

# Merion West ■

## Nemeth: If “Fascism” Comes, Will It Come from the Left?

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“While perhaps progressive values are well-intentioned, their tactics have been disastrous and have threatened all of our freedoms, not to mention undermining core American ideas like due process.”S

In a 1975 interview with 60 Minutes, President Ronald Reagan remarked, “You know, someone very profoundly once said many years ago that if fascism ever comes to America, it will come in the name of liberalism.” In January 2008, conservative author and National Review contributor Jonah Goldberg similarly argued that fascist movements were, and are, left-wing.

Classical liberalism, the political philosophy embraced by both President Reagan and Mr. Goldberg, is based upon the ideals of liberty and equality; progressivism, on the other hand, is a political philosophy based on the ideas of equality and government intervention to reform social systems. As President Reagan noted, “Fascism is private ownership, private enterprise, but total government control and regulation. Well, isn’t this the liberal philosophy?” Juan Linz, a Spanish sociologist and political scientist at Yale, argues that authoritarianism can be characterized by four qualities: 1) constraints on political institutions and groups, 2) a basis for legitimacy based on emotion, 3) “minimal social mobilization most often caused by constraints on the public such as suppression of political opponents,” and 4) informally defined executive power with often vague and shifting powers.

These days, progressives seem to have found a habit of describing their opponents as “fascist.” Bari Weiss at The New York Times lists numerous circumstances where seemingly rational individuals are labeled fascists. Such examples include Christina Hoff-Sommers, a critic of contemporary feminism, being shouted down and silenced at Lewis & Clark Law School and Mary Beard, a self-described “bloody lefty,” being deemed an “absolute monster” for questioning the unethical behavior of some in a disaster zone in Haiti.

Furthermore, “A 2017 Cato Institute survey found that 52 percent of self-identified Democrats, of all ages, viewed government suppression of offensive speech as more important than the unfettered right to say whatever one wants,” writes Tucker Carlson in *Ships of Fools*. This is a particularly chilling depiction of modern discourse given our nation’s history of promoting “freedom” and “liberty.”

The American government has endured throughout time largely due to its classical liberal tradition. In recent years, however, there appears to be an uptick in political violence, efforts by journalists to dox or expose individuals personal information, and heightened rhetoric accusing opponents of exaggerated crimes. This toxic combination, along with the role

of social media-created echo chambers, may lead America dangerously in the direction of the unfree or, at worst, the fascist.

American political violence is not a new concept. From the tensions between loyalists and patriots early on, political violence has divided America; members of the Ku Klux Klan terrorized and brutally murdered freed slaves and supporters of abolition. Later on, proponents of segregation sometimes turned to violence against African-Americans and advocates for desegregation. In the 1960's, Vietnam War protesters clashed with law enforcement, and the national guard gunned down students. It is not far fetched to conclude that some instances of violence, including the shooting of members of Congress, seen since 2016 are likely to be remembered along with these events. One particularly egregious agitator, however, in recent years has been Antifa, "a conglomeration of left wing autonomous, militant anti-fascist groups in the United States." Ironically, Antifa engages in property damage, physical violence, and harassment of those whom they determine to be fascists, racists, Alt-Right, or nuisances.

Antifa, along with other left-wing groups, was engaged in protests against the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President. The most notable Antifa protest was in February 2017 at University of California-Berkeley. The local Antifa group labeled Milo Yiannopoulos, a right-wing provocateur, as alt-right. This protest was covered by mainstream media because Antifa reportedly threw Molotov cocktails and smashed windows, causing roughly \$100,000 worth of damage. Antifa was also prominent at the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. To be clear, the Unite the Right rally was an undoubtedly racist, neo-Nazi event; however, Antifa's provocative tactics did little to diffuse the situation. Antifa counter-protesters reportedly "used clubs and dyed liquids against the white supremacists." NPR notes, "in Charlottesville, Antifa protesters chanted that people should 'punch a Nazi in the mouth.'" The terms "Alt-Right" or "Nazi" are informally defined and vague, a technique that has resulted in some liberals being attacked over mere disagreement on tactics.

It's not just the young activists who make up Antifa. The mainstream media, the Left's biggest ally today, is very much part of the problem. Recently, the media pushed the false story that a group of young, white male teenagers from Covington Catholic High School verbally abused Nathan Phillips, a Native American veteran. Aside from the media's focus on a single confrontation during the March for Life, a narrative was constructed using only a small portion of a two hour long video. Media reporting alleged that the teenagers were harassing Phillips; however, further evidence indicated that the Covington Catholic teenagers were instead confronted by Phillips and his entourage of Native American activists. Despite apologies from some journalists, the damage to the school's and the students' reputations had been solidified. The media's malfeasance and bias in the Covington Catholic incident follows a trend of egregious reporting errors in the anti-conservative direction. Timothy Carney says, "News media bias is real. It reduces the quality of journalism, and it fosters distrust among readers and viewers. This is bad for democracy." The Kavanaugh hearings were perhaps the worst of it.

What's more fascist than sidestepping due process and engaging in calculated character assassination? When it comes to conservative judicial nominees, the Left has been at this for a while. Most problematic with the progressive opposition to Kavanaugh's confirmation is the unfalsifiable nature of the allegation. Mainstream media outlets narrowed in on potential gaps in Kavanaugh's evidence of innocence, while ignoring the reality that Dr. Ford provided

insufficient evidence to prove his guilt. Progressives used pure emotion in their attempt to sway the public, and they almost prevailed.

The media's efforts to smear Judge Kavanaugh were reminiscent of past efforts to do the same to Judge Robert Bork and Justice Clarence Thomas, whose nomination was nearly derailed over a sexual misconduct allegation. In addition, progressive Democrat Senators Mazie Hirono and Kamala Harris "grilled" a judicial nominee over his membership in the Knights of Columbus, in essence a violation of the Constitution's bar on religious tests, because of the group's positions on social issues.

Gaslighting is a term psychologists use to refer to manipulation "where the manipulator is trying to get someone else to question their own reality, memory or perceptions." Individuals use this tactic to convince others of a reality that may not, in fact, exist. Authoritarians are known for their ability to convince the masses with emotion. Media outlets have, knowingly or unknowingly, convinced the public of specific narratives, such as in the case of the Covington Catholic students. The narrative they paint may be incompatible with concrete evidence, but the lack of hard evidence no longer matters much. And when that fails, progressives turn to heightened rhetoric. Take, for instance, Senator Bernie Sander's claim that "millions of people will die" if the Affordable Care Act were to be partially repealed. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said, "the world is going to end in 12 years if we don't address climate change."

Some progressives claim that income inequality is now a crisis. The most radical claim yet is that the Republican tax rate cut bill will cause roughly 10,000 more Americans to die each year. Republicans, of course, do this too, such as when the President claims that countless terrorists and are pouring across the Southern border, but the Left is the worst offender. Progressives and President Trump are all correct to point out specific issues that voters find impactful; however, their insistence on labeling everything "a crisis" will undoubtedly lead to excessive government interference into daily life, a phenomenon consistent with Reagan's analysis of fascism.

Fascism is an ideology that centers on power, and Yale philosopher Jason Stanley refers to it as "a technique to gain power." Consistent with Linz' characterization of authoritarianism, progressives have successfully used slanderous tactics to vilify their opponents as racists and they have mobilized into militant groups in order to combat and silence opponents. Through gaslighting, progressives have generated narratives using ideologically-friendly journalists to smear their opponents. In addition, their use of heightened rhetoric has led many grassroots activists to believe in the imminent moral threat posed by their opponents' policy prescriptions. While perhaps progressive values are well-intentioned, their tactics have been disastrous and have threatened all of our freedoms, not to mention undermining core American ideas like due process. However, these progressive values are, nonetheless, unenforceable without coercing others into complying with their agenda through the use of social pressure and government force.