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The Return of Mussolini

— EMILIO IODICE, ROME, ITALY



Benito Mussolini, 1919. Courtesy, Biografiaonline and Istituto Luce

We have buried the putrid corpse of liberty.

It is the State which educates its citizens in civic virtue, gives them a consciousness of their mission and welds them into unity.

The truth is that men are tired of liberty.

All within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state.

— *Benito Mussolini*

Power is not a means; it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution to establish the dictatorship.

Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing.

War Is Peace. Freedom Is Slavery. Ignorance Is Strength. — George Orwell, 1984

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

— *Edmund Burke*

For King and Country



Mussolini as the Image of "Il Duce" (The Leader) and his followers. Courtesy, photo credit, all posters.co.uk

I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually. — James Baldwin

I never considered myself a patriot. I like to think I recognize only humanity as my nation. — Isaac Asimov

Patriotism is voluntary. It is a feeling of loyalty and allegiance that is the result of knowledge and belief. A patriot shows their patriotism through their actions, by their choice. — Jesse Ventura

"In 1933 the Oxford Union, the university undergraduate debating society, passed a famous motion that *This House would not in any circumstances fight for King and Country*. It made headline news at the time: Churchill called the vote 'abject, squalid, shameful' and 'nauseating,' and it is even said to have misled Hitler into thinking the British had lost the will to fight."¹

Obviously, the debate in one of the United Kingdom's most elite institutions did not represent the thinking of all the people. Oxford University undergraduates came from the wealthy upper class of English society and were hardly examples of the entire British population of that era. Yet they were highly educated, well-read, and well-informed and felt they had the ability to debate philosophical issues as profound as loyalty and patriotism and war and peace.

The students, of course, were young and, at times, youth tend to take extreme positions, which in this case, they knew would invoke a strong political and social reaction. Even so, Oxford was an influential institution, and their students were a group with a voice heard across the British Isles and into the Continent.

These same undergraduates would govern the nation someday.

¹ <https://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/education/churchill-era/exercises/appeasement/king-country-debate/>

Obviously, with hindsight, we know that little was known of Hitler's plans and intentions in 1933 and some of the same young men who participated in the debate, fought for "King and Country" when Britain went to war in 1939.

In effect, the Oxford debate sent mixed signals to the government as to what was *the will of the people* as happened in another celebrated test of democracy one year later.

The Peace Ballot

To conquer a nation, first disarm its citizens. — Adolf Hitler

The League of Nations was created at the end of World War I to be an organization of international cooperation and to pursue the peaceful resolution of conflicts. In addition to the League's headquarters in Geneva, there was a European network of the local chapter's part of the *League of Nations Union*. Members debated local issues and current events, passed resolutions, and sent them to political officials and leaders in League headquarters.

"In 1934 a branch of the *League of Nations Union* in Ilford in Essex got together with the local newspaper and organized a local referendum asking people's views about the League, about the Locarno treaties, about disarmament and about the arms trade. The vote was overwhelmingly in favor of the League; moreover, many more people voted than turned out in local elections. The leaders of the League of Nations Union, along with several church and women's groups also campaigning for peace, thought it would be worth holding a national ballot along similar lines to the Ilford one, to gauge public opinion across the whole country. The ballot was held in the autumn of 1934 and the results announced in the early summer of 1935."²

Over eleven and half million people voted. It was almost half of the voting age population of the United Kingdom. They voted overwhelmingly in favor of the League. The results sent shock waves through the British political system, especially when the questions on the ballot were revealed along with the specific votes cast:

What did the ballot actually ask? There were five questions:

- 1. Should Britain remain a member of the League of Nations? (Over 90% answered "Yes")*
- 2. Are you in favor of an all-round reduction of armaments by international agreement? (Over 90% answered "Yes")*
- 3. Are you in favor of the all-round abolition of national military and naval aircraft by international agreement? (Over 80% answered "Yes")*
- 4. Should the manufacture and sale of armaments for private profit be prohibited by international agreement? (Over 90% answered "Yes")*
- 5. Do you consider that, if a nation insists on attacking another, the other nations should combine to compel it to stop, by:*
 - a) economic and non-military measures? (Over 90% answered "Yes")*
 - b) if necessary, military measures? (Over 70% answered "Yes")³*

The British ruling class could not ignore the voice of nearly twelve million voters. It influenced the thinking of Prime Minister Baldwin who supported a cautious foreign policy even as Hitler used violence to consolidate his power and Mussolini invaded Abyssinia.

British and European leaders in the 1930s indirectly promoted the expansion of totalitarianism and the deterioration of democracy through appeasement and weak governments. The Great Depression and growing social economic turmoil also strengthened the hand of despots.

² <https://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/education/churchill-era/exercises/appeasement/peace-ballot-1934-35/>

³ Ibid.

The best way to take control over a people and control them utterly is to take a little of their freedom at a time, to erode rights by a thousand tiny and almost imperceptible reductions. In this way, the people will not see those rights and freedoms being removed until past the point at which these changes cannot be reversed. — Adolf Hitler

*Fascism draws energy from men and women who are upset because of a lost war, a lost job, a memory of humiliation, or a sense that their country is in steep decline. The more painful the grounds for resentment, the easier it is for a Fascist leader to gain followers by dangling the prospect of renewal or by vowing to take back what has been stolen. It is easier to remove tyrants and destroy concentration camps than to kill the ideas that gave them birth.
— Madeleine K. Albright*

The Return of Il Duce

“It’s me,” roars a bombastic Benito Mussolini as he returns to the land, he governed for twenty years with an iron hand.

Shortly after falling from the sky and passing through the doors that separate life and death, Il Duce finds himself in the Eternal City where a distraught movie director discovers him and begins a media spectacle around the founder of the Fascist Party who the director thinks he is a talented but eccentric comedian dressed up as the great dictator.



Courtesy, *Sono Tornato*, Luca Miniero

The movie maker uses him to create a new television program that gains popularity for its amusement and false sense of reality. In the end, he discovers that it is not an impersonator but *Il Duce himself* who, through some miracle, has come back and is now on the eve of returning to power.

Of course, it's fiction. The 2018 Italian movie, *Sono Tornato (I'm Back)*, is a satire directed by Luca Miniero. It is filled with vignettes and impressions of life as it is today, according to Mussolini, who uses his charisma to seduce people to his philosophy so they will, once more, entrust their lives and sacred fortunes to him. While the film is a spoof about populism and tyranny, the underlying vision is provocative.

The fascination with dictatorial rule still exists.

The thought is frightening.

It is a nightmare that does not disappear even with the terrifying visions of history filled with violence, cruelty, and war waged by right and left-wing tyrants.

The garden in which the first modern seeds of Fascism were planted was Italy. According to many, the country still has not come to grips with Mussolini and his regime.

Francesco Filippi has written about the deep Fascist roots ingrained in Italian society that still bear fruit. His most recent book, *Ma Perché Siamo Ancora Fascisti (Why Are We Still Fascists)* asserts that Italians have never come to grips with their tyrannical past. He questions as to how an intelligent and cultured people can forget the disastrous wars, millions of deaths, and untold

suffering, the enduring shame of Mussolini's racial laws, the suppression of freedom and a bloody civil war. Swastikas, Fascist symbols and anti-Semitism are growing in Italy and other parts of Europe.

What we are seeing may not be a return to Fascism as it appeared in the 20th century. Instead, it may be the thinking that laid the foundation for totalitarianism to rise and take control.

After World War I, Europe was in turmoil, dealing with the aftermath of the disastrous conflict. Governments were weakened by deficits and the inability to resolve problems and get things done. Italy was a case in point. One government after another fell from power up from 1919 to 1922, until Benito Mussolini's Black Shirts marched on Rome, in October 1922 and the King offered him the task of Prime Minister.

From his election to Parliament to become the nation's leader took only seventeen months.

Nobody has ever denied that I am possessed of these three qualities: a discreet intelligence, a lot of courage and an utter contempt for the lure of money. — Benito Mussolini

Fascism: A Warning

Two US Secretaries of State who lived under Fascism were Henry Kissinger and Madeline Albright. He fled Nazi Germany in 1938 to settle in New York. She was born in Czechoslovakia. Her family escaped the Nazis at the beginning of World War II and then the Communists in 1948 to finally reach America. Later in life, she discovered 26 members of her family were victims of the Holocaust.



Courtesy, US Department of State

From a personal and professional point of view Albright developed a clear understanding of Fascism and wrote about it in her 2018 book, *Fascism, A Warning*.

Albright analyzes the rise of Fascism from the start of the twentieth century in Europe. From this study, she discovers patterns which emerge that are common denominators of present-day totalitarian regimes.

In 2021, for example, according to Freedom House, there were 50 dictatorships in the world: twelve in the Middle East and North Africa, eight in Asia-Pacific, seven in Eurasia, nineteen in Sub-Saharan Africa, three in the Americas, and one in Europe.⁴

Each of these rose from political and economic turmoil, which is the fertile ground for Fascism, according to Albright.

Fascism flourishes alongside economic, social and political chaos. Take the classic cases of interwar Germany and Italy. The Weimar Republic was buffeted by the Great Inflation and the Great Depression, violent left- and right-wing uprisings and the humiliation of a lost war, together with a punitive peace. Interwar Italy was battered by high inflation and unemployment and paralyzed for almost two years by strikes and lockouts as left- and right-wing gangs battled in the streets. These conditions resulted in citizens who were fearful and desperate.⁵

⁴ <https://planetrulers.com/current-dictators/>

⁵ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/madeleine-albright-warns-of-a-new-fascism-and-trump>

Democracies in the 1930s, like in the United Kingdom, most of Europe, and the United States, preferred isolationism, appeasement, and “peace at any price” and gave into the bullying tactics of Hitler and Mussolini to avoid conflict which allowed tyrannical regimes to flourish without serious international condemnation.

Albright explains similar dynamics are happening today. The dictatorship of Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela, the strong-arm rule of Viktor Orban in Hungary, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey are contemporary cases. These leaders emerged following serious economic decline. Problems of mass unemployment and social unrest are the soil for Fascists as are weak democracies and divided oppositions.

In interwar Italy liberal governments dithered while the country slid into chaos and the two largest parties, the Socialists and Christian Democrats, were more interested in defending the interests of their particular constituencies than democracy. In the Weimar Republic, the country's largest party, the Social Democrats, was more committed to democracy than its Italian counterpart, but it too faltered during the Great Depression and was continually attacked by antidemocratic left- and right-wing forces. While their opponents fought among themselves and let their country's troubles deepen, Fascists offered voters simple explanations of their problems in the form of enemies like nefarious foreign powers or Jews, and simple solutions to them, namely replacing weak and unresponsive democracies with strong dictatorships truly responsive to “the people.” Adolf Hitler once explained: “I will tell you what has carried me to the position I have reached. Our political problems appeared complicated. The German people could make nothing of them. ... I, on the other hand ... reduced them to the simplest terms. The masses realized this and followed me.”⁶

Once Mussolini was given ultimate power, according to Albright, he set about creating good government. Italians were exhausted from bureaucracy, political corruption, inefficiency, lack of jobs and opportunities to use their talents. Il Duce attacked the public sector and set about controlling and transforming it.

He insisted on daily roll calls in ministry offices and berated employees for arriving late to work or taking long lunches. He initiated a campaign to drenare la palude (“drain the swamp”) by firing more than 35,000 civil servants. He repurposed Fascist gangs to safeguard rail cargo from thieves. He allocated money to build bridges, roads, telephone exchanges, and giant aqueducts that brought water to arid regions. He gave Italy an eight-hour workday, codified insurance benefits for the elderly and disabled, funded prenatal health care clinics, established seventeen hundred summer camps for children, and dealt the Mafia a blow by suspending the jury system and short-circuiting due process. With no jury members to threaten and judges answerable directly to the state, the courts were as incorruptible as they were docile.⁷

Most often, the signposts that should alert us are disguised: the altered constitution that passes for reform, the attacks on a free press justified by security, the dehumanization of others masked as a defense of virtue, or the hollowing out of a democratic system so that all is erased but the label.⁸

The elements of a new Fascist era are upon us once again and no democracy is immune from it. According to Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, “America’s democracy is... in real danger. In fact, we are closer to a political civil war — more than at any other time in our modern history. Today’s seeming political calm is actually resting on a false bottom that we’re at risk of crashing through at any moment.”⁹

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ [Fascism Quotes by Madeleine K. Albright \(goodreads.com\)](https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1000000/Fascism-Quotes-by-Madeleine-K-Albright)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/04/opinion/gop-trump-2020-election.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

When mainstream politicians are discredited; leaders talk of division versus unity; the promotion of extreme patriotism and nationalism; claims of chronic voter fraud; and aspiring to win no matter what the cost, then we begin seeing the shadow of Fascism rising in the horizon.

The real question is: who has the responsibility to uphold human rights? The answer to that is: everyone. — Madeleine K. Albright

America: The Shining City on the Hill

Shortly before being sworn in, President-elect John F. Kennedy addressed the Massachusetts Legislature. He said:

During the last 60 days I have been engaged in the task of constructing an administration.... I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the flagship Arabella 331 years ago, as they, too, faced the task of building a government on a new and perilous frontier. Winthrop said, "We must always consider we shall be as a city upon a hill — the eyes of all people are upon us." Today the eyes of all people are truly upon us—and our governments, in every branch, at every level, national, State, and local, must be as a city upon a hill—constructed and inhabited by men aware of their grave trust and their great responsibilities.¹⁰



Courtesy, Library of Congress

The words of President Joe Biden should give us hope for those of us who love freedom as we look to new leadership to fortify the bonds of liberty that we hold more precious than our lives.

Can our democracy overcome the lies, anger, hate and fears that have pulled us apart? America's adversaries – the autocrats of the world – are betting it can't. They believe we are too full of anger and division and rage. They look at the images of the mob that assaulted this Capitol as proof that the sun is setting on American democracy. They are wrong. And we have to prove them wrong.¹¹



Courtesy of the White House

Before his election, Mr. Biden gave a speech at my alma mater, The Graduate Center of the City University of New York where he expressed the philosophy that will be the essence of his administration and will carry us through the hardships and challenges of this century:

Democracy is the root of our society, the wellspring of our power, and the source of our renewal. It strengthens and amplifies our leadership to keep us safe in the world. It is the engine of our ingenuity that drives our economic prosperity. It is the heart of who we are and how we see the world—and how the world sees us. That is why America's ability to be a force for progress in the world and to mobilize collective action starts at home. The United States must lead not just with the example of

power, but the power of our example.¹²

¹⁰ 1611. John Winthrop (1588-1649). Respectfully Quoted: A Dictionary of Quotations. 1989 (bartleby.com)

¹¹ <https://apnews.com/article/biden-joint-address-congress-a157a7355bfc5c189fdc1040722fb652>

¹² <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/>

About the Author

Emilio Iodice is a former American diplomat, business executive, university administrator, professor of leadership, and *Wall Street Journal* best-selling writer.

The foregoing essay is part of his new book, *The Return of Mussolini, The Rise of Modern Day Tyranny*, and will soon be available on Amazon. Iodice's other books can be found at both Amazon.com and <http://www.iodicebooks.com/>.

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