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Madeleine Albright Warns of a New Fascism—and Trump

By Robin Wright

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On a Sunday morning in 2016, Donald Trump retweeted a quote from Benito Mussolini, the Italian dictator, Nazi ally, and leader of the first major Fascist movement. An account called @ilduce2016 had posted, “It is better to live one day as a lion than 100 years as a sheep.” (Il Duce was Mussolini’s popular honorific.) When Trump appeared on “Meet the Press” later that day, the host, Chuck Todd, asked Trump whether he liked the quote—and wanted to be associated with Fascists.

“Chuck, it’s O.K. to know it’s Mussolini. Look, Mussolini was Mussolini,” Trump, then in the early days of his Presidential run, [replied](#). “It’s a very good quote, it’s a very interesting quote, and I know it.” Trump then asked what difference it made whether the quote came from Mussolini or somebody else. “I want to be associated with interesting quotes,” he said. “And people, you know, I have almost fourteen million people between Instagram and Facebook and Twitter and all of that. And we do interesting things. And I sent it out.”

Trump, it turned out, had been duped. The now-defunct Gawker Web site had set up a phony parody account, @ilduce2016, to test Trump’s political views. It posted quotes from Mussolini’s writings and speeches, adding Trump’s hashtag and “#MakeAmericaGreatAgain” to each. After Trump’s retweet, Gawker [wrote](#), “Is Donald Trump a fascist? Experts, historians and pundits have debated the question for months. One thing has been certain for a while now: He *tweets* like one.”

It had been such an obvious ploy that John Cook, then Gawker Media’s executive editor, feared that it “wouldn’t trick anyone but a complete idiot.” The [photo on the account](#) was of Mussolini’s face with Trump’s bouffant coif.

It was a mean-spirited prank. [Trump is not Mussolini](#). But the incident and the tenor of our times reflect why Madeleine Albright, who fled European Fascism as a child and became America’s first female Secretary of State as an adult, tackles the prospects of radical authoritarian nationalism—or Fascism—returning today in her latest book. “[Fascism: A Warning](#),” written [with](#) Bill Woodward, is both provocative and scary. It begins with Il Duce, for context.

Mussolini called on his followers to believe in an Italy that would be “prosperous because it was self-sufficient and respected because it was feared,” Albright writes. “This was how twentieth-century fascism began: with a magnetic leader exploiting widespread dissatisfaction by promising all things.” Il Duce, who was Italy’s Prime Minister from 1922 until 1943, said that his mission was “to break the bones of the democrats . . . and the sooner the better.” He used the term “*drenare la palude*,” or “drain the swamp.” He had a talent for theatre, Albright notes, and was a poor listener who disliked hearing other people talk. He discouraged cabinet members from “proposing any idea that might cause him to doubt his instincts,” which, he insisted, were

always right. He also promoted the idea of national self-sufficiency “without ever grasping how unrealistic that ambition had become.”

[Adolf Hitler](#) catapulted to power in Germany using similar tactics in a similar environment—a craving by the people for direction that conventional politicians weren’t providing. He “lied incessantly about himself and about his enemies,” Albright writes. He convinced millions that he “cared for them deeply when, in fact, he would have willingly sacrificed them all.” Even Winston Churchill was duped, she recalls. In 1935, Churchill described Hitler as highly competent, with “an agreeable manner, a disarming smile, and few have been unaffected by a subtle personal magnetism.” Hitler and Mussolini were different, however, in a pivotal way: Hitler had an ideology—Nazism. Mussolini did not; his appeal was pure nativist populism.

The United States was not immune to the temptation of Fascism. In 1939, [Fritz Kuhn](#), who led the Nazi-affiliated German American Bund, famously attracted twenty thousand followers to an event at Madison Square Garden, which echoed with shouts of “*Seig Heil*.” (He ended up serving a four-year prison stint for tax evasion.) Senator Joe McCarthy, a Wisconsin Republican, was a showman who had “the mentality of a Fascist bully” and “the instincts of a Mussolini,” but lacked the intellect, Albright writes. McCarthy fooled many by using the demagogue’s trick: “repeat a lie often enough and it begins to sound like it must—or at least might—be so.” In 1940, the America First Committee included Nazi sympathizers—and claimed eight hundred thousand members within its first year.

The premise of Albright’s book is that the Fascism of a century ago was not atypical. “In hindsight, it is tempting to dismiss every Fascist of this era as a thoroughly bad guy or a lunatic, but that is too easy, also dangerous,” she writes. “Fascism is not an exception to humanity, but part of it.” In the early twenty-first century, authoritarian demagoguery and nativist populism are making inroads in Egypt, Hungary, North Korea, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela. It’s part of a global trend. Worldwide, seventy-two nations had limited freedoms and a decline in democratic health according to [The Economist’s Democracy Index](#) published in 2017.

“Anti-democratic leaders are winning democratic elections,” Albright writes, “and some of the world’s savviest politicians are moving closer to tyranny with each passing year.” Russian President Vladimir Putin isn’t a full-blown Fascist, but he has “flipped through Stalin’s copy of the totalitarian playbook and underlined passages of interest to call on when convenient.”

Albright’s linking of the past and the present is, at times, weak. “We are not there yet,” she acknowledges, “but these feel like signposts on the road back to an era when Fascism found nourishment and individual tragedies were multiplied millions-fold.” Mussolini’s political strategy, she notes, was to pluck a chicken one feather at a time, so that each squawk will be heard separately “and the whole process is kept as quiet as possible.”

The future of American politics is the subtext of Albright’s book. “The elephant rampaging through these pages is, of course, Donald Trump,” she writes. He won the Presidency “because he convinced enough voters in the right states that he was a teller of blunt truths, a masterful negotiator, and an effective champion of American interests. That he is none of those things

should disturb our sleep, but there is a larger cause for unease. Trump is the first antidemocratic president in modern U.S. history.”

There are other worrying signs. *The Economist's* index—which factors in due process, individual freedoms, and space for civil society—reduced the United States' ranking from a full democracy to a “flawed democracy.” In the early nineteen-sixties, more than seventy per cent of Americans told Pew researchers that they had faith in government “most of the time” or “just about always.” In 2016, faith had sunk below twenty per cent. American politics is increasingly defined by contempt rather than a sense of common good.

“We are becoming disconnected from the ideals that have long inspired and united us,” Albright warns. “It doesn't take much imagination to conceive of circumstances—another major recession, a corruption scandal, racial unrest, more terror incidents, assassination, a series of natural disasters, or a sudden plunge into an unexpected war—that might trigger a demand for answers that our Constitution, democracy's manual, is too slow to provide.”

Albright may have overstated where the United States is right now. She was Bill Clinton's Secretary of State and campaigned for Hillary. She was never going to support Trump, or like much about him, whatever her [respect for the American political system](#). But Albright—who, at eighty, still teaches at Georgetown University—does have serious credibility on the subject. She witnessed the evils of Fascism firsthand, as her book movingly chronicles. And she effectively makes the case: pay more attention to the signals, subtle and strong. A lot more.