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The Threat of Authoritarianism in the U.S. is Very Real, and Has Nothing To Do With Trump

The COVID-driven centralization of economic power and information control in the hands of a few corporate monopolies poses enduring threats to political

Asserting that Trump is a fascist-like dictator threatening the foundations of US democracy has been a virtual requirement over the last 4 years to obtain entrance to cable news Green Rooms, sinecures as mainstream newspaper columnists, and popularity in faculty lounges.

Yet it has proven to be a preposterous farce.

In 2020 alone, Trump had 2 perfectly crafted opportunities to seize authoritarian power—a global health pandemic and protests and sustained riots throughout American cities—yet he did virtually nothing to exploit those opportunities.

Early in the pandemic, Trump was criticized, especially by Democrats, for failing to assert the powers he had, such as commandeering the means of industrial production under the Defense Production Act, invoked by Truman to force industry to produce materials for the Korean War.

In March, The Washington Post reported that “Governors, Democrats in Congress and some Senate Republicans have been urging Trump for at least a week to invoke the act, and... Joe Biden came out in favor of it, too,” yet “Trump [gave] a variety of reasons for not doing so.”

Rejecting demands to exploit a public health pandemic to assert extraordinary powers is not exactly what one expects from a striving dictator.

Virtually every prediction expressed by those who pushed this doomsday narrative of Trump as a rising dictator — usually with great profit for themselves — never materialized. While Trump escalated bombing campaigns he inherited from Bush and Obama, he started no new wars.

When his policies were declared by courts to be unconstitutional, he either revised them to comport with judicial requirements or withdrew them.

No journalists were jailed for criticizing or reporting negatively on Trump, let alone killed, as was endlessly predicted and sometimes even implied.

Bashing Trump was far more likely to yield best-selling books, social media stardom and new contracts as cable news “analysts” than interment in gulags or state reprisals. There were no Proud Boy insurrections or right-wing militias waging civil war in U.S. cities.

The hysterical Trump-as-despot script was all melodrama, a ploy for profits and ratings, and, most of all, a potent instrument to distract from the neoliberal ideology that gave rise to Trump in the first place by causing so much wreckage.

Positing Trump as a grand aberration from US politics and as prime author of America’s woes enabled those who have so much blood and economic destruction on their hands not only to evade responsibility, but to rehabilitate themselves as the guardians of freedom and prosperity.