

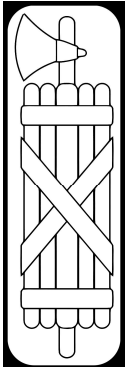
FASCISM:

The political philosophy that brought us WWII ... and the Holocaust.

But what is it, exactly? How does it come about? Perhaps most importantly: could America itself ever become a fascist state? Is there anything we can do to prevent it?

1. THE “F-WORD” OF POLITICS

Discussion Question: *What does the word “fascism” mean to you? What associations or images does it bring up in your mind?*



Benito Mussolini, the Italian dictator, coined the term “fascism” based on an ancient Roman symbol, the *fasces* ó a òbundleö of sticks bound around an axe, symbolizing the unification of all elements of a society. To Mussolini, the term meant especially “*the merger of state and corporate power.*”

Given the horrendous legacy of 20th-century fascism, there has been much discussion in recent years about the exact meaning and applicability of òfascismö in today’s world ó which governments or movements qualify as òfascist,ö whether fascism is strictly a òleft-wingö or òright-wingö phenomenon, whether racism is a necessary component, etc.

I suggest beginning with a very simple definition: òa political approach that strives to unify all elements of a society.ö Depending on the òunityö being sought, we see there could be many different kinds of fascism ó Christian or atheist, capitalist or socialist, liberal or conservative. No one has a monopoly on the term.

All such movements, however, are inherently anti-democratic. In a fascist state, *there are no competing interests* ó only the òinterestö of the State itself. Dissent is repressed ó by force if necessary (and somehow it always seems to become necessary). Democracy as we know it ceases to exist.

2. FASCISM AS “SOCIAL DISEASE”

We can also think of fascism as a “*disease*” of the body politic, a mental and emotional òdisorderö that can cause an entire society to act in strange and destructive ways. We can then use the language of *public health* and *epidemiology* to analyze its root causes, identify its symptoms, examine how it spreads, and determine ways that it can be prevented.

From this point of view, the question òCould America ever become fascist?ö is like the question òCould I get really sick?ö ó the answer to both is òOf course, if you fail to take care of yourself.ö Fascism is like the herpes virus ó an ever-present possibility, awaiting some challenge to the well-being of the system that will allow it to take a foothold and grow.

Discussion Questions:

- A. *Examine some of the “symptoms” of fascism. (See the articles by Britt, Wolf, and Eco listed in the Bibliography.) Which ones concern you the most? Which ones do you see as growing in today’s America? Which ones do you not see?*
- B. *Cholera, for example, spreads in the absence of proper sanitation. What are some of the “pre-existing conditions” that can allow fascist ideas and practices to spread?*
- C. *Sometimes, fascist regimes are democratically elected. What qualities of fascism might make it seem attractive or desirable to a population?*
- D. *What are some of the conditions present in American society today that could hinder or impede the development of fascism? (Our “immune system,” if you will.)*

òFighting fascism,ö then, is not an ill-defined struggle against some abstract òevilö force, but rather a series of *ongoing, specific, finite, doable tasks*: identify and rectify its root causes; minimize the factors that promote it; and bolster the factors that discourage it.

Preventing the development of fascism requires the continuous and proactive promotion of democratic values and ideals.

3. THREE LEVELS OF FASCISM, THREE LEVELS OF ACTION

Fascism operates on three levels of society:

- ☆ **Structural:** How the government actually operates (laws, courts, military, bureaucracy, elections, etc.); how citizens relate to the state
- ☆ **Cultural:** How citizens are expected to relate to each other; commonly accepted norms and standards of belief, expression and behavior
- ☆ **Personal:** How citizens actually conduct themselves in their everyday lives; the extent to which they internalize the influence of the structural and cultural levels.

So countermeasures must be taken at all three levels:

- ☆ **Structural:** There are many organizations & groups already in place that work to counter one or another of many of the òsymptomsö of fascism on the national stage (e.g., ACLU, Free Press, SPLC, Human Rights Watch, Public Citizen, etc.). ***Get involved with and support their work.***
- ☆ **Cultural:** There are certain cultural values that are anathematic to a fascist culture. These values include empathy, inclusiveness, awareness, joy, & creativity. ***Anything you do to encourage these values, therefore, is inherently counterfascist.***
- ☆ **Personal:** Think of the fascist state personified as a single individual. What is that person like? Contemplate its personality in detail, get to know it wellí and then ***strive to never become that person.*** Resist the pressure to become fearful of others, closed-minded, and unthinkingly obedient.

4. YOUR COUNTERFASCIST TOOLBOX...

What are the qualities, abilities, and resources you need to be effective at preserving democracy? Which do you have already? Which do you need to develop?

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Courage | <input type="checkbox"/> Community | <input type="checkbox"/> Communication |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding | <input type="checkbox"/> Knowledge | <input type="checkbox"/> Empathy |
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5. ...AND WHAT TO DO WITH IT

- ☆ Remain *aware & vigilant* (but not paranoid).
- ☆ Encourage *widespread civic participation and dialogue* ó let no group think it is öpowerlessö or ölocked outö (*especially* the folks you don't like).
- ☆ Keep power *diffuse* ó i.e., spread as widely and thinly as possible. Resist its tendency to become more centralized & concentrated.
- ☆ Press for greater levels of *transparency and accountability* in government and business.
- ☆ Encourage *awareness, communication, and mutual acceptance* between cultural groups.
- ☆ Create, join in with, maintain, and extend a sense of *community* around you.
- ☆ Remember that the triumph of fascism is not inevitable, and *can be prevented*.

Most importantly:

- ☆ *Refuse to be silent.*

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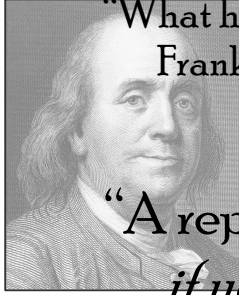
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"What have you given us, Dr.
Franklin? A republic, or a
monarchy?"

"A republic, ma'am –
if you can keep it."

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