

Opinion | Mussolini, Trump and What Assassination Attempts Really Do

A scholar of Mussolini and authoritarianism explains how failed attacks can be used to consolidate power.



Head of the Italian Fascist government Benito Mussolini boards the battleship Cavour with a bandage over his nose on April 8, 1926. The day prior, he suffered a gunshot wound to the face. | Mondadori/Getty Images

Opinion by Ruth Ben-Ghiat08/03/2024 07:00 AM EDT

Ruth Ben-Ghiat is a professor of history and Italian studies at New York University and the author of [Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present](#). She writes the “[Lucid](#)” Substack on threats to democracy.

On April 7, 1926, Fascist leader Benito Mussolini gave a speech to a conference of surgeons, and then began walking with his aides through the streets of Rome. When he reached Piazza del

Campidoglio, an Irish-born British pacifist named Violet Gibson stepped out of the crowd and shot him.

The bullet grazed Mussolini's nose and Gibson tried to shoot him again, but her gun malfunctioned, and police quickly detained her. Mussolini was whisked to safety, but a few hours later he appeared in public to reassure his fans — and posed for a photograph with a big white bandage on his nose.

Assassination attempts are an effort to change a political order in one fell swoop. But history shows that they often backfire, and more often serve not to eliminate a strongman, but to strengthen him and his cult of personality. Mussolini showed how that's done.

After serving as prime minister of a coalition government, Mussolini had declared a dictatorship in January 1925. The Gibson shooting was the third attempt on Mussolini's life after that. The earlier attacks were by Italian anti-Fascists: Tito Zamboni, a Socialist member of Parliament, was arrested before he could fire a bazooka at Il Duce from a hotel room he had rented, and the anarchist Gino Luccetti threw a bomb at Mussolini's motorcade that failed to explode.

By the time Gibson fired her gun, Mussolini had used the string of attacks as justification to issue a series of "Laws for the Defense of the State" that transformed Italy from a democracy to a regime. Grounded in a huge expansion of the powers of the executive branch at the expense of the judiciary and parliament, Mussolini and his Fascist Party ended press freedom, banned all opposition political parties, prohibited strikes and non-Fascist unions, created the notorious [OVRA secret police](#), and more. The laws made it clear that any attack on the leader would be considered an attack on the state and on national unity.



Mussolini speaks at a rally in the Colosseum in Rome. Mussolini survived four assassination attempts and used the string of attacks as justification to transform Italy from a democracy to a regime. | Oscar Manello/Central Press/Getty Images

For Fascists, the leader did not just represent the nation, as in democratic tradition, but physically embodied it. He took the hits for the nation, and so his wounds were his own, but also belonged to the people on whose behalf he toiled. That is why Mussolini, a journalist by training who attended to every detail of his image, posed for pictures after the attack, the bandage becoming a kind of badge of honor. And it is why each failed attempt became fodder for his personality cult by seeming to prove his macho toughness, resilience and invincibility. “The bullets pass, Mussolini remains,” the Italian leader wrote of the assassination attempts in his 1928 autobiography.

The history of Mussolini’s consolidation of power and the attacks that punctuated that process carry lessons for our understanding of the mentality and methods of Donald Trump after the attempt on his life at a rally last month.

The comparison between Mussolini and Trump can be overstated, and for one thing, Trump is not in power at the moment. He is an aspiring strongman, but we can’t know for sure how he would have reacted had the shooting occurred when he was in the White House, and whether he would have used it to crack down on critics or expand his authority.

What is clear already is that the assassination attempt has made Trump's personality cult more robust and more powerful for his followers. His claims of being a victim targeted on their behalf are now more credible and his persona cemented as an indomitable fighter. And he knows it.



Mussolini with a bandage on his nose and former President Donald Trump with bandage on his ear. "The bullets pass, Mussolini remains," Mussolini wrote in his autobiography. | Mondadori/Getty Images; Brendan Smialowski/Getty Images

From Il Duce onward, strongman leaders have shown time and again that they are built differently than other people. They think big, doing things on a scale most politicians would not attempt ([Trump's ambition](#) to deport 15 million to 20 million people from America comes to mind); they think ahead, remaining in control of situations even at moments when they are being personally targeted; and they are acutely conscious of the political and media impact of history-making events, assassination attempts included.



Donald Trump waves to the crowd as secret service surrounds him after the assassination attempt. | Scott Goldsmith for POLITICO

Familiarity with the behavior of strongmen gives Trump's actions in the dramatic minutes after he was shot a crucial frame of reference. Most people in that situation would have had the instinct to flee to safety. Not Trump, who told the Secret Service agents to "wait, wait" so he could put his shoes on, expose his face, arm and hand to the cameras and crowd, and deliver the fist pump and "fight, fight, fight" message that immediately created an iconic image.

With that gesture, Trump tended to his personality cult, reassuring millions of his devoted followers that he had survived and was unbeaten — just as Mussolini did with his photo almost 100 years before. That Republicans at the GOP convention began attaching white bandages to their ear in honor of Trump's own wound would surely have impressed Mussolini.

The danger is what comes next.

A Cycle of Violence

The laws that took Italians' freedoms away, and the assassination attempts that accompanied them, were part of a cycle of violence prompted by a circumstance that can seem familiar: the desperate desire of a leader to avoid exposure and prosecution for his crimes.

Born in Italy out of the ashes of World War I, the term “fascism” arose to describe a political movement that emphasized force and unity, based on groups called “fasci.” Fascism started out as a decentralized militia movement and then became a full-fledged political party that sought to impose “a revolution of reaction,” as Mussolini called it, using force to roll back women’s rights, workers’ rights and democratic pluralism in the aim of restoring a mythic national unity. (Even as the Fascist Party in Italy is no more, the fascist ideology still lives on across the world, including in Italy, where the prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, heads the neo-fascist Brothers of Italy party.)

In 1922, six months before Mussolini became prime minister following his March on Rome — a mobilization of tens of thousands of armed black-shirted “squadrists” ready to storm Rome’s centers of power — he posed key questions in an article that has relevance for the American right a century later: “Does Fascism intend to restore state authority or subvert it? Is it order or disorder? Can you be conservatives and subversives at the same time?”



Top: Trump at the Butler, Pennsylvania, rally prior to the assassination attempt. Bottom: Mussolini (center) leads the blackshirts in the Fascist “March on Rome.” | Scott Goldsmith for POLITICO; BIPs/Getty Images

Like many authoritarian movements that came after it, Fascism inspired cycles of violence that could work for or against the state and the leader. Fascism had gained power locally by sowing terror in the north and center of Italy, and once in power as prime minister, Mussolini continued to use violence to intimidate critics, even as he pandered to business elites [by privatizing](#) the electric, telephone and insurance sectors. He pioneered strategies to subvert free and fair elections with a 1923 law that gave any party receiving over 25 percent of the vote two-thirds of Parliament’s seats which delivered Fascists a substantial majority in the April 1924 election.

Then came an act of Fascist violence that backfired on Mussolini: He ordered the murder of Socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti, a lawyer and [anti-corruption crusader](#). Matteotti had discovered bribes paid by the American oil company Sinclair (already tainted by the American Teapot Dome Scandal) to Fascist officials in return for a monopoly on oil exploration rights in Italy. Mussolini’s brother Arnaldo, who served as his fixer, featured in the documents.

To stop Matteotti from exposing his corruption in Parliament, Mussolini ordered members of his personal secret police to kidnap and kill Matteotti, but they made mistakes. Although they succeeded in killing Matteotti, their car was soon traced to Cesare Rossi, head of Mussolini’s personal secret police and his press office. Although Matteotti’s body was not found until August 1924, special prosecutors launched a murder investigation. The opposition press accused Il Duce of complicity in the crime, and by the end of the year, Mussolini’s conservative allies began pressuring him to resign. “Really, there are two dead men, Matteotti and Mussolini,” the art critic Ugo Ojetto observed at the time.

Faced with likely jail time and the collapse of his political career, on Jan. 3, 1925 Mussolini made a bold move, [declaring that Italy would become a dictatorship](#) and that he and his party were above the law.

“I, and I alone, assume political, moral, and historical responsibility for all that has happened. ... If Fascism has been a criminal association, I am the head of that criminal association. ... Gentlemen, Italy wants peace, quiet, work, and calm. ... We will give it by love, if possible, or by force, if necessary,” he stated chillingly.

Then, as now, authoritarianism entails the transformation of rule of law into rule by the lawless, and authoritarian leaders routinely use pardons to free up criminals who can ply their valuable skills in the party and the government. In July 1925, Il Duce pardoned all political criminals, freeing the gangs of thugs known as “blackshirts” who had helped him get to power. He also fixed his legal problems by firing the magistrates who were overseeing the ongoing Matteotti investigation. Their replacements delivered the judgment of involuntary manslaughter, clearing Mussolini of direct responsibility for the crime and setting him up to rule without limitations on his power.

This was the backstory and context for the “Laws for the Defense of the State” which came out of Mussolini’s experiences of feeling physically and politically threatened. They were, in essence, laws for the defense of Mussolini, and they created the regime’s repressive infrastructure. After the first two attacks on his life in September and November 1925, Mussolini expanded the power of the executive in December to give it authority for all state functions; in January 1926, he made executive orders effective without approval of parliament, creating a governmental situation in which his will could not be challenged.

“Now the law, or lawlessness, of tyranny, was established at a breath-taking tempo,” the anti-Fascist G.A. Borgeese wrote of these emergency laws and executive decrees. Judges who were not aligned with Fascism were dismissed on grounds of “political incompatibility” and purges of the civil service freed up positions to award to loyalists, including pardoned [former squadrists](#).

Mussolini had personalized Italian politics and created a judicial framework that gave him de facto immunity from any consequences for his actions.



“Italy wants peace, quiet, work, and calm. ... We will give it by love, if possible, or by force, if necessary,” Mussolini said in 1925 when he declared Italy a dictatorship. | Hulton Archive/Getty Images

The slew of assassination attempts directed at him during this period also inaugurated a history of people thinking that eliminating the leader was the way to sink a personalist dictatorship with

maximum efficiency. Instead, a failed assassination attempt often boosts the leader's personality cult, and it lends credence to narratives about his omnipotence and the need for his repressive laws to keep the country safe from crime.

This has been the case so far with Trump, whose supporters have seized on the shooting and even [cited divine intervention](#) in saving his life. The shooting also comes in an atmosphere of heightened political violence that Trump has helped bring into the mainstream, not only with his rhetoric but with actions like visiting a gun store to admire a Glock with his name on it. [Trump had always told](#) his devoted followers that the "enemies" were not going after him, but rather going after them, and he was "just standing in the way." This awful assassination attempt will validate that claim, especially since a person attending the rally was killed by the shooter and other supporters were injured.

Followers of authoritarian personality cults who are bonded to the leader can become volatile when he is in distress. The tens of thousands of Trump supporters who participated in the Jan. 6 insurrection to "stop the steal" and restore Trump to power are proof of that.

Top: A delegate wears a bandage on his right ear during the Republican National Convention July 17. Bottom: Trump supporters rally outside the U.S. Capitol to protest the electoral college certification of Joe Biden on Jan. 6, 2021. | Julia Nikhinson/AP; Olivier Douliery/AFP via Getty Images

Even before the assassination attempt, you could find parallels between Trump and his allies' efforts to expand their power and what Mussolini pursued. The similarities of the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 with Mussolini's "Laws for the Defense of the State" are striking, from the purges of the civil service and the removal of judicial independence to the broader embrace of an extraordinarily aggressive use of executive authority that will make Trump's myriad legal and financial problems go away permanently.

Trump also has already vowed to pardon the Jan. 6 rioters if he's elected, just as Mussolini pardoned his blackshirts. Trump would also be able to use the Justice Department to easily quash the series of criminal prosecutions facing him. The Supreme Court, meanwhile, has conferred sweeping immunity powers to the president, ensuring Trump would see few guardrails.

Just as Il Duce refashioned government to support his ambitions for absolute power exactly a century ago, Trump could do his best to follow suit.

And the assassination attempt potentially strengthens his hand.

In this light, Mussolini's bandaged nose and Trump's bandaged ear both speak to how autocrats can use adversity to strengthen their power at democracy's expense.