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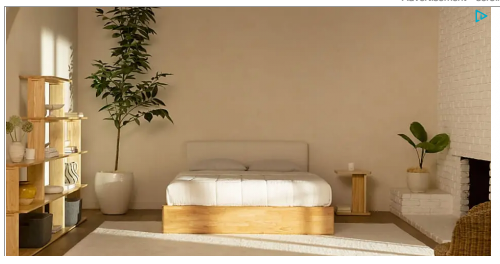

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ELECTIONS

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Trump's former chief of staff says he fits the definition of 'fascist.' What that means

Cybele Mayes-Osterman
USA TODAY

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Former Chief of Staff calls Trump a fascist
Former president Donald Trump's longest-serving Chief of Staff has gone on the record with concerning claims about his time in office. *Fox - Seattle*

(This story has been updated with new information.)

Former President Donald Trump's ex-White House chief of staff John Kelly said this week that the former president "falls into the general definition" of a fascist. Vice President Kamala Harris agreed with that assessment when asked about it in a CNN townhall.

Trump, for his part, has dismissed the criticism, saying it comes from a bully former aide who is seeking revenge. "It's - just couldn't be further from the truth," he told Fox News. "It's just the opposite, actually."

Many Americans may not know much about fascism other than that it brings to mind the fascist movements led by dictators such as Adolf Hitler in Germany and Benito Mussolini in Italy.

But what does it really mean for a leader to be a "fascist"?

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Benito Mussolini • Reign: 1922-1943 • Empire: Italian • Empire duration: 1922-1943 Benito Mussolini, Il Duce, had visions of a latter-day Roman Empire when he became leader of Italy in 1922. The Italian dictator attacked Ethiopia in 1935, gambling that the newly formed League of Nations would do nothing to stop him. Ethiopia was no match for Italy, but Italian successes on the battlefield would be few afterward. A campaign against Greece went badly and disaster was averted only when Germany, Italy's ally, intervened. Italian military disasters followed in North Africa. After the Allies invaded Italy itself in 1943, Mussolini was ousted when a fascist council asked King Victor Emmanuel III to resume his rule. ALSO READ: 25 Ancient Civilizations Destroyed by Natural Disasters *Photos.com / PHOTOS.com&gt&gt / Getty Images Plus*

What is fascism?

Kelly, a former Marine General who served as Trump's White House chief of staff from 2017 to 2019, said Trump is "certainly an authoritarian" who "prefers the dictator approach to government" in interviews with the New York Times.

"He certainly falls into the general definition of fascist, for sure," Kelly said.

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Kelly laid out a definition of fascism in the interview: "It's a far-right authoritarian, ultranationalist political ideology and movement characterized by a dictatorial

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leader, centralized autocracy, militarism, forcible suppression of opposition, belief in a natural social hierarchy," he said.

While different definitions abound, many experts agree that fascism is an extreme combination of nationalism and militarism, often accompanied by a cult of personality surrounding a leader.

The term "fascism" comes from the Italian word "fascio" – a bundle of sticks – representing a group of people united and held tightly together, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

Dec 3, 2018; Washington, DC, U.S.A; White House Chief of Staff John Kelly in attendance as President George H.W. Bush arrives to lie in state at the U.S. Capitol Rotunda. The late president will lie in state until 7 a.m. Wednesday, Dec. 5, 2018. Mandatory Credit: Jack Gruber-USA TODAY *Jack Gruber, Jack Gruber-USA TODAY NETWORK*

Fascism uses racist rhetoric

Many fascist movements use a combination of racism, xenophobia, antisemitism and ethnocentric nationalism to create "in" and "out" groups in society, in order to unite supporters against common enemies.

In the most famous example, the German Nazi Party promoted the idea of a superior race of white, Germanic Christians. Minorities – Jews, Roma people, gay people, disabled people – were seen as poisoning, or weakening society. This rhetoric eventually gave way to the regime's systematic arrest and mass murder of millions, including more than six million European Jews, according to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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"Fascist politics is about identifying enemies, appealing to the in-group (usually the majority group), and smashing truth and replacing it with power," Jason Stanley, a Yale University philosophy professor and the author of "How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them," said in an interview with Vox.

More: 'Alternate realities': Democrats and Republicans smear each other as 'fascists.' Is either right?

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'Cult of personality'

Fascism often glorifies one leader at the center of the movement as uniquely qualified to fix a broken government or system, according to the Council on Foreign Relations. Fascist leaders, nearly always male, often take on a hyper-masculine, macho presentation, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica.

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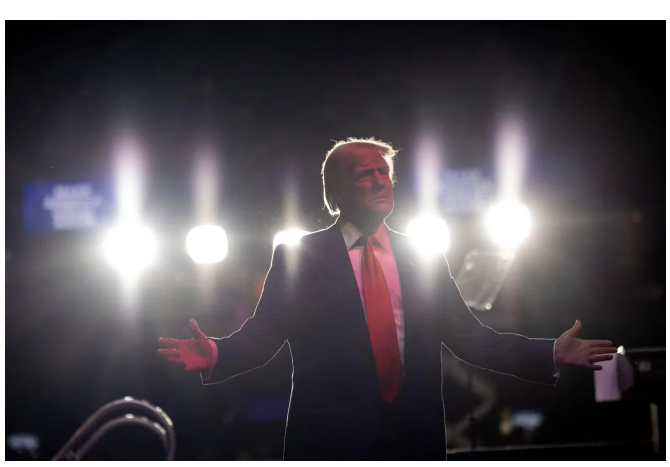
"These people are mass marketers. They pick up what's in the air," Ruth Ben-Ghiat, a historian of fascism and NYU professor, told the New Yorker in an interview on Trump's similarities with Mussolini.



Republican presidential nominee former U.S. President Donald Trump attends a rally at Mullett Arena in Tempe, Ariz., on Oct. 24, 2024. *Carlos Barria/Reuters*

Fascism encourages violence against political enemies

An ideology on the extreme right side of the political spectrum, fascism often points at socialists, communists, or other left-wing movements as common political enemies. In many cases, this feeds into violence, whether perpetrated by the state, military, or by supporters.

Mussolini, for instance, "mixed 'legal' state repression with 'illegal' squad violence," Michael R. Ebner, an associate professor of history in the Maxwell School at Syracuse University, and the author of "Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy," told the History Channel. "The police found cause to arrest and harass left-wing political opponents, while the squads could engage in beatings and assassinations to silence other critics."

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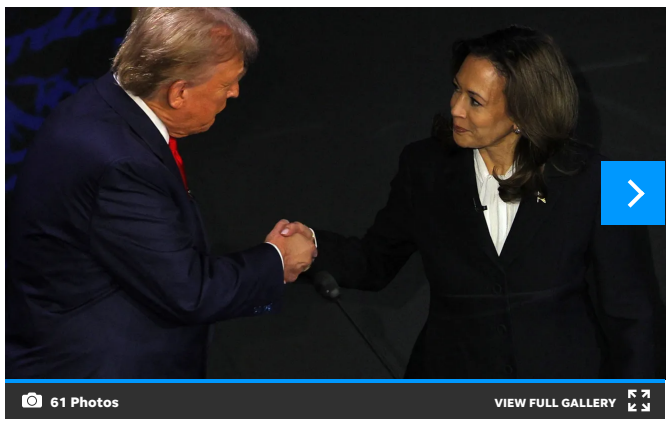
Sometimes, those common enemies are grouped together – Spanish dictator Francisco Franco portrayed the mass political violence carried out by his Nationalist party during the Spanish Civil War of the late 1930s as a "holy war," against a "Judeo-Masonic-Bolshevist" enemy, according to the Holocaust Museum.

Austria's Heimwehr movement dispatched volunteer militias to brutalize striking workers, while Mussolini banned trade unions and all "Marxist organizations," according to the Encyclopedia Britannica.

Fascist leaders often resort to violent means to stamp out political dissent. Under Augusto Pinochet, Chile's 17-year dictator, at least 3,000 people were killed or disappeared while around 40,000 were tortured during his campaign to root out communists and socialists.

"There's a state of siege declared. Political parties are outlawed. Universities are shut down. And a process of widespread arrest of political opponents begins to take place," Peter Siavelis, a professor of political science and international affairs at Wake Forest University, told NPR.



In Photos: Trump, Harris on the campaign trail ahead of 2024 presidential election
Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris and Republication presidential nominee Donald Trump campaign ahead of the 2024 November election.

Fascist leaders seek absolute power

Historically, fascist movements often arise in times of social, economic or political upheaval. They promise to alleviate hardship in exchange for absolute power.

The Nazis, for instance, built support as Germans suffered under the disastrous economic conditions of Germany's post-WWI Weimar Republic, according to the Wiener Holocaust Library.

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Fascist governments typically look to consolidate their political force and dismantle any democratic checks on their power. After he was appointed chancellor of Germany, Hitler used his power to suspend civil liberties and authorize police to make arrests without cause, according to the National WWII Museum.

"Fascisms take their first steps in reaction to claimed failings of democracy," political scientist Robert Paxton wrote in "The Five Stages of Fascism."

Cybele Mayes-Osterman is a breaking news reporter for USA Today. Reach her on email at cmayesosterman@usatoday.com. Follow her on X @CybeleMO.

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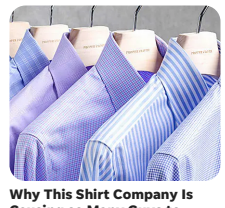

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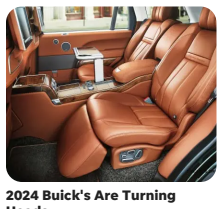

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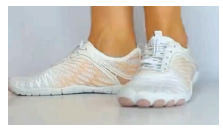

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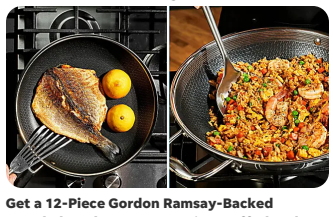

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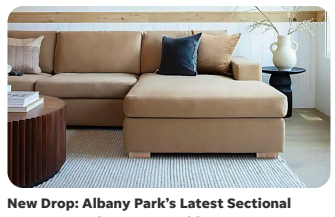

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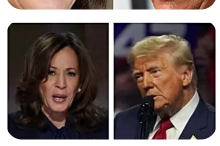

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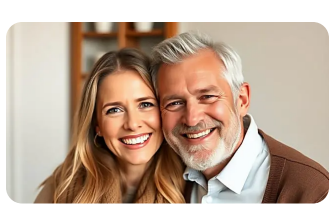

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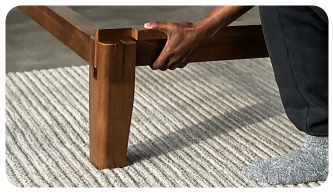

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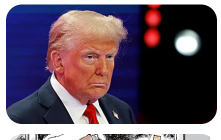

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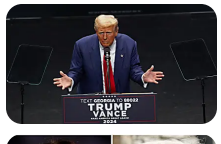

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