

Gen. John Kelly, Donald Trump's longest-serving chief of staff, went public this week with his concerns that the former president met the definition of a fascist. Speaking to the New York Times, Kelly declared that Trump "would govern like a dictator if allowed". Days later in an interview vice-president Kamala Harris agreed with him.

Trump replied in his usual style. On Truth Social, he called Kelly a "degenerate ... who made up a story out of pure Trump Derangement Syndrome Hatred". He also posted on X, falsely accusing Harris of "going so far as to call me Adolf Hitler, and anything else that comes to her warped mind". In fact, Harris has not called him "Hitler". Funnily enough, it was his own running mate, J.D. Vance, who once called him "America's Hitler" in a private text message.

Helpfully, Kelly also provided a surprisingly rigorous definition of fascism, a term famously flexible as both a political concept and a political insult. He described it as "a far-right authoritarian, ultranationalist political ideology and movement characterised by a dictatorial leader, centralised autocracy, militarism, forcible suppression of opposition, belief in a natural social hierarchy".

This is remarkably close to widely accepted historical definitions of the political tendency that arose with the foundation of Italy's fascist movement in 1919 and spread across interwar Europe. Federico Finchelstein, professor of history at the New School for Social Research, has summed it up as "a political ideology that encompassed totalitarianism, state terrorism, imperialism, racism, and, in Germany's case ... the Holocaust".
Historians on fascism

Historians have been debating whether the term applies to Trump since his first presidential campaign and his election on November 9 2016. Very early on, in a 2015 conversation with a Vice reporter, Cornell University history professor Isabel Hull stated that Trump was "not principled enough to be a fascist". She described him as more of a "nativist-populist".

Finchelstein wrote an entire book to explain the difference between historical fascism and contemporary populism. While they share many features, he argued fascism is a form of dictatorship while populism functions within the boundaries of democracy.
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Yet, populism can turn into fascism when it resorts to the practices of identifying and persecuting internal enemies. Timothy Snyder, a professor of history and global affairs at Yale University, has repeatedly stated that Trump is indeed a fascist, recently telling Vanity Fair that Americans might just quietly adapt to the "banality" of tyranny.

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Finchelstein's own perspective evolved after January 6 2021, when Trump appeared to incite his supporters to attack the United States Capitol, in order to prevent a peaceful transfer of power to Joe Biden. In response, Finchelstein wrote an op-ed in The Washington Post in which he argued that Trump had outgrown the populist camp and was now assuming the fascist mantle as a definitive threat to democracy.

And Finchelstein was not the only one to consider January 6 an irrevocable turning point. Robert Paxton, Mellon professor emeritus of social sciences at Columbia University, also changed his mind, writing that the "[fascist] label now seems not just acceptable but necessary".

Others remain unconvinced. Richard Evans, an emeritus professor at Cambridge University, feels that Trump was not a fascist, arguing in the New Statesman that "6 January was not a coup" and "the attack on Congress was not a pre-planned attempt to seize the reins of government".

According to Evans, Trump doesn't display the classic fascist hunger for conquest and expansionist violence, and it is politically unwise for his opponents to fixate on a past category rather than analysing his politics as a new phenomenon.

Meanwhile, Ruth Ben-Ghiat, professor of history and Italian studies at New York University, remains more divided on the issue. She wrote in an essay that "in some ways, the label of

Fascism is too reductive for Trump” because he “praises Communist dictators as much as he praises the Fascistic leaders”, but “it is beyond doubt that Trump has provided a new stage and a new context for fascist ideologies and practices”.

I believe that Trump would act as fully-fledged fascist if he could. The question is: will the American people let him do so? He has, in fact, enacted fascist-lite policies to the extent that his power allowed.

He attempted to overturn a democratic election; he nominated Supreme Court justices to effectively overturn Roe v Wade and govern women’s bodies. He also created additional procedural barriers to prevent immigrants from seeking asylum in America, some of which are reminiscent of fascist racial laws. He also threatened to deploy the military and law enforcement to target political opponents.

However, he has so far been forced to operate within the boundaries of the democratic rule of law. If the American people vote him into power a second time, there is no guarantee that those boundaries will hold. If fascism repeats itself, it will be as tragedy again – not farce.