

Commentary: Trump comments cross into Nazi territory

November 17, 2023

WASHINGTON (RNS)—One of the most dangerous things about former President Donald Trump is the way he has normalized hate speech. The venom and vitriol come so often that even when it is reported, its extremism fails to register with a fatigued and desensitized public.

For a campaign that began with vulgar boasts about grabbing women by the genitalia and the mocking of a disabled reporter, to a presidency marred by repeated nods to white supremacists, it's no surprise Trump has produced outrage after outrage throughout his post-defeat, perpetual-vengeance campaign.

Even as a scholar who has tracked Trump's rhetoric and its impact on his followers carefully since 2015, I have found myself, too often, responding to Trump's latest hateful outburst with a demoralized shrug.

Back in early 2016, I was keeping a list. It soon became unwieldy and impossible to keep up. Over the last eight years, the sheer volume has made us, collectively, comfortably numb.

But Trump's most recent comments should jar us back to our senses. They signal something new, even for Trump—that he has now fully embraced the rhetoric and strategies of the Nazis. If we care about democracy and the safety of all of our neighbors and fellow citizens, we can't dismiss these comments as typical bluster or with a wave of the hand because "Trump is just being Trump."

In this own words

Here's what former President Donald J. Trump—the leading GOP presidential candidate—has said in the last few weeks:

- “Root out ... the vermin.” This past weekend, Trump was in New Hampshire, where he delivered a nearly two-hour rambling tirade on Veterans Day. Trump’s closing should send a chill up the spine of every student of history and everyone who cares about democracy: “We pledge to you that we will root out the communists, Marxists, fascists and the radical left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country that lie and steal and cheat on elections. They’ll do anything, whether legally or illegally, to destroy America and to destroy the American Dream.”
- “Poisoning the blood of our country.” On Oct. 5, a late September interview Trump gave to a right-wing website surfaced in which he made these bigoted and unfounded claims about immigrants: “Nobody has any idea where these people are coming from, and we know they come from prisons. We know they come from mental institutions and insane asylums. We know they’re terrorists. Nobody has ever seen anything like we’re witnessing right now. It is a very sad thing for our country. It’s poisoning the blood of our country. It’s so bad, and people are coming in with disease. People are coming in with every possible thing that you could have.”
- “The threat from within.” Trump’s Veterans Day speech also encouraged his followers to view their fellow citizens as agents of evil: “The threat from outside forces is far less sinister, dangerous and grave than the threat from within. Our threat is from within. ... Despite the hatred and anger of the radical left lunatics who want to destroy our country, we will make America great again!”

In the past, one of Trump’s favorite rhetorical games was to make hateful

statements, only to wave them off with half denials when challenged. Trump's behavior these last weeks signals that he's moved beyond even that tactic. Trump doubled down on the use of "vermin" to describe his political opponents in a Truth Social post the same day as his speech.

And when *The Washington Post* reached out to the Trump campaign to respond to criticisms that these comments echoed the rhetoric of Nazi and fascist leaders, Steven Cheung, a Trump campaign spokesman, replied defiantly, "Those who try to make that ridiculous assertion are clearly snowflakes grasping for anything because they are suffering from Trump Derangement Syndrome and their entire existence will be crushed when President Trump returns to the White House." Note: In a puzzling move, the Trump campaign later tried to amend the statement to replace the phrase "entire existence" with "sad, miserable existence."

In graduate school, I concentrated in political philosophy and ethics, where I was rightly trained to be wary of arguments that tried to score rhetorical points by deploying a Nazi analogy, a move sometimes called "*reductio ad Hitlerum*" in philosophical circles. This tactic is a logical fallacy, typically taking the form of a slippery slope argument ("this policy sounds like it would lead to ...") or an ad hominem argument ("you know who else made a claim like that?").

Basically, the invocation of Hitler or the Holocaust in an argument about something else is illegitimate, because it is intended to be a conversation stopper by making hyperbolic claims about consequences or impugning the speaker as Hitler-like.

But I fear that our rightful reticence to invoke an inappropriate Nazi analogy has rendered us incapable of calling out instances of actual Nazi ideology.

Consider ‘Mein Kampf’

What we are hearing from Trump over the last few weeks are not Nazi-like statements, but outright Nazi sentiments. Lest you think I am exaggerating, here are just a few selections from Adolf Hitler’s [Mein Kampf](#) that are soberingly similar to Trump’s most recent rhetoric.

- *Mein Kampf* uses the term “vermin” three times and “rats” four times. Here is a sample: “The time seemed to have arrived for proceeding against the whole Jewish gang of public pests ... Now that the German worker had rediscovered the road to nationhood, it ought to have been the duty of any Government which had the care of the people in its keeping, to take this opportunity of mercilessly rooting out everything that was opposed to the national spirit. While the flower of the nation’s manhood was dying at the front, there was time enough at home at least to exterminate this vermin.”
- *Mein Kampf* references the word “blood” nearly 150 times, mostly in the context of notions of purity vs. contamination or poison. It notably intermixes references to both ethnicity and culture. References to blood as ethnicity appear right up top in chapter one with this claim: “German-Austria must be restored to the great German Motherland ... People of the same blood should be in the same Reich.”

And here is Hitler railing against what he saw as a Jewish-controlled press, with a metaphorical reference to blood as culture: “And so this poison was allowed to enter the national bloodstream and infect public life without the Government taking any effectual measures to master the course of the disease. The ridiculous half-measures that were taken were in themselves an indication of the process of disintegration that was already threatening to break up the Empire. For an institution practically surrenders its

existence when it is no longer determined to defend itself with all the weapons at its command.”

And this: “All the great civilizations of the past became decadent because the originally creative race died out, as a result of contamination of the blood.”

- *Mein Kampf* also characterizes the real threat to Germany as enemies within the country: “For never in our history have we been conquered by the strength of our outside enemies but only through our own failings and the enemy in our own camp.”

And again: “The strength of a nation lies, first of all, not in its arms but in its will, and that before conquering the external enemy the enemy at home would have to be eliminated.”

In the words of George Orwell

In 1940, after Hitler had invaded Poland sparking a war with France and England that eventually led to World War II, George Orwell reviewed a new edition of *Mein Kampf* in the *New English Weekly*. His words about Hitler—written five years before *Animal Farm* (1945) and nine years before *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949)—are prescient for the American context today:

Ever since (Hitler) came to power—till then, like nearly everyone, I had been deceived into thinking that he did not matter—I have reflected that I would certainly kill him if I could get within reach of him, but that I could feel no personal animosity. The fact is that there is something deeply appealing about him. One feels it again when one sees his photographs—and I recommend especially the photograph at the beginning of Hurst and Blackett’s edition, which shows Hitler in his early Brownshirt days. It is a pathetic, dog-like face, the face of a man suffering under intolerable wrongs. In a rather more manly way it reproduces the

expression of innumerable pictures of Christ crucified, and there is little doubt that that is how Hitler sees himself ...

One feels, as with Napoleon, that he is fighting against destiny, that he can't win, and yet that he somehow deserves to. The attraction of such a pose is of course enormous; half the films that one sees turn upon some such theme ...

Whereas Socialism, and even capitalism in a more grudging way, have said to people "I offer you a good time," Hitler has said to them "I offer you struggle, danger and death," and as a result a whole nation flings itself at his feet. Perhaps later on they will get sick of it and change their minds, as at the end of the last war. After a few years of slaughter and starvation "Greatest happiness of the greatest number" is a good slogan, but at this moment "Better an end with horror than a horror without end" is a winner. Now that we are fighting against the man who coined it, we ought not to underrate its emotional appeal.

Continued strong support

If we ever could, we certainly can no longer afford to think that Trump does not matter. He is the presumed nominee of one of America's two major political parties; no other Republican candidate is within striking distance. In virtually every national poll—and in recent battleground state polls—a two-way election between Trump and Joe Biden is a tossup.

In PRRI's recent American Values Survey, conducted in partnership with the Brookings Institution, nearly all voters who supported Trump in 2020 (94 percent) said they planned to support him in 2024. More than three-quarters of white evangelicals — along with nearly 6 in 10 of both white non-evangelical/mainline Protestants (57 percent) and white Catholics (59 percent)—say if the election were held today, they would vote for Trump. These levels of support from white Christians are virtually unchanged from

2016 and 2020.

Like other successful authoritarian leaders, Trump has uncanny political instincts. Ever since he rose to power, his MAGA mantra has been conjuring a vision of an ethno-religious, white Christian state. His use of the phrase “poisoning the blood of our country” conjures both ethnic (where a contemporary conception of whiteness stands in for Aryan ethnicity) and metaphorical (where white Christian nationalism becomes the American expression of Hitler’s call for a new German Weltanschauung) visions of things that are to be kept pure and protected from defilement.

His characterization of immigrants as dangerous, deranged and diseased is setting the stage for what likely future Trump administration appointees, such as Stephen Miller, have promised will be “the most spectacular migration crackdown” and “the largest deportation operation this country’s ever seen” should Trump be re-elected.

Trump’s calls to “root out ... vermin” who present a sinister threat from within the ranks of Americans intentionally dehumanizes, in the eyes of his followers, all those who oppose him. The word “vermin” is a peculiar and deliberate word choice in political speech. Its appearance on Trump’s lips is no accident.

Appeal to Christian audiences

Finally, it is important to understand the religious dimensions of Trump’s rhetoric. As I’ve documented extensively (e.g., see the Afterword in *White Too Long*), Trump has regularly appealed to white Christian audiences by promising to protect and restore the power of Christian churches.

Speaking to a raucous crowd in New Hampshire on Oct. 23, Trump vowed to reinstate a Muslim travel ban and halt all refugee resettlement to the

United States. Then he went on to say this: “I will implement strong ideological screening of all immigrants. If you hate America, if you want to abolish Israel, if you don’t like our religion—which a lot of them don’t—if you sympathize with the jihadists, then we don’t want you in our country and you are not getting in. Right?”

At his rallies, Trump’s favorite closing incantation of “one people, one family and one glorious nation under God” echoes the rhythms of Hitler’s “Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer” (one people, one realm, one leader).

Taken together, Trump’s recent statements reflect a willingness to trade in well-known Nazi propaganda tactics. Unlike Hitler, his speech most explicitly targets Muslims and immigrants rather than Jews—but it’s a risky bet to think American Jews won’t eventually be targeted if they don’t fit Trump’s narrow, rather Christian understanding of what he sees as America’s “Judeo-Christian” culture.

But Trump’s rhetoric follows the blueprint used by Hitler and other authoritarian leaders who dehumanized their political opponents to enhance their own power. Ultimately, these Nazi tactics are the bricks that pave the road to political violence.

Indeed, we are already seeing the seeds of political violence sprouting in American soil, not only in the deadly insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 but in what Trump’s followers are prepared to accept.

One of the most disturbing findings of PRRI’s American Values Survey was the increase in support for political violence. The number of Americans who agreed that “Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country” has jumped from 15 percent to 23 percent over the past two years. Today approximately 1 in 3 Republicans (33 percent) and white evangelical Protestants (31 percent) believe that political violence might be necessary

to save the country.

Moreover, among those who believe the big lie that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump, support for political violence rises to nearly half (46 percent). Among those who affirm the so-called Great Replacement Theory that immigrants are invading the country and replacing real Americans, and among those who understand America to be a divinely ordained promised land for white Christians, support for political violence rises to 4 in 10 (41 percent and 39 percent respectively).

Trump knows exactly what he is doing, and so should we. We should be clear about the basis of his appeal to his followers. And we should anticipate the violence to both our country and our neighbors that is sure to follow if he is re-elected to the presidency.

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