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## Trump: How is He Possible?



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More Americans than ever now realize, as Sinclair Lewis did more than eighty-five years ago, that “it” can indeed happen here.

What “it” is depends on historical, structural and contingent circumstances. There are many possibilities, some more noxious than others.

The basic idea, however, is always the same: that, when they feel they must in order to maintain their power, capitalist poohbahs with authoritarian inclinations will fund and otherwise encourage political entrepreneurs to organize susceptible persons into illiberal and

violent fighting forces that can be and typically are deployed in ways that advance the interests of those elites.

The “fascist” movements of the interwar years in Europe and the Middle East were prototypical. Contemporary political groupings that identify with their politics are “fascist” too, the historical anachronism notwithstanding.

For many decades after World War II, when fascism seemed to have suffered an irreversible historic defeat, the use of the very word was often verboten in respectable media circles. But the historical continuities and conceptual affinities are often striking enough that the anachronism is more enlightening than not.

Also, a lot more name calling is permitted nowadays than used to be. Some of the credit for that must go to Trump himself, inasmuch as name calling is among his favorite activities, and his personality practically invites the fascist label.

Whenever an authoritarian or fascist turn is taken, substantive, as distinct from merely procedural, democracy and the rule of law suffer egregiously, while segments of the general population that are not overtly fascist but that are susceptible to nationalist and racist agitation and are plagued by status anxieties of various kinds, will, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, go along.

How this can happen, in general and in particular historical circumstances, has been investigated from a variety of historical and philosophical vantage-points for nearly as long as the phenomenon itself has existed.

When fascism seemed a dead letter, such inquiries were of interest mainly in academic circles. Lately, as times have changed, they have again become matters of general and pressing concern.

This being the case, it is well to emphasize a fairly obvious point: that, although there is some overlap, accounting for the possibility of the United States taking a fascist or fascist-like turn is not quite the same as accounting for Trump’s past, present, or future role in American politics.

There the question is: how can someone of his caliber have become president? And now that he no longer is president, how is it possible that he is still able to have his will be done in the Republican Party? How is he able, out of office and with his Twitter account blocked, to make everything even worse than it already is – for example, by making a certifiable nut case, Marjorie Taylor Greene, a rising star in what remains of the Party of Lincoln?

Nearly everything about Trump and today’s Republican Party defies comprehension, but the prominence accorded Greene and like-minded “conspiracy theorists” is unfathomable.

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Careful analyses of the 2020 presidential election results are becoming available. The current (Winter 2021) issue of *Jacobin* magazine (#40) is a useful and accessible resource.

Thus, it is becoming clear that compared to the 2016 election, and despite all the bruhaha about diversity, Biden's victory over Trump last year depended mainly on Democratic gains in white, affluent suburbs.

The unusually large level of participation by "persons of color" was, of course, of great importance too. But, among working class voters of all races, there was actually a shift to the right. Turnout was up everywhere, but, to the surprise of many, it was up less in black areas than in affluent burbs.

This is not to say that Biden would not have gotten more votes in the right places for an Electoral College victory than Trump did, had not gotten the vote organizing efforts in black, brown, and native American communities been as effective as they were. But it seems that, so far at least, reports of a shift for the better in public opinion, thanks to changing demographics, are exaggerated at best.

A more salient development, evident in the election results, is the growth and apparent immutability of the personality cult that has grown up around Trump. That miserable creature got more than seventy million votes last November; and, despite all that has happened since then, all the pandemic deaths and all the Trumpian shenanigans, he would probably do just as well were the election held today.

Biden did win fair and square, however; Trump's Big Lie, as liberal media have taken to calling it, cannot change that.

The conventional wisdom is that this shows that the country is divided along (duopoly) party lines. It is indeed. But, though hardly anyone these days will admit it, the conventional wisdom is misleading.

Biden's victory had very little to do with him or, for that matter, with the Democratic Party, and everything to do with Trump and the GOP. Biden won because Trump lost.

If only he had lost decisively enough to bring Republican Senators and House members down with him, the country would now be in a much better place. But anti-Trump sentiment, though broad, was evidently not deep. Down ballot, it seems to have had little, if any, effect.

It did cause well-off white suburbanites, women especially but also highly educated men, to be appalled and embarrassed enough to bother to vote and in many cases to desert the GOP. Trump also made it easy for diligent organizers from the party's rising Leftwing to impress upon potential black, brown, and native American voters that they too needed to show up at the polls – because, for them and their communities, Trump posed an "existential threat."

But because Biden ran as a Biden, not a Warren or a Sanders, too few formerly apolitical people were inspired to go far enough beyond the motives Trump inadvertently provided to put changing the world radically for the better on the agenda in a serious way.

Thus, nearly everywhere except at the very top, Democrats did more poorly than they could have had their "icons," working hand in glove with incorrigibly "centrist" party leaders, not

put the kibosh on efforts to move the less odious of our duopoly parties in directions that it should have pursued decades ago.

Because Biden has so far been governing more like one would expect from Warren or Sanders than from himself, progressives are loathe to point this out. Quite rightly — why jinx a good thing?

And so, even now, what will happen depends more on what the unintended consequences of Trump's acting out his own delusions turn out to be, and on what his efforts to maintain his cult following come to, than on what progressives are able to do on their own.

But the times are ripe, overripe, for change; and genuinely transformative change could indeed be on the way. Or not; depending mainly on what Trump and the morons intent on remaining under his thumb do.

That depends in part on what happens to Trump himself and to his underlings, which depends, in turn, on Biden's willingness not to follow the model that Obama, Attorney General Eric Holder, and perhaps also Biden himself put in place a dozen years ago.

Now is no time to let bygones be bygones again — in order ostensibly “to move forward.” All that would do – again — is ease the way forward for continuing to do what many, maybe most, Democratic voters thought they were voting against.

In 2008, they thought they were voting against Guantánamo. What they got for their trouble was President Drone. If Biden has learned anything at all in the intervening years, it is, or ought to be, not to make a similar mistake again.

This consideration makes the questions posed at the outset more poignant: how is it possible that a role of such monumental historical importance could fall to the likes of a Donald Trump and how can it be that, at least for now, the Trump cult actually seems poised to survive into the future whether or not Trump is still calling the shots?

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There is a sense in which understanding what people are saying when they speak of what matters to them requires nothing more than linguistic competence; there is another in which it requires a kind of empathy, an ability to grasp intuitively what they are trying to convey.

Thus, as the philosopher John Rawls once put it, we really cannot understand what is being said when someone claims to find meaning in life, say, by counting blades of grass on lawns. The idea is too remote from anything that we can imagine ourselves or anyone else thinking to be comprehensible, even though we know what the words mean.

People have all sorts of projects that give their lives meaning that others might support or sympathize with or feel indifferent towards or oppose. Most people find most of these projects comprehensible, regardless of what they think about them.

I trust that I am not alone in thinking that the attitudes some Trump supporters evince towards the former president – not all of them, but an alarmingly high number – are very nearly as incomprehensible as lives dedicated to counting blades of grass.

To put the matter bluntly: what's to like? This is not to ask how could people find it within themselves to like, say, tearing children away from their parents and separating them in ways that make family reunifications all but impossible? Or a person who would inflict a murderous mob of misfits and ignoramuses upon anyone standing in his way of overturning the results of an election that he lost?

That the political line Trump promoted and continues to promote is deplorable, whether or not he actually cares about any of it except insofar as it affects his vanity and bottom line, is beside the point. The "how possibly?" question posed here pertains to the man himself, to his personal qualities, as it were; not to the real world consequences of his policies.

Trump harmed a lot of people; black and brown people and Muslims bore the brunt, but the entire working class suffered to some extent. So indeed did everyone who isn't obscenely rich.

His administration's de-regulatory zeal was even worse for the planet than his predecessors' feckless efforts to ward off, or at least delay, future environmental catastrophes. And, what seems to have upset his standing within the political class and among media honchos most, he blasphemed the American civil religion, causing an "insurrection" that breached the very "temple of democracy," as self-righteous politicians and corporate media hacks have lately taken to calling the U.S. Capitol.

I put "insurrection" in scare quotes in order not to give the idea a bad name. As in 1776, we might need it again someday. Indeed, had Trump won the last election, that day might already be upon us.

Another reason is that with the tinhorn insurrection that Trump was impeached for inciting, he exceeded his already considerable general level of incompetence to such an extent that it is no longer clear what he thought he was doing – besides terrorizing innocent people.

For one thing, an insurrection without the support of what Trump calls "the deep state" is hard to imagine. Those words, properly understood, denote the part of the federal bureaucracy that doesn't change when governments change.

It is especially useful in studies of parliamentary regimes in which governing coalitions are often in flux at the same time that basic state institutions remain essentially the same.

It is Trump and his underlings that gave "the deep state" malevolent connotations. They did it by deriding the federal bureaucracy in word and deed every chance they got. In view of their nefarious intentions, this was stupidity on stilts.

After all, for overthrowing governments, nothing in the world today, or perhaps ever, beats the CIA. And yet, our insurrectionist president, with his self-declared "very big" and "very stable" brain, went out of his way to make an enemy of it.

Our upper level military officials were too "professional" to complain about it openly, but Trump made an enemy of them too. This was even stupider.



Precisely when in the nineteenth century it became obvious that without the support, or at least the acquiescence, of the military, insurrections in urban areas became impossible; 1848, “the springtime of the peoples,” is a good bet, but it would not be unreasonable to move the date a little bit forward or back.

Revolutions waged in the countrysides of remote peasant societies are another matter, as the CIA and the U.S. military have found out to their dismay time and again as they fought peoples seeking independence, and nations seeking liberation.

Needless to say, Donald Trump, chicken hawk extraordinaire, did not become the beneficiary of a personality cult thanks to his position in the U.S. military.

Usually, in authoritarian regimes, colonels or generals call the shots; not spoiled rich kids whose fathers get doctors to tell draft boards that they suffer from bone spurs. That was good for keeping the Donald from having to fight on the wrong side in Vietnam, but it is not the stuff from which dictators are made.

For all these reasons and more, Trump’s January 6 insurrection, vicious as it was, was a non-starter. This is not to say that he shouldn’t be punished to the hilt for launching it, or even that to get him for doing that is like getting Al Capone for taxes. Trump’s first impeachment a year ago had that flavor, but not this. There is so much more for which he ought to be punished to the hilt as well, but even in the midst of it all, outright sedition stands out.

It was only after all other ways to retain power after losing the election failed that Trump took the incitement route; what else could the poor little narcissist do with the prospect of doing not-so-hard time at Club Fed staring him in the face?

But that last minute departure from the norm aside, Trump’s political crimes and criminally actionable offenses, though grievous, are not all that different from what has become standard fare for U.S. presidents. Compared to the crimes against humanity and against the peace for which other authoritarian leaders could be blamed, they are, like Trump himself, “small potatoes.”

Adolph Hitler, for example, started and executed World War II – in Europe, the Japanese case is more complicated — and he initiated and directed industrial scale genocidal policies against Jews, Romani (gypsies), and other categories of people he deemed undesirable.

Compared to him and countless lesser malefactors, Trump doesn’t even come close. Indeed, on matters of war and peace, the Donald was arguably our least lethal president since Jimmy Carter.

But if instead of focusing on harms caused, we focus on qualities of mind and political competencies, it is a different story altogether.

Compare even just the oratorical and literary skills of Hitler and Trump, or their interest in and knowledge of history and military strategy. On a scale of one to ten, if the judge is feeling generous, Hitler might get a two or even a three; Trump would get a zero no matter how the judge is feeling.

For any fascist worthy of the name, the scoring would be much the same. In that department as in so many others, Trump is just not up to snuff. Even so, it cannot be denied that in some ways, he is indeed very much like the big boys.

Evangelicals are capable of believing just about any nonsense, so it is not all that surprising that some of them believe that the Trump presidency accords with providential design, that Trump is, as it were, on a mission from God.

But although Trump was happy enough to pander to them when there seemed to be some percentage in it for him, he and they were hardly on the same page. Unlike many fascist or quasi-fascist leaders of the past and present, Trump has never been drawn into anything like a clerical fascist orbit. In this respect, he is like Hitler's or, more on point, Benito Mussolini.

Of all the bona fide fascists of the past and present, Mussolini is probably the one with whom Trump has the most in common.

This is partly a matter of style. Mussolini was a figure out of the opera buffa tradition, practically a self-parody. Trump is a tad too gangsterish for that, but he is, in his own way, a comical figure too.

However, Mussolini practically invented fascist politics and fascist political institutions. He also, as they say, made the trains run on time; in a way, he was a modernizer. Trump pioneered nothing, his politics is atavistic, and his incompetency is legion.

The question therefore remains: how possibly could anyone concoct a charismatic figure out of someone so worthless? Winston Churchill called Russia "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." That Trump is as popular as he is is more incomprehensible still.

Needless to say, explanations abound. Many of them have merit, but, separately or together, none are entirely satisfactory. What they agree on, for the most part, is that the collective insanity feeds on grievances that are, at least to some extent, reality based. They also agree that those grievances are exacerbated by rightwing cable networks, talk radio, and social media.

Fair enough but, even if one sort or another of what we might as well call "fascism" would address the problem – say, by providing a cause and a community to those who would otherwise be leading lives of quiet desperation — was it really necessary to scrape the bottom of the barrel to put it together?

Perhaps we should be grateful that they did. A Dear Leader who is up to speed, compared to the great and not-so-great dictators of the past century, would have been far more dangerous. Now that we know not only that "it" can happen here but also what "it" could involve, we should start preparing for that eventuality.

As of this writing, it looks like Trump's hold over the GOP, and therefore over the Senators who will soon decide his fate, is secure. The man is guilty as sin of sedition and the Democrats could not have mounted a more masterful case to prove it, while Trump's legal team could hardly have done a worse job defending him.

But, barring divine intervention, the Senate will not convict. For that to happen, decency would have to break out on the Republican side. That is about as likely as that the sun will not rise tomorrow morning.

I find it hard not to feel ambivalent about this sorry state of affairs. Letting Trump off sets a bad precedent that could haunt the republic forever more. But his being there will harm the Republican Party and complicate the lives of the feckless presidential aspirants within its fold.

It is a Buridan's ass situation, if ever there was one.

For that reason, and because it is probably impossible in any case to make much progress on the "how possibly" question regarding Trump, it is best, at this point, just to accept whatever happens with equanimity and to deal with it as best we can.

Some of life's puzzlements just are and will remain forever inscrutable. Figuring out how Trump got and still retains the base he has would seem to be one of them.

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