



## IT IS UP TO THE “ENEMIES WITHIN” TO SAVE AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

I return from another two weeks abroad, during which each conversation touched sooner or later on the US election. Why, I am repeatedly asked, is the election so close? I came prepared and had polling data and a range of explanations – including in respect of the economy, inflation, cost of living and the border. Invariably, the inquiries narrowed – how is it that the former president, who continues to maintain, against all evidence to the contrary, that he won the 2020 election and who sought to prevent the peaceful transfer of power, has the support of 46-48% of the American electorate. What is equally mystifying across the board is that so few of his supporters seem willing to take seriously, among what appears to be increasingly unhinged rants, the unmistakable roadmaps for inciting violence, if he does not win, and for ushering in an unprecedented assault on the rule of law and the Constitution, if he does win.

I [previously](#) have highlighted a litany of warnings from historians and political scientists about Trump’s threats, dating back to last September. I will return to those in a moment. What is astounding is that, in an election that is too close to call, Trump and his acolytes continue to ramp up rhetoric that is unmistakably the language of autocratic rulers, of dictators.

### “Enemies Within”

When asked last Sunday in an [interview](#) with Fox News to comment on concerns expressed by President Biden that there could be violence around the election, Trump, reprising comments made back in November 2023, said “the bigger problem is the enemy from within,” including “very bad people,” “sick people,” “radical left lunatics,” “who are more dangerous than China, Russia and all these countries.” Trump’s solution to countering the “enemies from within” ... calling out, if necessary, the National Guard and, if really necessary, the military. On Monday, at a rally in Pennsylvania, he doubled down accusing his political opponents of weaponizing the election. On Tuesday, in Chicago, he doubled down again in his Fox News town hall, when [questioned](#) about his “enemy within” comments, and, if there was any mystery as to who Trump was referring to, it was crystal clear on Tuesday, further confirmed yesterday, that for him the “enemy within” are Democrats.

We saw similar statements last Veterans Day when he proclaimed that “the real threat is not from the radical right; the real threat is from the radical left ... The threat from outside forces is far less sinister, dangerous, and grave than the threat from within. Our threat is from within.”

We have descended into the world of Orwell’s 1984. Given multiple opportunities to distance themselves from Trump’s most recent comments, [Senator JD Vance](#), [Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin](#) and [House Speaker Mike Johnson](#) all decline to do so. Mid-week, when Fox News host Bret Baier had his exchange with Vice President Harris regarding Trump’s statement, rather than play the clip of the Sunday Fox News interview, Fox instead ran a clip of a later interview where Trump responds to a question about the comments but edited out the question (Baier later [admitted](#) making a [mistake](#) ).



## Putting the Rhetoric into Context

Anne Applebaum's piece in The Atlantic this past week ("[Trump Is Speaking Like Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini](#)") is the latest in a line of articles that set out the worrying similarities between Trump's rhetoric and the rhetoric of autocrats. Others have cited fascist rulers (Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini), and Applebaum adds Joseph Stalin to the mix. Trump's "enemies within" is but the latest example of dangerous rhetoric of his that includes referring to immigrants (see [WSJ reporting](#) and [NYT reporting](#)):

- as "vermin" - "We pledge to you that we will root out the communists, Marxists, fascists and the radical left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country that lie and steal and cheat on elections." "They'll do anything, whether legally or illegally, to destroy America and to destroy the American Dream."
- who are "poisoning the blood of the country" or "destroying the blood of our country";
- who have "bad genes" and are "not humans, they are animals" – drawing from pseudo race science that until pulled into the mainstream by Trump typically inhabited the fringe of the extreme right ecosystems.

Hitler, Applebaum reminds us, praised Germans who had helped "cleanse Germany of all those parasites who drank at the well of the despair of the Fatherland and the People." Stalin referred to his opponents as "enemies of the people" and as vermin that needed to be subjected to "purification." Applebaum cites notes from a meeting of leaders of the East German secret police (the Stasi) that referred to a struggle against "vermin activities," namely the purge and arrest of critics of the regime. "Operation Vermin" was a Stasi operation to move suspicious East Germans away from the border with Germany.

Similarly, Applebaum notes that Mao described political enemies as "poisonous weeds" and the Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot called for "cleansing" Cambodians to purify the country. In the weeks leading up to the genocide in Rwanda, Hutu leaders referred to Tutsis as "cockroaches" and, in fact, as far back as 1959, as Peter Wehner reminds us ([Have You Listened Lately to What Trump Is Saying?](#)), Hutu leaders were referring to Tutsis as "vermin." In each case, the rhetoric was intended to dehumanize political opponents as a precursor to depriving them of rights, arresting them and/or murdering them.

And if you were wondering why Trump continues to double down on [unsubstantiated](#) (and since widely debunked, at least outside MAGA circles) claims of legal Haitian immigrants eating domestic pets, the Trump playbook remains the same – dehumanize, and create a permission structure for the removal of undocumented migrants and further crackdowns on legal migration.

The Trump campaign has borrowed from other fascist era themes. At a town hall in Pennsylvania last week during which Trump swayed to music for 39 minutes, the slogan "Trump was right about everything" appeared on the screen behind him, prompting NYU historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat to [juxtapose](#) that image with the fascist slogan "Mussolini is always right."



In May, Trump posted on Truth Social a quickly deleted [campaign video ad](#) whose black and white images, fonts and style [were characterized](#) by Ben-Ghiat as “highly reminiscent of fascist propaganda I have studied for many years.” What once again renewed the debate over Trump’s unabashed sympathies for authoritarian rulers were multiple references in this “What’s Next for America?” ad to “the creation of a unified Reich” and to World War I. This continues an all too frequent pattern of parroting Nazi rhetoric, of associating with Nazi symbolism and of otherwise incorporating in his campaign rallies phrases associated with fascist regimes.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

So, who are the “enemies within”? Trump apologists point to illegal migrants, but for the record when Trump speaks of threats from migration he may not distinguish between legal and illegal immigrants. And when one connects the dots through to other targets of Trump’s ire – leftists, fascists, Marxists, Communists – not to mention those whom he blames for “stealing the election from him, and most recently Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi and Rep. Adam Schiff, the “enemies within” takes on a far more sinister meaning. Yesterday, in his interview with Media Buzz’s Howard Kurtz, we have the following exchange “You call Americans who don’t support you ‘the enemy within.’ That’s a pretty ominous phrase to use about other Americans.” “I think that’s accurate,” Trump replied.

So, who then are the “enemies within”?

- They are the American citizens who insist that Joe Biden won the 2020 election and who believe the 2020 election was free of widespread fraud.
- They are the American citizens who saw the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> in person or on the screen and were repulsed by what they saw and cannot fathom how anyone could view that day as “[a day of beauty and love](#)” when “a small group of people went down to the Capitol and a lot of strange things happened including police ushering them into the Capitol.”
- They are the American citizens who believe Trump should be prosecuted for inciting an insurrection and for attempting to thwart the peaceful transfer of power.
- They are the American citizens who believe the men and women who serve our country, whether in the military or in public service (including FEMA first responders who provided assistance earlier this month following two hurricanes), should be respected and thanked for their service, rather than attacked and demeaned.
- They are the American citizens who disagree with Trump on climate change, on a woman’s right to make her own decisions about her body, and on the need for a ban on assault weapons and other reasonable solutions to address the scourge of gun violence.
- They are the American citizens who reject mass deportations of undocumented migrants and support the Biden’s administration’s unprecedented set of legislative solutions to begin to fix our broken immigration system.
- They are the American citizens who embrace the rule of law and the Constitution.



Trump’s ever widening list of grievances should not mask what is truly at stake here. We should not allow his frequent repetitions intermixed with simply bizarre pronouncements (most recently, Arnold Palmer’s anatomy) to normalize the rhetoric and, more importantly, we should not lose sight of the fact that the rhetoric represents a roadmap to authoritarian rule. This is not merely background noise, and Trump is not remotely bluffing.

We, the “enemies within,” must do our part – vote, urge others to vote, canvass, send letters or postcards, participate in phone-banking, volunteer to be poll watcher, donate.

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