that Hitler and Mussolini enjoyed, it is not for want of trying. Trump's ability to dominate the information ecosystem through repetition, disinformation, and spectacle mirrors the propaganda instincts of the two earlier strongmen.

Democratic Norms

Trump's conduct represents a systematic assault on the written and unwritten rules of American democracy, as evidenced by his unleashing of DOGE to abolish every foundational institution he can get his hands on. His attempts to subvert the 2020 election—culminating in the Capitol attack—posed the most direct challenge to peaceful democratic transfer of power in modern U.S. history.

Hitler and Mussolini did not merely test democratic norms—they eradicated them. Trump is in the process of following that playbook. Hitler used the Reichstag Fire

to suspend civil liberties and passed the Enabling Act to legislate without parliamentary oversight. Mussolini abolished all political opposition by 1926 and ruled by decree. Trump is attempting to emulate Mussolini and to rule by Executive Order.

Violence

The use or incitement of violence marks a key divergence among the three leaders, though not without resonance. Hitler and Mussolini relied on organized paramilitary groups—the SA and the Blackshirts, respectively—to intimidate, beat, and murder political opponents. In power, Hitler escalated to genocide and total war, while Mussolini sanctioned colonial atrocities and internal repression.

It is not clear what direct relationship Trump may have with White Nationalist paramilitaries, but they certainly are willing to follow his commands. He repeatedly encourages aggression at his raucous rallies, condones these right-wing militias, and showed what he was when he incited the January 6th insurrection. While less deadly than the campaigns of Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy, Trump's willingness to normalize political violence is a critical break with democratic precedent. We don't yet know how far Trump will go.

Scapegoating and Identity Politics: Enemies Within

Scapegoating is a hallmark of authoritarian governance. Hitler blamed Jews, communists, and other minorities for Germany's decline, laying the groundwork for the Holocaust. Mussolini demonized socialists, later targeting Jews under Nazi influence. Trump's scapegoats are immigrants, Muslims, Black Lives Matter activists, and coastal elites, among others. He casts his political opponents as traitors and almost sub-human, and encourages the belief that the nation is under siege from within.

This politics of exclusion has helped galvanize his base, much like the fascist strategy of forging unity through enmity. While Trump's targets have not faced the existential threats Jews and others did under fascism, the rhetorical pattern of defining an "un-American" enemy echoes a dangerous lineage. And Trump is on the way to disappearing people he dislikes to prisons abroad, defying court orders to return them.

Foreign Policy and Militarism

Hitler and Mussolini glorified war and expansion—Hitler for lebensraum, Mussolini for empire. Their regimes embraced conquest as national destiny. Trump, on the other hand, favors military strength but until recently largely eschewed foreign wars. His threats to annex Canada and Greenland, and his saber rattling against Mexico and Iran, however, are ominous.

Trump's foreign policy is unilateralist and anti-globalist, characterized by trade wars, withdrawal from international agreements, and admiration for autocrats. Until recently, his militarism was mostly symbolic—a desire for parades and dominance—rather than strategic aggression. There is a palpable change in approach, as described above. Trump has a transactional view of alliances and his disdain for democratic norms abroad has marked a significant break from America's post-WWII role as a promoter of liberal order. There is every reason to believe that Trump is looking for any excuse he can find to leave NATO.

Institutional Control

Both Hitler and Mussolini achieved near-total institutional control. They purged civil services, dissolved opposition parties, and fused party and state. Hitler's regime embodied totalitarianism; Mussolini's was slightly more restrained but no less authoritarian. Trump has sought to bypass the guardrails and legal prohibitions that exist in order to dismantle the system of checks and balances. Trump's willingness to govern through executive fiat and loyalty tests reveals an authoritarian impulse constrained only by circumstance. And that circumstance is changing under our feet.

Conclusion: Patterns, Parallels, and Limits

Donald Trump is not Hitler. Nor is he Mussolini. But the comparison is not merely hyperbolic. It is instructive. The commonalities—in nationalist grievance, cult of personality, media manipulation, democratic contempt, and use of scapegoating—illustrate how authoritarian playbooks can adapt to new eras. Trump's inability in his first term to consolidate full power should not mask the extent to which he degraded democratic culture, encouraged political violence, and redefined the limits of presidential conduct. This time around, he is pushing ahead full steam toward new and frightening dimensions.

His presidency underscores a chilling truth: the authoritarian impulse does not always require totalitarian machinery to do lasting harm. It requires only a leader

willing to break rules, a public receptive to fear and grievance, and institutions too slow or cautious to stop the slide. In studying Trump alongside Hitler and Mussolini, we do not merely examine the past—we confront the present danger of democracy undone not in a single coup, but in a thousand breaches of the public trust.

Trump is not a well man. Neither were Hitler and Mussolini well men. But none of that impeded their work of subverting democracy. The emperor has no clothes, but the enablers in his party won't say it out of fear.

And so the outrages continue, and we will have to do everything legal to subvert Trump's efforts. His lightning attacks on our institutions and democracies require an immediate reaction. That is the challenge for the American people at this point in history. How we meet it will determine the future of our republic. That is no hyperbole.