Donald Trump and the Age of Evil

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How Trump Uses Power to Normalize Selfishness and Cruelty



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By any standard of morality, Trump is depraved. But adorned with the power of the state, he descends to another level — the level of evil.
Donald Trump exhibits the classic traits of psychopaths — superficial charm, grandiosity and self-importance, a need for constant stimulation, a penchant for lying, deception and manipulation, and an incapacity for remorse or guilt. But is he evil?



If, as the philosopher Susan Neiman writes, evil is not simply the opposite of good but inimical to it, if the aim of evil is to destroy all moral distinctions, then

Trump qualifies as evil. Morality, for Trump, is for losers. All life is transactional. Self-interest and self-enrichment usurp all other considerations. No one else matters. In her new book, *Call It Evil: Understanding the Trump Era,* Neiman argues that evil "isn't cruelty but something much worse: the ideas that allow cruelty to become ordinary."

She continues: There's a difference between calling one action evil and calling another a crime. Crimes are things for which we have procedures — at least for punishing, if not for preventing. This means that a crime can be fit in some way into the rest of our experience. To call an action evil is to suggest it cannot — and that it thereby threatens the trust in the world that we need to navigate it. There's no signpost on the border between evil and awful. Evil is what you say when your jaw begins to drop if you sense that a line has been crossed.

Trump crosses line after line. He declares wars on a whim. He enriches himself and his family in crypto schemes, from which he has made over a billion dollars. He orders assassinations and the kidnapping of heads of state. He uses billions of taxpayer dollars to sustain genocide in Palestine and, since January 2025, has provided over $20 billion in new arms sales to Israel. He guts government departments designed to lift up the vulnerable and bloats the war budget. He builds rogue paramilitary forces to terrorize citizens and immigrants. He attacks and attempts to censor the news industry.

In short, he does what all who commit evil do. He fosters a world where nothing is sacred and where democracy and civic virtues do not exist. Concepts of fairness, decorum, justice and empathy are imploded by the Trump administration. His threat to annihilate Iran — i.e., carry out genocide — announced, of all places, at the United Nations, is greeted with indifference by a public rendered numb by his moral vacuity.

Neiman writes: Once the supremacy of self-interest is enshrined as commonsense realism rather than a philosophical idea, moral capacities like empathy and shame become not just naïve but suspect. Sadists exist and cause no end of pain. But the most common forms of evil arise from the view that only fools believe in anything but their own advantage.

The institutions designed to protect democracy, to safeguard civic virtues and to foster equality — including the courts, law firms, universities and the media, all of which have been captured by the billionaire class — swiftly fell to their knees to curry favor with the Trump White House. The titans in Silicon Valley showered him and his campaign with millions of dollars. The supposed virtues these institutions and individuals claimed they championed were jettisoned. These virtues, they illustrated, were nothing more than branding, performance art, a sham.

To an enraged public, Trump's transparent greed and cruelty is preferable to the slick hypocrisy of the politicians, Republican and Democrat, who preceded him. He does not engage in their faux empathy. In fact, he seems incapable of empathy. Once morality is for fools, virtue makes no sense. Once we believe we should grab what we can, even at the expense of those around us, we surrender to evil.

"Unlike the rest of us, he permanently exhibits the combination of motives we are told are the true forces driving human behavior," Neiman writes of Trump. Nor does he appear to understand any other. Though he recognizes that other people, aka



o idea of how norms work, moving people to override r them.

In acting on the international stage like Richard Dawkins

's ruthless genes, he has attracted millions of followers who tell us they admire his authenticity. This doesn't mean his followers are deplorable. They may not be evil at all, but in a world where implacable self-interest is usually camouflaged in soft colors, they find his candor refreshing. They have so often heard that people conceal the raw self-interest that really moves things, they're relieved to watch a man who never hides it.

The worst evil, Neiman argues, "may be the denial of evil — as well as disdain for any goodness that might oppose it. When self-interest becomes the basis of reason, evil no longer needs to justify itself. It's already been mistaken for rationality." This evil leads us down the familiar road to fascism. It was Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during Trump's first term, who warned us, calling Trump "fascist to the core."

The media — too spineless to label Trump a fascist — prefers the word "authoritarian," which Neiman notes may be a more bearable word, but "will not make fascism more bearable." **Authoritarianism, she notes:** [I]s a word that can

be useful for describing certain German professors, and the softer sort of Latin American military regime.

But a country where masked men deport people to wastelands they've never seen? Combat troops occupy major cities and shoot peacefully protesting citizens? A government that coerces media, universities, and other countries to suit its will? A military that blows fishermen to bits with the meagerest of justifications, then begins the kind of wars the International Military Court at Nuremberg condemned?

As it wrote in 1946, 'To initiate a war of aggression is not only an international crime, it is the supreme international crime, differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.' It would be easy to go on, but counting crimes is pointless. Before these words are printed, the administration will have found countless new ways to flout the rule of law.

We are in deep trouble.

The moral rot in our society preceded Trump. He is its logical conclusion. He is the apotheosis of a culture where greed, exploitation and self-interest — the core tenets of neoliberalism — are held up as the defining forces of human existence. We must fight back while we can. But to do so requires that we recapture the language of good and evil. It requires us to make moral choices and to accept self-sacrifice. It requires us to name the bleakness before us, not turn our faces from the fascist monolith being cemented into place. Denying these truths and refusing to defy evil will ensure our enslavement.

Speaking these truths and standing with the oppressed and the marginalized, even at the cost of our own financial and physical security, will set us free.

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