

# The Delray Democrat

## “It Can’t Happen Here.” America’s Flirtations with Fascism<sup>1</sup>

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Sinclair Lewis’s Depression-era novel *It Can’t Happen Here* imagined America’s descent into fascism after a populist demagogue is elected president on a platform of making America great again. Sound familiar?

The book’s ironic title is invoked whenever fascism rears its ugly head. After Donald Trump squeaked out an electoral college win in 2016, many proclaimed “It *Has* Happened Here.”

But Trump is not the first demagogue to threaten our democracy. Senator Joseph McCarthy destroyed countless lives with his serial defamations, but he was undone when America got a closer look at him during 6 weeks of televised hearings that culminated in Joseph Welch’s iconic accusation: “Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?”

The same charge has often been leveled at Trump, and his unhinged, despicable public performances this year suggest he may face a similar reckoning. Still, it is a long way to November, and would-be tyrants are at their most dangerous when their grip on power is threatened.

### “Would It Be Any Different If We Had Only a State Media?”

If George W. Bush appears thoughtful and compassionate next to Trump, in the aftermath of 9/11 his administration was spreading lies about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein, and these lies were accepted uncritically by our corporate media. One study found that in the two weeks leading up to the invasion of Iraq, only 5 of the 404 talking heads who appeared on television opposed the invasion of Iraq – and that study *excluded* Fox.

The president of CNN later bragged of bringing the White House a list of former four-star admirals and generals being considered as color commentators and getting “the thumbs up on every one.” The progressive journalist Amy Goodman pointedly asked, “how would it be any different if we had only a state media?”

Corporate control of government is the other face of fascism, and it surged during the Bush administration. Lobbyists wrote legislation that sailed through the Republican Congress to be signed into law, and government regulation of the financial industry was virtually nonexistent.

### “Worst Job in America Given to a Black Man”

The resultant economic collapse was so severe and so damaging to the Republican brand that the country did what had once been unthinkable – it elected an African-American president. The

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<sup>1</sup> *The Delray Democrat*, June 2020, p. 1.

headline in the satirical magazine *The Onion* the day after Obama's victory captured the moment perfectly: "Worst Job in America Given to a BlackMan."

Barack Obama proved up to the challenge. He prevented a second Great Depression, created 11 million jobs, saved the American auto industry, and launched America's longest postwar recovery. The Affordable Care Act helped 20 million previously uninsured Americans obtain health insurance, which translates to tens of thousands saved from premature, preventable deaths.

### **Fascism-Lite**

The only thing more likely to enrage a racist than a black man in our highest office is a highly effective, widely admired black man in that office. Claims that Obama's election heralded a post-racial society were soon exposed as wishful thinking.

Republicans exploited that racial animus to win back the House and numerous State Houses in 2010. In Congress they betrayed their supporters by opposing and/or diluting legislation that would have helped them weather the Great Recession.

At the state level, they raised gerrymandering to a level never previously seen in America. Although Republicans received 1.4 million fewer votes nationally in 2012, they retained control of the House by a margin of [234 to 201](#).

They continued to be overrepresented in the House in every subsequent election. Aided and abetted by the judicial activism of a Republican-majority Supreme Court, they engaged in widespread voter suppression. Let's call it "fascism-lite."

### **Behold the Beast**

Republicans could hobble Obama and betray their own voters but they couldn't win back the White House. What they lacked was a demagogue. Enter Trump.

No one despises Obama more than Donald Trump. This is hardly surprising since Obama is everything that Donald Trump is not – articulate, graceful, witty, effective, intelligent, highly educated, accomplished, and self-made.

At first blush, Trump's initial skirmish with Obama – becoming the face of the Birther movement – may seem to have been a humiliating failure. Obama released his birth certificates and then ridiculed him at the White House Correspondents Dinner: "But no one is happier, no one is prouder, to put this birth certificate matter to rest than the Donald. And that's because he can finally get back to focusing on the issues that matter, like, did we fake the moon landing?"

But Trump had the last laugh. When he began his presidential bid five years later, a [poll found](#) that 72% percent of registered Republicans doubted Obama's natural citizenship. It was Trump's first Big Lie on the way to the White House.

Perhaps the most odious Big Lie, the one most associated with fascism, involves his attacks on the media. Widely respected and essentially centrist institutions are "Fake News" and their reporters are "enemies of the people." These denunciations, reeking of the Nazi Era in which they were

finely honed, belong only in the dictatorships that Trump so openly admires.

### **“Who You Gonna Believe, Me or Your Lyin’ Eyes?”**

In the world according to Trump, truth is what he tweets. If you saw something different, well, as Groucho said, “who you gonna believe, me or your lyin’ eyes?”

Unfortunately for Trump, but fortunately for our democracy and the planet, Americans have been appalled by what they have seen and heard as Trump bloviates, free-associates, lies, and is repeatedly corrected by scientists at his coronavirus press conferences. They were horrified by his crazy talk about injecting toxic household products and the budding realization that he had absolutely no clue how to manage the first crisis of his presidency that was not self-inflicted. And they were appalled to hear him brag of his ratings as tens of thousands of Americans died and tens of millions more became unemployed.

His first response to the threat posed by the virus was magical thinking – “when it gets a little warmer, it miraculously goes away.” After reality intervened, and the shutdown measures needed to flatten the virus curve began flattening the economy as well, he claimed “we can’t let the cure be worse than the disease.”

That is another Big Lie. We can’t poll them but it’s fair to say the 109,213 people (through June 6) who have died would beg to differ, and polls show that an overwhelming majority of Americans also favor stay at home orders. Moreover, a recent study at Columbia University estimated that 36,000 lives would have been saved if the United States had started imposing social distancing measures only one week earlier, with 54,000 saved if the measures had been adopted two weeks earlier.

### **Slouching Towards Bethlehem**

Of course, fascists don’t care about polls, so long as they have Brown Shirts like the thugs who invaded Michigan’s capitol. [Armed with assault rifles](#) they took up positions in the gallery above the chamber in which lawmakers debated an extension of Governor Gretchen Whitmer’s stay-at-home orders. Trump tweeted that the protestors were “[very good people](#)” and suggested that Whitmer should “make a deal with them.”

In a civil society “good people” don’t join mobs that menace elected officials attempting to do their jobs, and in a democracy they don’t get to make a deal when [four of five](#) citizens support the positions taken by those officials. Those of us who asked rhetorically how Trump and police would have reacted if the protesters had been black did not have to wait long for confirmation.

After a Minneapolis policeman with 18 prior complaints against him brutally murdered a non-resisting man, George Floyd, protests were widespread. Those protesting yet another unarmed, unresisting black man were “thugs” who should be shot, declared Donald Trump, a man for whom the word “miscreant” was created. While protests led to violence and looting (some of it provoked by Fifth Columnists), there are widespread [videos](#) of peaceful protestors being attacked by police.

At the same time Trump is also recklessly doubling-down on his attacks on the media. Journalists covering the protests are “[truly bad people with a sick agenda.](#)” This has encouraged [police attacks](#)

[on journalists](#), one of whom was blinded in her left eye after police fired a bullet directly at her.

With protests showing no sign of slowing, and humiliated by reports that he hid in the White House basement from protests across the street, the creature whom J.K. Rowling aptly called “you tiny, tiny, tiny man” struck back.

He ordered police to disperse the protesters so that he could have a photo-op at St. John’s Church, where it turns out he was neither expected nor welcome. Then he held a Bible upside down as he struck a solemn pose.

Trump is in free fall and sees chaos and violence and disinformation as his parachutes. If you’re not worried about what Trump will do to hold onto power, you haven’t been paying attention. Cancel the election? Have Barr announce a criminal investigation of Joe Biden? Refuse to accept a loss?

Trump has readied a new Big Lie if he loses: voting by mail is “substantially fraudulent.” Anybody who believes we can rely on Republicans to uphold their oaths to the Constitution if Trump is defeated and attempts a putsch hasn’t been paying attention to their serial betrayals of those oaths for 3½ years.

In “The Second Coming,” Ireland’s great poet William Butler Yeats described a time when “the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” He ended the poem with the lines “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born.”

Few people thought rough beast could be elected in 2016, so polls predicting his defeat in November must be taken with a heavy helping of salt. If the good people of this country do not pour out to Vote Blue, No Matter Who, Trump can and will win. And that will be how fascism finally comes to America.