

Fascism can't be stopped by fact-checking

Confronting Trump's political project

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Hannah Arendt. Hannah Arendt Private Archive.

I continue to be struck by this quote from Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

“This method [of infallible prediction] is foolproof only after the movements have seized power. Then all debate about the truth or falsity of a totalitarian dictator’s prediction is as weird as arguing with a potential murderer about whether his future victim is dead or alive – since by killing the person in question the murderer can promptly provide proof of the correctness of his statement. The only valid argument under such

conditions is promptly to rescue the person whose death is predicted. Before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion fact depends entirely on the power of man who can fabricate it...In other words, the method of infallible prediction, more than any other totalitarian propaganda device, betrays its ultimate goal of world conquest, since only in a world completely under his control could the totalitarian ruler possibly realize all his lies and make true all his prophecies.”

Arendt, a German-born Jewish philosopher, wrote these words trying to make sense of Hitler’s Germany. The ways in which they resonate in today's U.S. context is chilling. Arendt’s analysis here reminds me why fascism—including nascent neo-fascist forms—can’t be fact-checked.

When authoritarian rulers are on a quest to cleanse and restore the nation while scapegoating minorities, we can respond in a number of ways. Assuming the main issue is misinformation, science about climate change and data analyses on the feasibility of various proposals including mass deportations, border walls, and registries can be brought forth. Assuming the main issue is dialogue, friendly conversations with the ruler’s supporters can be pursued. Assuming the main issue is fake news, more real news can be circulated? Regardless, all of these approaches prove to be poor primary antidotes to this kind of political illness.

The problem is a particular vision of the world supported by people with *power* to carry it out. This kind of political project can’t be fact-checked away. As the profoundly [undemocratic](#) conditions in the [state politics](#) of North Carolina have recently proven, [conciliatory attempts](#) to compromise with this project are absorbed and outmatched by those wielding power. In such cases, our American fallacy of bi-partisanship is exposed because there are certain things that cannot be met halfway and there are times when both parties fail us.

Although I started with a quote from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, I think political scientist Corey Robin is right when he [says](#) the most important Arendt text for understanding Trumpism may actually be *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. If Trump and his supporters are to succeed in realizing their political vision, there will have to be extended networks of collaborators, even collaborators who claim to be doing their work for the good.

In light of everything that Trump has said and done, there can only be one proper response as Arendt argued in her context: “The only valid argument under such conditions is promptly to rescue the person whose death is predicted.” Neo-fascism can only be “fact-checked” by active resistance. It cannot be met halfway but must be opposed by people who are willing to take a courageous stand for an alternative political vision anchored in inclusion and justice. In spite of North Carolina’s repressive direction, [Rev. Barber’s leadership](#) in the Moral Mondays movement remains a shining light.

What does resistance look like? I recently made a [joke](#) about the Star Wars *Rogue One* film that got some attention online. I sarcastically shared my disappointment about the Rebels interrupting the Empire’s peaceful transition to Death Star instead of pursuing more dialogue. As commercialized and fill-in-the-blank *Rogue One* may be, it was [still able to capture](#) a basic anti-fascist message often lost by elite centrist liberalism. For pragmatic purposes, I think we need to utilize all available material to foster a mentality of resistance, even an incredibly mainstream film like Disney-owned Star Wars.

The question of violence vs. non-violence in this political situation can easily function as a subterfuge that paralyzes resistance. We must protect the vulnerable whether this includes Muslims, immigrants, women, or the LGBTQI community. The important thing to keep our eye on is the power we *do* possess and the various avenues by which we can resist. What can resistance look like? I think we will have to utilize all of the legal, political, economic, activist/organizing, artistic, and religious means available to us.

Moderate neutral theology will not help us during these times. Our faith and our “God” either sides with the oppressed or with the oppressor. For Christians committed to justice, this is a time to tap into the radical and progressive strands of our tradition and vigorously oppose any justification or cooperation with fascism. Whether we are practically speaking of sanctuary efforts or drawing from liberation theologies, Social Gospel, Catholic church social teaching, Catholic workers, confessing church movements, Anabaptists, active contemplatives etc....all hands on deck!

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