

American Catastrophe Through German Eyes

Trump says he wants to protect law-abiding citizens. In 1933, Hitler issued his ‘Decree of the Reich President for the Protection of People and State.’

PARIS — No people has found the American lurch toward authoritarianism under President Trump more alarming than the Germans. For postwar Germany, the United States was savior, protector and liberal democratic model. Now, Germans, in shock, speak of the “American catastrophe.”

A recent cover of the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* portrays Trump in the Oval Office holding a lighted match, with a country ablaze visible through his window. The headline: “Der Feuerteufel,” or, literally, “the Fire Devil.”

Germans have a particular relationship to fire. The Reichstag fire of 1933 enabled Hitler and the Nazis to scrap the fragile Weimar democracy that had brought them to power. Hitler’s murderous fantasies could now become reality. War, Auschwitz and the German catastrophe followed.

I have known many thoughtful German diplomats over the years, including Michael Steiner, who labored to stop the Balkan wars of the 1990s, and Wolfgang Ischinger, the former German ambassador to the United States. It always seemed to me that their particular passion for freedom, democracy and openness stemmed from the knowledge of how easily these are lost.

Michael Steinberg, a professor of history at Brown University and the former president of the American Academy in Berlin, wrote to me this week:

“The American catastrophe seems to get worse every day, but the events in Portland have particularly alarmed me as a kind of strategic experiment for fascism. The playbook from the German fall of democracy in 1933 seems well in place, including rogue military factions, the destabilization of cities, etc.”

Steinberg continued, “The basic comparison involves racism as a political strategy: a racist imaginary of a pure homeland, with cities demonized as places of decadence.”

Trump provokes outrage in a cascade designed to blunt alarm. He deadens reactions through volume and repetition. But something about the recent use of unmarked cars and camouflage-clad federal agents without clear identifying insignia detaining protesters shattered any inclination to shrug.

From the deployment of those federal units in Portland, Oregon’s largest city, where protesters have been demanding racial justice and police accountability, it’s not a huge leap to the use of paramilitaries (like the German Freikorps in the 1920s) to buttress a “Law and Order” campaign. The Freikorps battled communists. Today, Trump claims to battle “anarchists,” “terrorists” and violent leftists. It’s the leitmotif of his quest for a second term.

Perhaps the years I spent covering Argentina in the 1980s, in the aftermath of the military junta, made me particularly sensitive to the use of unmarked cars — in the Argentine case, Ford Falcons — to grab left-wing political opponents off the street. They were “disappeared,” a word whose lingering psychological

devastation I measured in countless tear-filled rooms. Later I went to Berlin, where there was only one story: totalitarian tragedy and the labors of democratic salvation.

The Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection confirmed this week that it has deployed officers from three paramilitary-style units to join the federal crackdown in Portland. The Trump administration, facing lawsuits, has cited post-9/11 legislation establishing the department to justify its action. Chicago is now among several cities being targeted as Trump seeks to foment confrontation.

As Tom Ridge, a Republican who was the first head of the Department of Homeland Security, noted in an interview with the Sirius XM host Michael Smerconish, the department was "not established to be the president's personal militia."

In wartime, the Third Geneva Convention, to which the United States is a party, requires even irregular forces to wear "a fixed distinctive sign recognizable at a distance." This is critical not only to protecting civilians but also to ensuring accountability for misconduct.

When paramilitary-style units have no identifying insignia, there is no transparency, no accountability — and that means impunity. Democracy dies. Think of all this as setting the scene for Trump's own "state of emergency" if he does not like the November election result. Social media is combustible enough for a physical fire to be unnecessary.

The president says he wants to protect law-abiding citizens. In 1933, after the Reichstag burned, Hitler issued the "Decree of the Reich President for the Protection of People and State" as his means to seize power. German horror at Trump has many components. He's the fear-mongering showman wielding nationalism, racism and violence as if the 20th century held no lessons. He's the would-be destroyer of the multilateral institutions that brought European peace and made it possible for Germans to raise their bowed heads again. He is a fascist in the making.

As Ian Beacock argued recently in *The New Republic*, Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, got it right on the virus. Not for her the imagery of war — all that talk of the silent, invisible enemy to be vanquished. No, for her the challenge of the virus has been a lesson in the power of democracy.

"We are not condemned to accept the spread of this virus as an inevitable fact of life," she said. "We thrive not because we are forced to do something, but because we share knowledge and encourage active participation." She went on to say that success largely depends "on each and every one of us."

It worked. Merkel was addressing all democratic citizens, Americans included. No wonder Trump cannot stand her, a woman trained as a scientist whose life lesson has been the sacred value of freedom.

THE VIEW FROM IRELAND:

Fintan O'Toole: Future of the American republic is in grave danger unless Trump is defeated

If Donald Trump is not removed from office, Abraham Lincoln's republic cannot endure



Fintan O'Toole

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Donald Trump has taken, in recent months, to comparing himself to “the late, great Abraham Lincoln”. “I think I’ve done more for the black community,” he recently told Fox News, “than any other president, and let’s take a pass on Abraham Lincoln.”

In May, he conducted an interview, with the same channel, from inside the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC, suggesting that “I think it’s great for the American people to see” him and Honest Abe in the same frame. He has even boasted that his poll numbers are higher than those of those of the 16th president, which, given that opinion polls did not exist in the 1860s, must count as that rarest of things, a Trump utterance that is (sort of) true.

Yet, as the United States marks an Independence Day ravaged by plague and riven by division, there is one way in which Trump really does bring Lincoln to mind. In the great Gettysburg address of November 1863, delivered on a blood-soaked battlefield of a still-raging civil war, he raised the same question that Trump has managed to bring to the fore. Lincoln did this with superb brevity (the speech is 272 words long); Trump with increasingly insane ramblings.

But in their vastly different ways, the two presidents evoke the same doubt: can the US survive as a republican democracy?

When Lincoln spoke amid the carnage of 1863, he sought to define the purpose of the war he was pursuing with such anguish and such relentlessness. He did not say the obvious thing: that he was fighting to preserve the US as a political entity. The war was, rather, not about preserving a government – it was about the survival of a form of government, republican democracy.

What was being tested, Lincoln told his audience, was whether “any nation so conceived . . . can long endure.” The struggle would seek to determine “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth”.

This is the inverse relationship between arguably the greatest of American presidents and arguably the worst. For what Trump has achieved is to force Lincoln’s existential question back to the surface. Unless he is defeated in November, it is uncertain that the US can survive as a republic in anything but name.

It can be argued with considerable justice, of course, that it was never anything else. The nation was “conceived” in sin: slavery and the genocide of the indigenous peoples are encoded in its genes. The republic, at least since the mid-19th century, has had to compete with its evil twin: the empire. Not the empire it threw

off in 1776 but the one that grew within itself, fed by the rapacious expansionism of Manifest Destiny, pushing first “from sea to shining sea”, then into global dominance.

“Government of the people” has always depended on which people the US had in mind: not the black, the brown, the yellow or, sometimes, the merely fallow.

Is Donald Trump losing his touch?

US democracy is heading towards the mother of all stress tests

Rise of black candidates shows change is coming to Democratic Party

Endured

Yet the American republic has not perished from Earth. It has endured: primarily because generations of citizens have struggled to sustain and deepen it.

The great American democrats – from Lincoln and Frederick Douglass to Susan B Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, from the Selma marchers to the Stonewall rioters, from Eleanor Roosevelt to Robert Kennedy, from the anti-Vietnam war protestors to the Black Lives Matter movement – have not set themselves against the ideals of genuinely popular republican government. They have, in consistently demanding that those ideals be embodied in reality, kept them alive.

The hostile caricature dreamed up by America’s enemies has become the face it shows to the world

Torn between these two states – between the brutality of empire and the justice of the republic – the US has always lived a kind of half-life, always been a promised land seen, as Martin Luther King put it his great last speech, from the distant mountaintop. It has always both stood for its ideals of freedom and equality and engaged in terrible self-mockery.

That self-mockery is now embodied and installed in the Oval Office. The hostile caricature dreamed up by America’s enemies has become the face it shows to the world. Anti-Americanism has lost its bite – there is no burlesque so savage as the daily reality of Trump’s parade of manic egotism, malign incompetence, crass vulgarity and tribal hatred.

All the diseases that assault the republic, from racism to nativism, from oligarchic corruption to authoritarianism, from wilful ignorance to spiteful arrogance, have gathered into a single malady. It is by no means certain that it can survive this onslaught.

Last Sunday morning, Trump tweeted a link to a video and added his thanks to the “great people” in it. In the video, a middle-aged white man in Florida is driving a golf cart with “Trump 2020” and “America First” posters on the windscreen past some anti-racism protestors who are unseen off-camera. He turns towards them, raises his fist and shouts “Yeah, you got it. White Power! White Power!” Trump left his tweet up for three hours before it was quietly taken down.

Given the way Trump operates, it would be naive to think of this as a mistake. “Great people” echoes Trump’s description in August 2017 of white supremacist and neo-Nazi marchers in Charlottesville as “very fine people”. In the video Trump linked to on Sunday, essentially nothing else happens except the man shouting those words quite audibly. What Trump was doing in endorsing this racist act was what he always does. He was testing the waters.

Test-marketing

This is the way he operates. What he knows about, from his only successful career before he became president (playing a mogul on TV) is test-marketing: try it out, see how it goes, pull back, refine, go again.

What was being tested this time? Certainly the continued efficacy of race-baiting with his own base. But also the slavishness of the Republican Party in Congress and of Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News. Would they

withdraw from him even if he openly endorsed racist and neo-Nazi slogans? No – barely a murmur. That road remains open.

The US president, in other words, offered to favour China if Xi would help him to get re-elected. Trump had to test this because of his catastrophic handling of the pandemic, in which he has killed tens of thousands of Americans and made the most powerful country on Earth seem terrifyingly impotent. A rump of unelected Republicans has rebelled against him. The cleverly-named Lincoln Project has been trolling him with well-made ads. His former national security adviser John Bolton has published a devastating memoir of his time in the White House, *The Room Where It Happened*. Trump's White Power tweet was a probe sent out to check how far this rebellion might go.

Conservatives, after all, are supposed to value one thing above all others: national security. Yet, as well as confirming from the inside Trump's inability to do his job, Bolton effectively accuses Trump of treason. He records that at a summit with the Chinese president Xi Jinping, Trump "asked . . . for some increases in farm-product purchases (to help with the crucial farm-state vote). If that could be agreed, all the tariffs [on Chinese goods] would be reduced."

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Even as Bolton's book was being published last week, Carl Bernstein, one of the duo of reporters who exposed the Watergate scandal, published a report based on transcripts of hundreds of phone calls between Trump and foreign leaders. They were so "delusional" and abusive of US allies that they "helped convince some senior US officials – including his former secretaries of state and defense, two national security advisers and his longest-serving chief-of-staff – that the president himself posed a danger to the national security of the United States".

Abandoned

Yet the congressional Republicans, and the Senate they control, will do nothing to counter this danger. By refusing even to conduct the semblance of a trial of Trump when he was impeached for trying to bully Ukraine into interfering against Joe Biden in the 2020 election, they have made it clear to him that he can do, as he puts it himself, whatever he wants. This is where the great threat to the American republic lies: one of its two main parties has abandoned any interest in defending its norms, or even its interests.

Bolton also reports that Trump told Xi in the same meeting that "people were saying that the two-term constitutional limit on presidents should be repealed for him". People are saying no such thing, of course, but it is clearly what Trump believes – that he should be, like the dictators he wants to emulate, president-for-life. A US leader who will offer to sell his country to China to get re-elected will do everything and anything to secure the same goal. Trump has also test-marketed, during the Black Lives Matter protests in American cities, the idea that his critics are terrorists and can therefore be subjected to the sweeping authoritarian powers – up to and including military force – allowed for in anti-terrorism legislation.

He has also test-marketed the idea that the November election is likely to be illegitimate and "rigged", the usual prelude to a refusal to accept an unfavourable result.

In this, he has at least clarified what is at stake: the American republic itself. If it is to survive, Trump must be removed from office. If he is not removed from office, republican government cannot long endure.