Donald Trump and the Italian Fascist Connection

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"Arrogance and self-awareness seldom go hand-in-hand." M (Judi Dench), "Casino Royale"

Directly following Donald Trump's release from a three-night stay at Walter Reed Hospital to relieve symptoms for contracting the coronavirus in 2020, and after de-boarding the military helicopter, Marine One, he ascended the steps leading to the high balcony at the White House.

Once there, he instantly removed his face mask as he turned to the flash cameras and cam recorders below. Occasionally visibly gasping for air, he posed in the style of Benito Mussolini with an arrogant gaze and head held high.

This Il Duce Trumpolini has much more in common with the actual Italian Il Duce than readily meets the eye and ear.

The bad news was that Donald J. Trump became the 45th President of the United States. The good news was that Trump, the so-called "populist," lost the popular vote in 2016 to Hillary Clinton, and over two million more voters do not support the draconian policies and vile language he uttered during the campaign.

White ultra-nationalist (fascist) leaders and many of their followers supported the candidacy of Donald J. Trump in 2016 and in 2020 and are doing so again in 2024, and celebrated his Presidential victory. For example, a white nationalist conference held on November 19, 2016 at the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, DC headlined by neo-Nazi, Richard Spencer, greeted attendees with a tribute to President-elect Donald J. Trump shouting "Hail Trump! Hail victory!" from the stage before all in attendance gestured in a traditional Nazi straight-arm salute.

Before his election, Trump tapped Steve Bannon, former editor of the far-right Breitbart News as his campaign director, and before firing him, elevated Bannon into the White House to function as his chief policy advisor, a position that did not

require Senate confirmation. Bannon once gloated that Breitbart News serves as the mouthpiece for the so-called "alt-right" – the less odious term for "white nationalism."

While many of the social, political, and economic conditions differ today in the United States from Italy during the first half of the last century, some parallels persist.

Certainly, Trump rises to the level, and possibly surpasses, Mussolini's arrogant swagger and all-consuming narcissism and sociopathy. Both figures are and were legendary for their predatory womanizing and frequent extra-marital affairs. In Mussolini's case, his mistress, Clara Petacci, acted as his informal policy advisor.

Both leaders played hard-and-fast with the truth, in their utterances and in their consciousness. They never let the facts get in the way. According to Nazi chief propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, "If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it." In the case of Trump and Mussolini, they themselves came to believe it.

Mussolini and Trump could be placed into the category of "Machiavellian" in their single mindedness, cunning, plotting, and unscrupulous – sometimes vicious — actions in advancing their careers and enacting their policies. To them, the ends certainly justified the means no matter who gets hurt.

Trump differs significantly from Mussolini, though, in terms of interest and achievement in intellectual pursuits. Mussolini prided himself on his scholarly endeavors and command of multiple languages. Mussolini acted on strong ideological beliefs. Trump, on the other hand, acts on concerns for winning at all costs regardless of ideological positions.

Once identifying himself as a Democrat, Donald Trump, while never unequivocally disavowing himself from white nationalists, has transformed himself, at the very least, into the mouthpiece of the extreme far-right-wing of the Republican Party.

Once a staunch socialist, Benito Mussolini was denounced by the Italian Socialist Party for advocating Italy's involvement in World War I, which countered the Party's stance on neutrality. Mussolini severely transformed his political stance, and later he became one of the chief architects of the fascist movement.

Born in 1883 in the small town Dovia di Predappio to Alessandro Mussolini, a blacksmith and socialist, and Rosa Maltoni Mussolini, a Catholic school teacher, he was named after the Mexican leftist President, Benito Juaréz.

He believed that nationalism superseded class distinctions, as opposed to a focus in socialism on class struggle, which he had previously accepted. He argued that a vanguard of elites must lead society, which would ultimately suppress democracy, and that the state must control "proper linguistic and racial confines."

Though Mussolini's theories on "race" centered on the culture of a people more than on biology as in Nazism, he did, however, assert a "natural law" thesis that "stronger" people had the right to dominate the "inferior," for example, the Slavic peoples of Yugoslavia whom he characterized as "barbaric."

Recall Trump and his father Fred's refusal some years ago to rent their properties to black people, and his racist representations of Latinx people who attempt to come into the United States across the border.

Trump's continual cries against "Islamic jihadist terrorists" as the number one threat to our nation, his presidential executive orders banning travel into the US by six majority Muslim nations, and his call to place US Muslims on a "national registry" and surveillance to track their movements de facto "racializes" Muslims regarded of their so-called "race."

Mussolini founded the Italian war interventionist newspapers in 1914, *Il Papolo d'Italia* (The People of Italy) and the *Fasci Rivoluzionari d'Azione Internazionalisto* (Revolutionary Fasci for International Action), supported by funds he received from the armaments firm, Ansaldo, which would profit in any Italian war effort. (The US National Rifle Association would have loved *Il Duce*!)

Later, serving as Italy's youngest Prime Minister in 1922 at the age of 39, he helped to establish the secret police, outlawed labor strikes, and facilitated the establishment of a one-party dictatorship. Favoring the wealthy classes and forming a virtual oligarchy, he passed legislation making it easier for privatization, deregulation of business and industry, and the dismantling of labor unions. Trump has proposed and forwarded very similar policy directives during and following his presidency. If elected again, this would be codified as outlined in the far-right Heritage Foundation's Project 2025.

As World War II approached, Mussolini decided to join with Hitler's Germany describing the war as "the struggle of the fertile and young people against the

sterile people [British and French] moving to the sunset; it is the struggle between two centuries and two ideas," and a "logical development of our [fascist] Revolution."

Will Trump's apparent parallels with Benito Mussolini hold and even strengthen during his presidency if elected again?

Donald Trump and Benito Mussolini's Sons-In-Law: A Cautionary Tale

While not an elected leader *per se*, though influential nonetheless, the figure of Galeazzo Ciano (pronounced "Chano"), was tapped by Italian Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini as his chief propagandist and foreign minister from 1936 until 1943.

Ciano, was, in fact, Mussolini's son-in-law. At age 27, he married Mussolini's eldest child, Countess Edda Mussolini, on April 23, 1930.

Ciano was born into wealth and privilege in Livorno, Italy in 1903. His father, Costanzo Ciano, owned vast tracts of real estate, and a successful newspaper, all which he shared with his son. In addition, the elder Ciano served as an Admiral recognized as a hero in WWI in the Royal Italian Navy. He assisted in the reorganization of the Italian merchant navy soon following the war and served as a founding member of the National Fascist Party.

Both father and son joined Mussolini's 1922 march on Rome before the soon-to-be *Il Duce*'s installation as Prime Minister.

Some of the elder Ciano's "service" to the nation centered on exploitation on a massive scale, and even fraud. He used his great influence in finances and on the stock market to ruthlessly degrade the stock of certain companies, after which he purchased controlling interests. The value of the stock then rose, and he substantially increased his profits.

Lacking anti-nepotism statues in Italy, Mussolini appointed Galeazzo Ciano as Italian counsel in Shanghai, and in 1935, chose him as minister of press and propaganda. He joined the army and volunteered in the Italian incursion into Ethiopia (1935-1936), returning as a war hero as did his father earlier. The younger Ciano then resumed his ministerial rank and duties under Mussolini.

Also, while not an elected office, Jared Kushner was chosen by Donald J. Trump to serve as one of his chief campaign advisors and strategists on Trump's run for the

presidency. At age 28, Kushner married Trump's eldest daughter, Ivanka Trump, on October 25, 2009, at Trump's National Golf Club in Bedminster, New Jersey.

Born in 1981 to wealth and privilege and sent to prestigious schools, Jared Kushner joined his father, Charles Kushner's, highly profitable real estate empire. Following his father's conviction and incarceration for tax evasion, witness tampering, and illegal campaign donations, the younger Kushner purchased a newspaper, the *New York Observer*, in 2006, and helped to inaugurate Cadre, an online marketplace for large real estate buys. Following a brief downturn in the housing market resulting in substantial losses, he regained his footing and again increased his wealth substantially.

Kushner consolidated and directed Trump's data management efforts by connecting fundraising and campaign messaging. Trump gave Kushner an enormous portfolio of responsibilities serving as a virtual shadow Secretary of State.

He won Trump's trust and gently moved into the older man's inner circle of top political advisors.

While anti-nepotism laws prevented Kushner from working in the Trump White House in an official paid capacity, the then President-elect announced that he would like to send his son-in-law to the Middle East, and especially to Israel since he was raised as an Orthodox Jew whose grandparents were Holocaust survivors and emigrated to the US following World War II.

Trump proposed appointing Kushner, who does not have actual diplomatic experience, as special envoy to negotiate a peace settlement between Israelis and Palestinians. This ended in total failure.

Back in Italy, even prior to Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, inciting World War II, Mussolini decided to side with Germany and enter the conflict by declaring war on France in 1940.

Ciano attempted to act as a moderating voice in Mussolini's ear by warning the Italian leader that their military was completely ill-equipped for any serious and possibly prolonged war effort. Ciano attempted to serve as a voice of reason throughout Italy's doomed involvement.

His truculent arrogant father-in-law dismissed the younger man's concerns by assuring him of the army's readiness for what he predicted would amount to a swift and relatively easy victory.

"Single-mindedness is the virtue of fools," Ciano later wrote in his diary. In fact, Mussolini became a German puppet once he decided to enter the war. Can one say that Trump did not become Vladimir Putin's puppet?

In Ciano's diary, he wrote: "I am sad, very sad. The adventure begins. May God help Italy." He increasingly turned against the war effort, and even leaked a warning to then neutral Belgium of an imminent German invasion.

Ciano's prognostication materialized. He actively lobbied Mussolini to withdrawal from the war and to sue for peace. *Il Duce* refused and ultimately fired Ciano and his entire cabinet on February 5, 1943, and offered his son-in-law the post of Italian Ambassador to the Vatican, which he accepted.

After Italian King Victor Emmanuel III's decision to relieve Mussolini of his duties and to form a new government, Ciano fled the country fearing arrest by the newly installed Italian government.

He and his family had been assured by Nazi leaders in Italy that they would fly them to Barcelona for safety, but airlifted them, instead, to Munich, Germany on Hitler's direct orders.

The Germans returned Ciano to Mussolini, whom they positioned as provisional leader of the "Italian Social Republic," a German-controlled territory in Northern Italy. Mussolini summarily order the execution of his son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano, on the charge of treason, February 6, 1943, before Mussolini was ultimately rounded up and killed by Italian socialist partisans.

Soon before his killing, he is reported saying that "I got to the top of the world so fast, and now I die just like this."

When affairs went well, Mussolini considered Ciano a trusted advisor. As conditions increasingly deteriorated, and as Ciano advised a different course – specifically for his father-in-law to sign a separate peace with the allies to spare the country needless loss of life and devastation — Mussolini only distrusted Ciano more and accused him of treason.

While historians have yet to write the chapter on the Trump presidency and subsequent political campaigns and criminal and civil indictments, and we do not know precisely what Jared Kushner's part will be in the story, we can refer to the Mussolini/Ciano drama as a cautionary tale that we would do well to consider.