

Patrick Lawrence

## **America's turn toward fascism.**

Every day since an agent of Immigration and Customs Enforcement shot Renee Good on a Minneapolis street 7 January, social media are filled with videos of the lawless conduct of what has served as an armed militia since the Trump regime began its campaign against immigrants a day after Donald Trump took office a year ago next week. Having watched dozens of these videos, each uglier and more brutish than the next, there is no question in my mind that the Trump regime has transformed ICE into a paramilitary force of the sort long common in distant dictatorships. A lot of people now protesting the presence of ICE in U.S. cities call it “America’s Gestapo.” I would have dismissed this as hyperbole even a couple of months ago. It seems time now to consider this term more carefully.

Renee Good was 37, a mother of three, and was acting as a legal observer of the ICE operation in Minneapolis when she was shot three times and died at the wheel of her car. Millions of Americans, including many elected officials, have since gone to the streets in a national movement calling itself “ICE Out for Good,” the compassionate pun lost on nobody. Rather than defusing this confrontation between citizens and a federal enforcement agency that is patently out of control, the Trump regime has taken every opportunity to sharpen it.

Here is Stephen Miller, Trump’s deputy chief a staff and a major influence in the Trump White House, on Fox News, the arch-conservative television broadcaster, on 13 January:

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To all ICE officers: You have federal immunity in the conduct of your duties. Anybody who lays a hand on you or tries to stop you or tries to obstruct you is committing felony. You have immunity to perform your duties, and no one—no city official, no state official, no illegal alien, no leftist agitator or domestic insurrectionist—can prevent you from fulfilling your legal obligations and duties. The Department of Justice has made it clear that if officials cross that line into obstruction, into criminal conspiracy against the United States or against ICE officers, then they will face justice.

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With Renee Good's murder six days behind him, Miller's purposely menacing warning amounts to a dispensation for ICE agents to shoot those demonstrating against the agency's Draconian interventions. In keeping with this, Trump and his cabinet of misfits—unread, ignorant of the Constitution and law—continue to claim against a surfeit of perfectly legible video evidence that the ICE officer who killed Renee Good acted in self-defense. People with sharp minds have taken to quoting the famous line from Orwell's *1984*: "The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command." What the British writer presciently imagined 77 years ago is now a bitter reality in America.

This crisis, and the Trump regime has indeed created one, is likely to worsen in months to come. Since mid-2025 the Homeland Security Department has been running [aggressive advertising campaigns](#) to recruit many thousands of new ICE agents. These are long on "patriotism," "national security," and the presence of "dangerous criminals" in American cities. "This is a defining moment in our

nation's history," Kristi Noem, the Homeland Security secretary and without question the stupidest of the yahoos populating Trump's cabinet, said as she introduced the new recruitment drive. "Together, we must defend the homeland."

I do not know what the United States of early 2026, as Trump begins the second year of his second term, looks like from the other side of the Atlantic. And I am well aware of the heavy load the term "fascism" bears among Europeans. But it seems to me time to conclude that America is on the way to its own version of this ideology, if its purported leaders do not already impose it in all but name.

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"Fascism" and "fascist" have rolled too readily off the tongues of Trump's opponents since he first occupied the White House in 2017, notably but not only among liberals with undisciplined minds and too poor a grasp of history. I have long objected: Alarmist overstatement never serves to clarify one's moment. But these past months of increasingly aggressive ICE operations in U.S. cities—before the mess in Minneapolis there was Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, New Orleans, Charlotte (North Carolina), and Portland (Oregon)—prompt a reconsideration.

Certain features of the fascist state have long been in place. The unity of the state and the major economic structures is an obvious case. One has not been able to tell for many years where the federal government ends and the most powerful American companies begin. During his second term, Trump has gone so far as to direct federal investments in corporations deemed essential to America's economic future. "Fascism should more properly be called 'corporatism' because it is the merger of the state and corporate power," Mussolini is reputed to have said on

numerous occasions. I do not think any such merger is complete in the United States, but this is a very close call now.

I am concerned here with characteristics of fascism that are other than structural. I am concerned with what Il Duce called matters of spirit and ethics.

Here is how Mussolini began “[The Doctrine of Fascism](#),” his famous 1932 essay:

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Like all sound political conceptions, Fascism is action and it is thought; action in which doctrine is immanent, and doctrine arising from a given system of historical forces in which it is inserted, and working on them from within. It has therefore a form correlated to contingencies of time and space.

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How accurately these lines describe the *modus operandi* of the Trump regime. The regime’s ideology is immanent—unstated, implicit in what it does. What it does is dictated by the immediate circumstances of any given moment in any given place.

And further on in Mussolini’s essay:

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The State, as conceived and realized by Fascism, is a spiritual and ethical entity for securing the political, juridical, and economic organization of the nation, an organization which in its origin and growth is a manifestation of the spirit....

The Fascist State expresses the will to exercise power and to command. Here the Roman tradition is embodied in a conception of strength. Imperial

power, as understood by the Fascist doctrine, is not only territorial, or military, or commercial; it is also spiritual and ethical....

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It is this, the irrationality of Trump's movement, that ICE now puts thoroughly and therefore fearfully on public display. This, the dispensing of any resort to reason, is what Trump and all the manifestation of his regime, ICE but one of them, have in common with Mussolini's Italy. Anyone who watches an ICE operation via one of the numerous videos available on social media will see immediately that many of these agents brim with hatred and *ressentiment*, the collective feeling of inferiority and suppressed envy that has long motivated disadvantaged social groups to act. Once this is understood, it should be plain that the excesses of an ICE operation are subliminally intentional: They are meant as displays of power, as expressions of a righteous irrationality devoted to the primacy of strength and action.

Law is rational, to put this point another way. And as Trump recently made clear, he has no use for law, only his own "morality"—his word, unmistakably, for Mussolini's "ethics." So can we understand that the abuses of law and civil rights one can see in the videos is also purposeful. Law does not count: The power of a heavily armed ICE agent is all that counts.

Mussolini was notably given to the manipulation of images, as students of Fascism, capital "F," often remark. He understood the power of imagery to control the popular consciousness. This, too, is Trumpian. There are—the accepted figure at the moment—roughly 14 million illegal immigrants in the United States. Is there some question that these often-violent, door-to-door ICE operations can possibly remove all of them? The thought is preposterous. It is the imagery of ICE in action that matters.

“Fascism, the term,” can be distracting when used in the American context. It can mislead people into thinking that what occurred a century ago is what is happening again. This is not a useful perspective. This moment in American history has no precedent, however many its similarities to past passages in the history of others.

Fascism in America does not wear black shirts, jodhpurs, and riding boots. It wears ridiculous cowboy hats and boots to match. It is a *sui generis* phenomenon. Its ideology is immanent in what, day by day, it does, just as it was in Italy a century ago. But the American variety is a creature all its own, a point that ought not be missed. Kristi Noem has it right about one thing, remarkably enough. This seems to be a defining moment in American history.

14 January 2026.