



REFLECTIONS ON MEMORIAL DAY: TRUMP IS UNDAUNTED AS HE DOUBLES DOWN ON AUTHORITARIAN RHETORIC

- Donald Trump's penchant for authoritarian rhetoric is undiminished.
- Trump floats the idea of a third presidential term.
- Campaign video clip, taken down 15 hours later – in answer to “What’s Next for America?” (if Trump wins) – has various references to the creation of a “unified Reich,” replete with fascist symbolism.
- Trump accuses President Biden of trying to have him assassinated by the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.
- Trump claims only he can secure the release of wrongly imprisoned WSJ journalist Evan Gershkovich.
- Trump sends Memorial Day wishes to the “Human Scum working so hard to destroy our Once Great Country.”

Donald Trump continued to garner high-profile support in recent days, ranging from Nikki Hailey to financier Stephen Schwartzman. One might have thought that the former contender for the presidency, who had called Trump “unhinged” and “unstable” and who joined former Attorney General Bill Barr, New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell in supporting Trump's re-election, or business leaders who less than seven years ago were repulsed by Trump's comments following the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville (and, in fact, Schwartzman [referred](#) to the insurrection “that followed the president's remarks” as “appalling and an affront to the democratic values we hold dear”), have been persuaded by some perceived softening of Trump's dangerous rhetoric or simply decline to take Trump's rhetoric seriously. There is, however, absolutely no evidence that Trump is softening his rhetoric and there is no reasonable basis for believing that Trump does not mean what he says. While Trump picks up new endorsements, he continues to double down. And it seems to be working.

The Authoritarian Threats Continue

Speaking at the National Rifle Association annual convention in Dallas a week ago, where he fixated on protecting Second Amendment rights for gun owners and warned that the Biden “regime” would be “coming for your guns,” Trump again [floated](#) the idea of serving a third term if elected again (after referring to FDR, asking the crowd “are we going to be considered “three-term” or “two-term”?). That possibility is proscribed by the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution. Perhaps that third term flows from his conviction that he was due a second term in 2020.

Early last week, Trump posted on Truth Social a now deleted [campaign video ad](#) whose black and white images, fonts and style [were characterized](#) by historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat as “highly reminiscent of fascist propaganda I have studied for many years.” What once again renewed the debate over Trump's unabashed sympathies for authoritarian rulers were multiple



references in this “What’s Next for America?” ad to “the creation of a unified Reich” and to World War I. This continues an all too frequent pattern of parroting Nazi rhetoric (claiming immigrants are “poisoning the blood of the country,” likening political opponents to “vermin” and accusing the Biden administration of being a “Gestapo regime”), of associating with Nazi symbolism and of otherwise incorporating in his campaign rallies phrases associated with fascist regimes.

The clip was [taken down](#) from Truth Social after 15 hours (the campaign claiming that the clip “was not an [official] campaign ad” and had been reposted by a staffer), but once again there was no apology, no remorse, no consequence from among the faithful. Perhaps a feeble walk-back, or effort to minimize the significance, but that is it. Not unlike his comments after Charlottesville or his characterization of his November 2022 dinner with two known antisemites. But as Margaret Sullivan, US columnist for the Guardian, recently [wrote](#), “despite all of Trump’s misdeeds – the criminal indictments, the abhorrent words, the sordid relationships, the clear plans to dismantle democratic guardrails – he rolls on undaunted.”

Later in the week, Trump [accused](#) President Biden, in a campaign fundraising email, of trying to have him assassinated (Biden was “locked & loaded ready to take me out & put my family in danger”), twisting into a grotesque accusation a customary policy statement attached to warrants intended to limit the use of deadly force by FBI agents. Incidentally, the same language would have been used in connection with the search undertaken of President Biden’s premises. Neither Trump nor members of his family were at Mar-a-Lago when the search was undertaken, and the FBI reportedly gave advance notice of the search to the Secret Service. But, as we see regularly, facts do not matter in Trump world.

In another email, Trump [reportedly](#) wrote, “Biden’s DOJ was authorized to shoot me. I nearly escaped death.” Presumably, he meant “he barely” escaped.

The allegations prompted Jack Smith, the special counsel in the Mar-a-Lago documents case, to urge, in a [filing](#) submitted to the District Court in Florida, that the court “exercise its authority to impose a condition that Trump may not make public statements that pose a significant, imminent, and foreseeable danger to the law enforcement agents participating in the investigation and prosecution of this case.” The request was predicated on “intentionally false and inflammatory statements recently made by Trump that distort the circumstances under which the [FBI] planned and executed” its search warrant. Today, Judge Aileen Cannon [denied](#) the request, without prejudice, for procedural reasons.

And not surprisingly, last week Vladimir Putin also entered the discourse. Trump predicted on Truth Social that falsely imprisoned Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich would be released “definitely before I assume Office.” Vladimir Putin “will do that for me, but not for anyone else, and we will be paying nothing.” As commentators have noted, if Trump has leverage, why is he not using it now. He could have made that request via Tucker Carlson during the latter’s interview with Putin. Or is that leverage only operative when Trump can offer him something in return. Moreover, as commentators have also noted, this post likely means there is no chance Evan is released before the election.

The foregoing are only the most recent examples of threatened actions that were they to be carried out would presage the end of democracy in America as we know it. The more



inflammatory have been called out, but many have fallen below the radar screen. A [report](#) released last week by Citizens for Responsibility & Ethics in Washington (CREW) summarized the results of an analysis of over 13,000 posts by Trump on Truth Social (between January 2023 and April 2024), which found that Trump has issued direct and implied threats to weaponize the powers of the federal government to target President Biden, including FBI raids, investigations, indictments and prison. He has also targeted senators, judges, members of the Biden family and NGOs, as well as President Obama.

The Broader Landscape

Trump's statements and the failure of Republicans to distance themselves from the statements, let alone criticize him, need to be seen in the context of a few worrying underlying trends.

Significant numbers of Republicans still believe Trump won the last election, and there remains, as Ruth Ben-Ghiat recently noted ("[Denial about Donald Trump is deeper than ever](#)"), an "information deficit" co-existing side-by-side with a "disinformation surfeit." She cites a [Save My Country](#) poll showing that when voters in three battleground states (excluding those who believe Biden lost the 2020 election, *i.e.*, potential Biden voters) were shown ten of Trump's most authoritarian statements, only 31% had "heard a lot" about them. After these voters were apprised of these ten statements, the percentage of those who view Trump unfavorably increases five points, from 53% to 58%, and 69% believe Trump will bring "chaos to the presidency and our country." Said another way, when presented with evidence of Trump's own words, they understand an authoritarian second term is plausible.

At the same time, when Axios is [reporting](#) that significant proportions of swing state voters do not trust that the elections will be free from violence, Trump and other Republican lawmakers, including Senators J.D. Vance, Lindsey Graham, Ben Carson and Marco Rubio have signaled that they will not accept the results of the election, "if they are unfair." Other Republicans have gone further (simply refusing to answer whether they would accept the results), including Rep. Elise Stefanik and Senator Tim Scott. In what world are we living where politicians will endorse results only if they win? What must Al Gore have been thinking?

Pulling all of these recent strands together, Ben-Ghiat and Washington Post columnist Jennifer Rubin, [interviewed](#) on MSNBC on Saturday, remind us that fascism thrives on scorning, discrediting and delegitimizing democratic institutions and the rule of law. Talk of assassination and threats to Trump's life, in the context of having shamelessly normalized the narrative that the 2020 election was stolen, follows the authoritarian playbook perfectly – create a crisis, and voters will then accept Trump as a savior in that moment of crisis. The talk of "dictator for one day" (history, incidentally, has no examples of dictators for a single day), the adulation of authoritarian rulers, the constant attacks on the rule of law, the courts, judges and the justice system (mostly recently on Memorial Day, when Trump launched into a tirade against the judges who presided over the E. Jean Carroll case and the case brought by the New York Attorney General, and attacked E. Jean Carroll as well), and the undeniably fascist rhetoric serve the purpose of normalizing the idea that America could be led by an authoritarian ruler.



Ben-Ghiat, Rubin and others maintain that Trump’s statements are not gaffes – they are not mistakes. Rubin refers to Ben-Ghiat’s book “Strongman – Mussolini to the Present” not as “history, but as journalism. It is an explication of exactly everything that is happening every day.” And to those who dismiss these statements as idle speech, one need only look to recent history – not 1930s, but to the fraught days between Election Day 2020 and January 6, 2021. Trump talked endless about having won the election, about not standing by and then led an insurrection.

Asha Rangappa and Tom Joscelyn, writing in Just Security (“[Anatomy of MAGA Conspiracy of Assassination Attempt Against Trump: What It Tells Us](#)”), make similar points in response to the false assassination narrative. They note that, even though the narrative can easily be debunked, in the febrile environment in which we find ourselves, the accusations are dangerous. Trump is “fanning the flames, in particular, of anti-government extremism.” These inflammatory lies feed conspiracy theories, which in turn, they note, “especially those that undermine the public’s confidence in our democratically elected government and institutions, are a core part of Trump’s political platform. These conspiratorial beliefs can culminate in violence.”

And The Endorsements Continue

I return to my introduction, and question how it is that Trump continues to rack up endorsements/support, despite the clear signaling of what lies ahead were he to serve again as president. How is it that many still see the 2024 race as a normal election contest? If ever there were a single disqualifying factor for the presidency (among the myriad candidates for that designation), it is Trump’s efforts to overturn the 2020 election. Yes, these actions are the subject of a case pending in federal court, stalled because of the delay by the Supreme Court in ruling on the issue of presidential immunity for criminal acts committed while president. But the facts are uncontroverted, prompting the obvious question, what does it take to convince those endorsing/supporting Trump what is at stake?

It cannot be that Trump is merely the victim of a campaign to tarnish his reputation driven by the Biden “regime,” left-leaning journalists and the other “Marxists, Communists, radical left thugs” that he rails against. I should add to that litany from Trump’s second Memorial Day missive the “Human Scum that is working so hard to destroy our Once Great Country.”

While some may question whether the cases against Trump are politically motivated, recall that Trump, after all, was found guilty of sexual abuse and defamation by a jury of his peers and then found guilty of defamation related to statements made about the first case by a second jury of his peers. The January 6th case and the Georgia election interference case were based on indictments returned by grand juries. In October 2022, Judge David O. Carter [found](#) in a civil case involving John Eastman, the Trump lawyer behind the effort to convince Vice President Pence to not certify the election, that it “was more likely than not that Trump had corruptly attempted to obstruct the joint session of Congress on January 6th.” There has been no legal case premised on the events of January 6th in which a court has ruled that Trump did not engage in insurrection or has overruled a lower court finding that Trump engaged in insurrection.



In a March 2023 [ruling](#) unsealed last week in a case related to overriding attorney-client privilege based on the crime-fraud exception, then Chief Judge Beryl A. Howell found there was “strong evidence” Trump intended to obstruct the search of Mar-a-Lago and other evidence that Trump “willfully sought to retain classified documents when he was not authorized to do so, and he knew it.” The judge, referring to the discovery of additional classified documents in Trump’s bedroom following the FBI search of Mar-a-Lago, found “no excuse is provided as to how the former president could miss the classified-marked documents found in his own bedroom.”

Concluding Thoughts

Speaking on MSNBC to mark Memorial Day (the day America honors those who gave their lives to defend the country, its values and its democracy), historian Jon Meacham framed the threat we face succinctly. “To introduce, and promulgate, and defend and repeat, all of which President Trump and his followers have done, a vernacular of dictatorship, and authoritarianism and autocracy is to undermine the very system that they wish to represent.” “It is a choice we are making. [Half the country] is choosing to enable this authoritarian movement. It is incumbent therefore upon the rest of us to stand up against it.” “Truth matters.”

And now paraphrasing Meacham’s closing remarks: Trump’s mendacity, his casting doubt on the election results (a NYT analysis, [Trump’s Pattern of Sowing Election Doubt Intensifies in 2024](#), found that, since announcing his candidacy for the 2024 election, Trump has repeated the lie that he won the 2020 election on average once a day), and his accusations that Democrats are a greater threat to democracy than Republicans are straight out of the authoritarian playbook. The threat can only be dealt with if those who believe the truth continue to stand up and insist that facts matter. It is fact that President Biden is defending American democracy (imperfect as it may be), and it is fact that Trump has demonstrated repeatedly that he seeks to undermine American democracy. Those standing with Trump should recognize that they are not just casting a vote for lower marginal tax rates or for a particular policy, or because they disagree with Biden; they are casting a vote to undermine, and ultimately destroy, fundamental American institutions of democracy.

One final thought. As I have [noted before](#), there have been calls from various quarters for Congress to take action to amend the Insurrection Act to limit a president’s authority to deploy the military domestically and to provide for oversight by Congress and the courts. The CREW [report](#) urges Congress to reintroduce and pass the [Protecting our Democracy Act](#), which, among other things, would curb the ability of the White House to interfere in the work of the Department of Justice and law enforcement, curb abuses of the presidential pardon power and reduce the likelihood that emergency powers would be abused. The unfortunate reality is that, as Susan Glasser noted in her letter from Biden’s Washington (“[There is literally nothing Trump can say that will stop Republicans from voting for him](#)”), Democrats failed to do either when they controlled both the House and the Senate, leading her to



conclude that “[i]f the January 6th riot at their own Capitol was not enough to persuade lawmakers to take Trump’s words literally, I’m not sure anything is.”

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Mark S. Bergman
7Pillars Global Insights, LLC
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