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Book Review: The Return of Mussolini: The Rise of Modern Day Tyranny

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The Return of Mussolini: *The Rise of Modern Day Tyranny*

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Reviewer: Elizabeth Gingerich, JVBL Editor-in-Chief

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“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

— Spanish philosopher George Santayana

Troubling national shifts in policies throughout the world beg retrospection and analysis to determine the proper course of conduct for the future. To do otherwise than wholeheartedly protect both nascent and developed democracies signals irretrievable losses in personal liberties. This is the resounding message of this historical narrative.

Like Adolph Hitler, Benito Mussolini (Il Duce) was a product of World War I and the devastation caused thereby. Grappling with mass unemployment, a shattered economy, and overwhelming budget deficits in Italy, a dominant seat of power was there for the taking by a figure who could control the citizenry, the press, and the military.

Iodice provides the following summary of Mussolini's ascent to power:

The rise of Fascism and Mussolini were predicated upon a concatenation of events which provide parallels to governments in the 21st Century. From the ravages of World War I, Europe had become a fertile breeding ground for the rise of charismatic, jingoistic dictators and Mussolini proved to fit the description. His dominance spawned a cult of personality in Italy, based on the promise of remaking the Roman Empire and therefore, making the country great again. Delusions of grandeur and repressive tactics made him immune from open criticism and political challenge.

Benito Mussolini arrived on the political scene in the early 1920s and was supported by an unsettling alliance of science denial, bigotry, violence, extremism, and nationalism. Care and concern of the collective was quickly exchanged for the call of the cult of one. Mussolini quickly

augmented his control over the media and the military. The formal end to Italy's democracy occurred with Mussolini's solidification of political might in 1924 and the transfer of power from King Victor Emmanuel III, making Il Duce Prime Minister of Italy and the Parliament wholly subservient to his directives. Constitutional guarantees of oversight were promptly eliminated and legislators were manipulated to favor his reign. The descension down the rabbit hole was marked by incessant bullying and outright ridiculing of opponents which quickly led to mass incarceration and the loss of free and uncensored elections.

The author then details those salient circumstances leading to Mussolini rapid ascent to power. Mussolini stoked the seeds of discontent by promising to revive the great days of the Roman Empire which he insisted could be replicated under his rule. His lies were so pervasive and so repetitive, they led to belief in his own outrageous conspiracy theories. In this way, Mussolini's drive to rebuild an Empire justified Italy's invasion in Ethiopia, participation in the Spanish Civil War, and ultimately acquiring the Axis brand in World War II – all of which turned his delusions of grandeur into utter chaos and failure.

Part of the momentum for this disturbing rise to power (and the parallels of power grabs today) and acquisition of unfettered control point to playing to constituencies who felt alienated or simply prone to anger. After igniting internal forces by fiery, galvanizing speeches, Mussolini manipulated the press, claiming that those in power were indifferent or incompetent. The reviewer notes the similarities of Mussolini's rise to dominance, supported by angered citizens, to the state of the former Donald Trump administration and the assault on the Capitol on January 6, 2021. The message both then and now was perceived marginalization and anti-immigrant bias, perpetrated by the man at the helm of power and control.

The author adeptly emphasizes that Fascism in America (and throughout the world) is no longer a rhetorical threat, but a disturbing reality and highly reminiscent of the rise of Mussolini in Italy. At both times in history, there was a cult of personality and abject hypnotism by an autocratic leader upon the masses. History has shown that there is no more dangerous combination than narcissism, bigotry, and power in a person aspiring to the highest seat of power. This toxic mixture inevitably gives rise to violence and suppression.

Iodice lists other notable characteristics of this Fascist leader drawing parallels with modern-day heads of government and the rise of a totalitarian regime:

- The rise of populist forces.
- The subservience of women to men and the rewarding of reproduction through the bestowal of government benefits and favorable policies.
- Reigniting the country's death penalty.
- The execution and/or expulsion of dissidents.
- The regular invocation of the name of God.
- The building up of military forces.
- Controls on industry and agricultural sectors.
- Voter intimidation and the implementation of voting restrictions.

Mussolini, provided the framework for creating a society controlled by fear, fanfare, audaciousness, and ultimately violence. The fascism born in Italy in the early part of the 1900s became a playbook for successive regimes and autocratic rule. Iodice also points out that Mussolini's rise to power was born through a series of failures in attempted careers. No doubt the experience of rejection and repeated failure along the way bred one who was intent upon

winning despite the odds. He successfully channeled dissent and those previously disgraced. His love of violence and weaponry aided his ascent and the beginnings of mass murders and utter destruction. He replaced pacifism with annihilation of pacifistic organizations.

The rise to power was augmented by consolidation of disgruntled masses in the form of the populist army of Black Shirts (the reviewer cannot help but be reminded of the tiki torches and khaki shorts donned by the white supremacist marchers in Charlottesville). With a might-is-right mentality, Mussolini fought the trend of the extreme left and set the direction of a country now bent on oppression and suppression – all bolstered by a captivated media. He quickly set out to convince the people that the state should control all facets of life. He started the process of indoctrination at a very early age and make it the central core of the Italian education system. This drive was aided by symbols and mottos infused with conspiracy theories to taint any dissidents. He rendered religion to a symbiotic position with government policies and suppressed the labor movement (again, the reader cannot help but picture Donald Trump holding up a Bible blocks from the White House in an attempt to disband a Black Lives Matter rally in 2020). Mussolini excoriated intellectuals (“I love the poorly educated” simile). Mussolini championed crime and punishment and sought to equip police forces with unbridled governance. Cronyism and corruption ruled the day. He understood that the key to power stability would be to ensure a managed voting system. Mussolini elevated a perpetual notion of nationalism. He welcomed Catholicism by controlling it, gaining the allegiance of the Vatican by exempting the Catholic Church from taxation.

Quoting the author, “Mussolini promised to make Italy great again and restore the glory of the Roman Empire.” Conquest and bloodshed were his calling cards to ensure this promise. Yet by attacking a poor and defenseless country like Ethiopia, Italy could not now claim the rebuilding of an Empire. He was sanctioned by the League of Nations and as the military and Italy suffered tremendous losses, all paving the way for a German alliance and a symbiotic relationship with Adolf Hitler. Mussolini declared a policy of “non-belligerence” until the eve of the fall of France and the perception that Hitler would gain control of the world. Involvement in World War II signaled the beginning of the end of Mussolini’s reign. Germany had already bailed Italy out making the nation wholly supplicant. His attempt to impose racial laws designed to target Jewish communities were largely unworkable. The Grand Council in 1943 voted against him and removed him as Prime Minister, having him arrested. He was rescued by Hitler and brought to Germany. His political detractors were soon rounded up and executed. Rome fell in June of 1944. In the end, military defeats and economic devastation made Mussolini bitter and scorned; in this of humiliation, he suffered exile, and ultimately execution.

Iodice’s book is more than a historical primer and narrative. It provides lessons of the past which must be heeded today. Although the situations in America compared to 1920s and 1930s Italy are vastly different, insecurities have been heightened and citizenry divided with the rise of Trump coupled with the restrictive freedoms levied by the pandemic. Instead of populist speeches from balconies, the last five years have witnessed the rise of disinformation on social media, breeding mistrust and supplanting facts in favor of falsities. Seeds of oppression have been shown with the rise of Trump, accentuated by racial overtones and fear mongering in Charlottesville, Virginia shortly after his election. Lessons from history need to be respected.

Iodice exhorts the reader to realize that the rise of Fascism and individual control in Italy can happen again. And global democracies must take heed. As power begets power and is stoked by fear and unbridled emotion, the author properly notes that this dangerous mixture ultimately results in failure and unforeseen disaster. Iodice emphasizes that the Italian leader's delusions of grandeur were stoked by his autocratic messages and subversion of democracy. The masses are controlled by further delusions of self-rule and individual sovereignty. In the United States, furthering a sense of "us versus them" was not just a nationalist ideology, but one that waged and is waging within its own borders against those historically marginalized.

No democracy is immune from the elements of Fascism and Russia and China are two prime current examples. The hallmarks of these present-day regimes carry forward control of media, manipulation of data and facts, and the control and shaping of the masses. Practices of political harassment, and the incarceration and murder of political opponents continue on. Media is now the new form of repression and control. The emphasis on economic power and technology are the modern-day weapons of choice.

Lastly, Iodice's selection of Lord Acton's famous aphorism: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" wholly summarizes the salient theme of this powerful book.

— Elizabeth Gingerich, JVBL Editor