

Is It Fascism? A Leading Historian Changes His Mind.

Elisabeth Zerofsky



Credit...Erik Madigan Heck for The New York Times

Robert Paxton thought the label was overused. But now he's alarmed by what he sees in global politics — including Trumpism.

Credit...Erik Madigan Heck for The New York Times

By Elisabeth Zerofsky

Elisabeth Zerofsky is a contributing writer for the magazine who has reported extensively on European and American politics. She is currently at work on a book about the rise of the far right.

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The historian Robert Paxton spent [Jan. 6, 2021](#), glued to his television. Paxton was at his apartment in Upper Manhattan when he watched a mob march toward the Capitol, overrun the security barriers and then the police cordons and break inside. Many in the crowd wore red MAGA baseball caps, while some sported bright-orange beanies signaling their membership in the Proud Boys, a far-right extremist group. A few were dressed more fantastically. Who are these characters in camouflage and antlers? he wondered. “I was absolutely riveted by it,” Paxton told me when I met him this summer at his home in the Hudson Valley. “I didn’t imagine such a spectacle was possible.”

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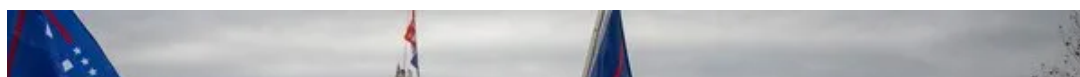
Paxton, who is 92, is one of the foremost American experts on fascism and perhaps the greatest living American scholar of mid-20th-century European history. His 1972 book, [“Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944,”](#) traced the internal political forces that led the French to collaborate with their Nazi occupiers and compelled France to reckon fully with its wartime past.

The work seemed freshly relevant when Donald Trump closed in on the Republican nomination in 2016 and articles comparing American politics with Europe’s in the 1930s began to proliferate in the American press. Michiko Kakutani, then the chief book critic for The New York Times, was among the first to set the tone. She turned [a review of a new Hitler biography](#) into a thinly veiled allegory about a “clown” and a “dunderhead,” an egomaniac and pathological liar with a talent for reading and exploiting weakness. In The Washington Post, the conservative commentator Robert Kagan wrote: [“This is how fascism comes to America.](#) Not with jackboots and salutes,” but “with a television huckster.”

In a column for a French newspaper, republished in early 2017 in Harper’s Magazine, Paxton urged restraint. [“We should hesitate before applying this most toxic of labels,”](#) he warned. Paxton acknowledged that Trump’s “scowl” and his “jutting jaw” recalled “Mussolini’s absurd theatrics,” and that Trump was fond of blaming “foreigners and despised minorities” for “national decline.” These, Paxton wrote, were all staples of fascism. But the word was used with such abandon — “everyone you don’t like is a fascist,” he said — that it had lost its power to illuminate. Despite the superficial resemblances, there were too many dissimilarities. The first fascists, he wrote, “promised to overcome national weakness and decline by strengthening the state, subordinating the interests of individuals to those of the community.” Trump and his cronies wanted, by contrast, to “subordinate community interests to individual interests — at least those of wealthy individuals.”

After Trump took office, a torrent of articles, papers and books either embraced the fascism analogy as useful and necessary, or criticized it as misleading and unhelpful. The polemic was so unrelenting, especially on social media, that it came to be known among historians as the Fascism Debate. Paxton had, by this point, been retired for more than a decade from Columbia University, where he was a professor of history for more than 30 years, and he didn’t pay attention to, let alone participate in, online debates.

Image





Paxton was reluctant to join other historians in equating Trumpism with fascism. Jan. 6 changed his mind. Credit...Ashley Gilbertson/VII, for The New York Times

Jan. 6 proved to be a turning point. For an American historian of 20th-century Europe, it was hard not to see in the insurrection echoes of Mussolini's Blackshirts, who marched on Rome in 1922 and took over the capital, or of the violent riot at the French Parliament in 1934 by veterans and far-right groups who sought to disrupt the swearing in of a new left-wing government. But the analogies were less important than what Paxton regarded as a transformation of Trumpism itself. "The turn to violence was so explicit and so overt and so intentional, that you had to change what you said about it," Paxton told me. "It just seemed to me that a new language was necessary, because a new thing was happening."

When an editor at Newsweek reached out to Paxton, he decided to publicly declare a change of mind. In a column that appeared online on Jan. 11, 2021, Paxton wrote that the invasion of the Capitol ["removes my objection to the fascist label."](#) Trump's "open encouragement of civic violence to overturn an election crosses a red line," he went on. "The label now seems not just acceptable but necessary."

Until then, most scholars arguing in favor of the fascism label were not specialists. Paxton was. Those who for years had been making the case that Trumpism equaled fascism took Paxton's column as a vindication. "He probably did more with that one piece than all these other historians who've written numerous books since 2016, and appeared on television, and who have 300,000 Twitter followers," says Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, an assistant professor at Wesleyan and the editor of a recent collection of essays, "Did it Happen Here?" Samuel Moyn, a historian at Yale University, said that to cite Paxton is to make "an authority claim — you can't beat it."

This summer I asked Paxton if, nearly four years later, he stood by his pronouncement. Cautious but forthright, he told me that he doesn't believe using the word is politically helpful in any way, but he confirmed the diagnosis. "It's bubbling up from below in very worrisome ways, and that's very much like the original fascisms," Paxton said. "It's the real thing. It really is."

Image





Benito Mussolini (center) and his Blackshirts. The Blackshirts, who had assembled outside Rome in a show of force, entered the capital city in 1922. Credit...Amerigo Petitti/Mondadori, via Everett Collection

Calling someone or something “fascist” is the supreme expression of moral revulsion, an emotional impulse that is difficult to resist. “The temptation to draw parallels between Trump and the fascist leaders of the 20th century is understandable,” the British historian Richard J. Evans wrote in 2021. “How better to express the fear, loathing, and contempt that Trump arouses in liberals than by comparing him to the ultimate political evil?” The word gets lobbed at the left too, including by Trump at Democrats. But fascism does have a specific meaning, and in the last few years the debate has turned on two questions: Is it an accurate description of Trump? And is it useful?

Most commentators fall into one of two categories: a yes to the first and second, or a no to both. Paxton is somewhat unique in staking out a position as yes and no. “I still think it’s a word that generates more heat than light,” Paxton said as we sat looking out over the Hudson River. “It’s kind of like setting off a paint bomb.”

Paxton, who speaks with the lilt of a midcentury TV announcer or studio star, is an elegant, reserved man, with a dapper swoop of hair, long gone white, his face etched with deep lines. He and his wife, the artist Sarah Plimpton, moved out of New York City, where they lived for 50 years near the Columbia campus, only a few years ago. He told me that what he saw on Jan. 6 has continued to affect him; it has been hard “to accept the other side as fellow citizens with legitimate grievances.” That is not to say, he clarified, that there aren’t legitimate grievances to be had, but that the politics of addressing them has changed. He believes that Trumpism has become something that is “not Trump’s doing, in a curious way,” Paxton said. “I mean it is, because of his rallies. But he hasn’t sent organizers out to create these things; they just germinated, as far as I can tell.”

Whatever Trumpism is, it’s coming “from below as a mass phenomenon, and the leaders are running to keep ahead of it,” Paxton said. That was how, he noted, Italian Fascism and Nazism began, when Mussolini and Hitler capitalized on mass discontentment after World War I to gain power. Focusing on leaders, Paxton has long held, is a distraction when trying to understand fascism. “What you ought to be studying is the milieu out of which they grew,” Paxton said. For fascism to take root, there needs to be “an opening in the political system, which is the loss of traction by the traditional parties” he said. “There needs to be a real breakdown.”

Paxton was not quite 40 when he published his groundbreaking book about the Vichy regime. In demonstrating that France’s leaders actively sought collaboration with the Nazis and that much of the public initially supported them, he showed that the country’s wartime experience was not simply imposed but arose from its own internal political and cultural crises: a dysfunctional government and perceived social decadence.

Later in his career, Paxton began to write comparatively about fascist movements across Europe in the 1920s and ’30s: what caused them to grow and win power (as in Italy and Germany) or to fail (as in Britain). The work was a response to what he saw as a fundamental misconception on the part of some of his peers, who defined fascism as an ideology. “It

seems doubtful,” Paxton wrote in *The New York Review of Books* in 1994, “that some common intellectual position can be the defining character of movements that valued action above thought, the instincts of the blood above reason, duty to the community above intellectual freedom, and national particularism above any kind of universal value. Is fascism an ‘ism’ at all?” Fascism, he argued, was propelled more by feelings than ideas.

Fascist movements succeeded, Paxton wrote, in environments in which liberal democracy stood accused of producing divisions and decline. That remains true not just of the United States today but also of Europe, especially France, where the far-right National Rally party of Marine Le Pen has inched closer and closer to power with each election cycle. “Marine Le Pen has gone to considerable lengths to insist that there is no common ground between her movement and the Vichy regime,” Paxton told me. “For me, to the contrary, she seems to occupy much the same space within the political system. She carries forward similar issues about authority, internal order, fear of decline and of ‘the other.’”

Fifty years after “*Vichy France*” was published, it remains a remarkable book. It offers jarring details on the material and practical support provided to Nazi Germany by France, the largest supplier to the German war economy of both food and foreign male laborers in all of occupied Europe. But it also illuminates, with clarity and a degree of even-handedness that feels astonishing today, the competing historical and political traditions — progressive versus Catholic traditionalist, republican versus *ancien-régime* — that created the turbulent conditions in which Vichy could prevail and that continue to drive French politics today.

“*Vichy France*,” published in France in 1973, profoundly shook the nation’s self-image, and Paxton is still something of a household name — his picture appears in some French high school history textbooks. He often comes up in the mudslinging of French politics. Éric Zemmour, a far-right pundit and one-time presidential candidate, who has sought to sanitize far-right politics in France by rehabilitating Vichy, has attacked Paxton and the historical consensus he represents.

Image





Paxton's book "Vichy France," published in France in 1973, forced the country to reckon with its Nazi collaborationist past. Credit...From Robert O. Paxton

In "Vichy France," Paxton asserted that "the deeds of occupied and occupier alike suggest that there come cruel times when to save a nation's deepest values one must disobey the state. France after 1940 was one of those times." The book was a "national scandal," Paxton said. "People were quite horrified." Paxton's adversaries called him a naïf: He was American and had no history of his own. "I said, 'Oh, boy, you don't know anything,'" Paxton told me.

Paxton was born in 1932 and raised in Lexington, a small town in the Appalachian hills of western Virginia. As he wrote in the introduction to "Vichy France" when it was reissued in 2001, his own family "still brooded, a century later, about its decline after the death of my great-grandfather in the Battle of Chancellorsville on May 3, 1863." Paxton's father was a lawyer and publisher of the local newspaper, and his family was liberal, but nonetheless they could see the "substantial house on a hilltop" that had belonged to his father's grandfather, a brigadier general in the Confederate Army, occupied by another family since 1865. "The bitterness of the defeated South tended to express itself in the study of history," he wrote. "My fellow Southerners spent their time researching, debating, commemorating, rewriting, even re-enacting their four-year 'war for Southern independence.'" Surely, he thought, he would find in France "an equally active fascination with the history of Vichy."

Paxton chose to study European history to get away from American history, especially the South, which "felt rather stultifying," he said. His parents sent him to Exeter for his last two years of high school, but instead of going on to Harvard or Yale, he decided to return to Lexington to attend Washington and Lee University, like generations of Paxtons before him. After graduating, he won a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford, did two years of military service, working for the Navy leadership in Washington, and then went to Harvard to earn a Ph.D. In 1960, he arrived in France to begin research for his dissertation.

Paris at the time was brimming with rumors of an impending coup by French generals who were fighting to keep Algeria, then a colony, French, and who were angry that the government in Paris was not supporting them. The notion of an Army officer class that was loyal to the nation but not to its current government was, to Paxton, a resonant one. He wanted to write about how the officers were trained, but when he went to search the military academy's archives, he was told they were bombed in 1944. A French adviser suggested that he focus instead on the Vichy period, a time of great confusion. But it had been only 15 years since the end of the war, and France had a rule about keeping archives closed for 50 years. Fortunately, Paxton also spoke German, and so there was another resource: the German archives, which had

been captured by Allied forces and made accessible on microfilm.

As he sorted through documents, Paxton began to question the narrative about Vichy that became dominant after the war. The French held that the Nazis maintained total dominion over France, and that Vichy was doing only what was necessary to protect the nation while waiting for liberation — the so-called double game. But this did not correspond to the records. “What I was finding was a total mismatch,” Paxton told me. “The French popular narrative of the war had been that they’d all been resisters, even if only in their thoughts. And the archives were just packed with people clamoring, defense companies wanting to construct things for the German Army, people who wanted to have jobs, people who wanted to have social contacts.”

Image



The 1945 trial of Marshal Henri-Philippe Pétain (center, hand to ear), who headed France's collaborationist Vichy government during German occupation. He was convicted of treason but ultimately spared the death penalty. Credit...The New York Times

In his book, Paxton argued that the shock and devastation of France's 1940 military defeat, for which many French blamed the four years of socialist government and the cultural liberalization that preceded it, had primed France to accept — even support — its collaborationist government. After World War I, France was a power in decline, squeezed between the mass production of the United States and the strength of the newly formed Soviet Union. Many French citizens saw the loss of France's prestige as a symptom of social decay. These sentiments created the conditions for the Vichy government to bring about what they called “the national revolution”: an ideological transformation of France that included anti-Jewish laws and, eventually, deportation.

Every major French publication and broadcast reviewed the book. One reviewer sarcastically congratulated Paxton for solving France's problems. Another offered “hearty cheers to this academic sitting in his chair on the other side of the Atlantic, 30 years later.” Many commentators, however, recognized that perhaps only an outsider could have accomplished what he did. It was true that the postwar narrative was already being publicly challenged: “The Sorrow and the Pity,” a searing 1969 documentary about French collaboration, and the controversial pardon of a Vichy parapolice leader raised questions among the younger generation about what actually happened during that period. But it

was Paxton who “legitimized changes that were in the process of happening in French society,” Henry Rousso, a French historian and expert on Vichy, told me. “He had the allure of a Hollywood star. He was the perfect American for the French.”

Paxton’s scholarship became the foundation for an entirely new field of research that would transform France’s official memory of World War II from one of resistance to one of complicity. It came to be known as the Paxtonian revolution. Yet even at the time, Paxton was judicious about the uses and misuses of “fascism.” In “Vichy France,” he acknowledged that “well past the halfway point of this book, the term fascism has hardly appeared.” This was not, he continued, “to deny any kinship between Vichy France and other radical right regimes of the 20th century,” but because “the word fascism has been debased into epithet, making it a less and less useful tool for analyzing political movements of our times.”

To describe the French case as “fascism,” Paxton went on, was to dismiss “the whole occupation experience as something alien to French life, an aberration unthinkable without foreign troops imposing their will.” This, he warned, was a “mental shortcut” that “conceals the deep taproots linking Vichy policies to the major conflicts of the Third Republic.” That is, to everything that came before.

In determining what counts as fascism, many historians still rely on parameters that came from Paxton. Throughout the 1960s and ’70s, historians argued about how best to understand and define it. Paxton wasn’t much involved in those debates, but by the early ’90s, he found himself dissatisfied with their conclusions. Their scholarship focused on ideas, ideology and political programs. “I found it bizarre how every time someone set out to publish a book or write an article about fascism, they began with the program,” Paxton told me when we met again, at Le Monde, a French bistro near the Columbia campus. “The program was usually transactional,” he said over our very French lunch of omelets and *frites*. “It was there to try to gain followers at a certain period. But it certainly didn’t determine what they did.”

In 1998, Paxton published a highly influential journal article titled “The Five Stages of Fascism,” which became the basis for his canonical 2004 book, [“The Anatomy of Fascism.”](#) In the article, Paxton argued that one problem in trying to define fascism arose from the “ambiguous relationship between doctrine and action.” Scholars and intellectuals naturally wished to classify movements according to what their leaders said they believed. But it was a mistake, he said, to treat fascism as if it were comparable with 19th-century doctrines like liberalism, conservatism or socialism. “Fascism does not rest explicitly upon an elaborated philosophical system, but rather upon popular feelings about master races, their unjust lot, and their rightful predominance over inferior peoples,” he wrote in “The Anatomy of Fascism.” In contrast to other “isms,” “the truth was whatever permitted the new fascist man (and woman) to dominate others, and whatever made the chosen people triumph.”

Whatever promises fascists made early on, Paxton argued, were only distantly related to what they did once they gained and exercised power. As they made the necessary compromises with existing elites to establish dominance, they demonstrated what he called a “contempt for doctrine,” in which they simply ignored their original beliefs and acted “in ways quite contrary to them.” Fascism, Paxton argued, was best thought of as a political behavior, one marked by “obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation or victimhood.”

The book, already a staple of college syllabuses, became increasingly popular during the Trump years — to many, the echoes were unmistakable.

When Paxton announced his change of mind about Trump in his 2021 Newsweek column, he continued to emphasize that the historical circumstances were “profoundly different.” Nonetheless, the column had a significant impact on the ongoing, and newly fierce, debate over whether Trump could be labeled a fascist. Ruth Ben-Ghiat, a historian of Italian

Fascism at New York University, says that the column's importance lay not only in the messenger, but also in marking Jan. 6 as a "radicalizing event." In his 1998 article, Paxton outlined how fascism evolved, either toward entropy or radicalization. "When somebody allies with extremists to get to power and to sustain them, you have a logic of radicalization," Ben-Ghiat says. "And we saw this happening."

Not everyone was persuaded. Samuel Moyn, the Yale historian, told me it was impossible not to admire Paxton — "he's a scholar's scholar, while also making a huge political difference" — but he still disagreed. In 2020, [Moyn argued in The New York Review of Books](#) that the problem with comparisons is that they can prevent us from seeing novelty. In particular, Moyn was concerned about the same "mental shortcuts" that Paxton warned against more than 50 years earlier. "I wanted to say, Well, wait, it's the Republican Party, along with the Democratic Party, that led to Trump, through neoliberalism and wars abroad," Moyn told me. "It just seems that there's a distinctiveness to this phenomenon that maybe makes it not very helpful to use the analogy."

Michael Kimmage, a historian at Catholic University who specializes in the history of the Cold War and worked at the State Department, told me that even when it comes to Putin, a good candidate for the "fascist" label, the use of the word often generates a noxious incuriousness. "It becomes the enemy of nuance," Kimmage says. "The only thing that provides predictive value in foreign policy, in my experience, is regime type," Kimmage says. He argues that Putin has not behaved as a full-blown fascist, because his regime depends on maintaining order and stability, and that affects how he wages war. It should affect how the United States responds too.

But for those who use the label to describe Trump, it is useful precisely because it *has* offered a predictive framework. "It's kind of a hypothesis," John Ganz, the author of a [new book on the radical right in the 1990s](#), told me. "What does it tell us about the next steps that Trump may take? I would say that as a theory of Trumpism, it's one of the better ones." No one expects Trumpism to look like Nazism, or to follow a specific timeline, but some anticipated that "using street paramilitary forces he might do some kind of extralegal attempt to seize power," Ganz said. "Well, that's what he did."

Image



Hitler in Germany in 1933, the year he became chancellor. Credit...Andreas Wolochow/Shutterstock

Some of the most ardent proponents of the fascism label have taken it quite a bit further. The Yale historian Timothy Snyder offers lessons on fighting Trumpism lifted from totalitarian Germany in the 1930s in the way that many other

historians find unhelpful. But the debate is not just an intellectual one; it's also about actual tactics. Some on the far left accuse prominent figures in the political center (whom Moyn calls "Cold War liberals") of wielding the label against Trump to get them to fall in line with the Democratic Party, despite having strong differences with parts of its platform. Steinmetz-Jenkins told me that he objects to the attitude that "what matters is winning, so let's create an enemy, let's call it fascism for the purpose of galvanizing consensus." And this kind of politics, Kimmage notes, also comes with its own dangers. "Sometimes waving that banner, 'You fascists on the other side, and we the valiant anti-fascists,' is a way of just not thinking about how one as an individual or as part of a class might be contributing to the problem," he says.

Paxton has not weighed in on the issue since the *Newsweek* column, spending much of his time immersed in his life's second passion, bird-watching. At his home in the Hudson Valley, I read back to him one of his earlier definitions of fascism, which he described as a "mass, anti-liberal, anti-communist movement, radical in its willingness to employ force . . . distinct not only from enemies on the left but also from rivals on the right." I asked him if he thought it described Trumpism. "It does," he said. Nonetheless, he remains committed to his yes-no paradigm of accuracy and usefulness. "I'm not pushing the term because I don't think it does the job very well now," Paxton told me. "I think there are ways of being more explicit about the specific danger Trump represents."

When we met, Kamala Harris had just assumed the Democratic nomination. "I think it's going to be very dicey," he said. "If Trump wins, it's going to be awful. If he loses, it's going to be awful too." He scoured his brain for an apt historical analogy but struggled to find one. Hitler was not elected, he noted, but legally appointed by the conservative president, Paul von Hindenburg. "One theory," he said, "is that if Hindenburg hadn't been talked into choosing Hitler, the bubble had already burst, and you would have come up with an ordinary conservative and not a fascist as the new chancellor of Germany. And I think that that's a plausible counterfactual, Hitler was on the downward slope." In Italy, Mussolini was also legitimately appointed. "The king chose him," Paxton said, "Mussolini didn't really have to march on Rome."

Trump's power, Paxton suggested, appears to be different. "The Trump phenomenon looks like it has a much more solid social base," Paxton said. "Which neither Hitler nor Mussolini would have had."

Elisabeth Zerofsky is a contributing writer for the magazine. Her last article was on the divisions within the French left.

Read by Julia Whelan

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