**Madeleine Albright: Trump Is 'The Least Democratic President of Modern History'**

**By Isabel Fattal, *The Atlantic* April 18, 2018**

“I am an optimist who worries a lot,” Madeleine Albright said Monday night when asked about the future of democracy. It’s a quotable phrase, but the former secretary of state is serious—both about her belief in the power of democracy and the fact that today, there’s substantial reason to worry about it.

In a wide-ranging conversation with The Atlantic’s editor in chief Jeffrey Goldberg in Washington, Albright spoke about the 20th-century history of fascism that she details in her new book, Fascism: A Warning. Albright, whose family was driven out of Czechoslovakia twice (once at the start of World War II, and again by the Communist regime in 1948), discovered late in life that 26 members of her family were murdered in the Holocaust. This personal history, as well as Albright’s long career as a diplomat and politician, have helped inform her understanding of fascism—both what it is and what it’s not.

Albright, who served as secretary of state in the Clinton administration from 1997 to 2001, acknowledged that fascism is hard to define. She pointed to a few signifiers: identification with a tribe or group and discrimination against those who aren’t members; a lack of attention to democratic institutions; the use of propaganda and rallies where political opponents are vilified; and the encouragement of violence.

But Albright seems most interested in what she thinks of as the preconditions of fascism. Asked about the state of democracy in the world today, she offered a metaphor: “I am worried about the fact that there are conditions out there that provide the petri dish for something terrible to happen, where some of the definitions I gave of fascism would take hold.”

Goldberg pointed out that Albright indirectly references President Trump several times in her book; she mentions, for example, that one of Benito Mussolini’s mottos was “drain the swamp.”

Goldberg asked Albright directly: Is Donald Trump a fascist? “He is not a fascist,” she responded. “I do think he is the least democratic president of modern history.” Trump, it seems, contributes to the petri dish: “His instincts are not democratic,” Albright argued, pointing to his attacks on the press, “how he treats the judiciary,” and his tendency to create “us-versus-them” divisions in his rhetoric. These are “tendencies that make me very nervous,” she said.

Albright’s cautious pessimism seems colored, at least in part, by a life spent engaging with foreign leaders, and watching other nations approach the point of no return. While she seems sure that America isn’t quite there, she seems equally sure that it could be.

The petri dish of fascism, Albright argued, requires several catalysts mixed together: It needs a leader with antidemocratic tendencies, as well as a populace that puts certain kinds of pressures on that leader. Albright calls the force of the populace a “pressure from below”; fascism, she argued, comes “bottom up” through people who feel they’ve been discriminated against or denied job opportunities. “And then,” Albright concluded, “there’s a leader from above who takes advantage of disquiet and makes it worse by exacerbating the divisions in society.” Asked if she sees in America today the same preconditions for fascism that she’s seen in the other countries she’s studied, Albright pointed to a few similarities: the sense of disenfranchisement among the American people, the anger over a lack of jobs and educational opportunity, and the instinct to blame foreigners for problems. “We’re operating on the fear factor,” she said.

Some [readers](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/is-the-united-states-really-on-the-road-to-fascism/2018/04/13/9e66d45a-3e26-11e8-8d53-eba0ed2371cc_story.html) of Albright’s book had hoped she’d take a harder line in identifying the difference between a fascist and an almost-fascist. Asked by Goldberg what her “red line” is—at what point she’d turn to unequivocally calling someone a fascist—Albright gave a few metrics. She said that it depended on how much violence is involved, on the leader’s attempts to undermine democratic institutions, and on a sense the leader has that he or she is above the law. (That last one is a threat she suggested Americans should worry about, if Trump were to fire Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein or Special Counsel Robert Mueller.)

Albright said she was planning to write a book on fascism no matter who got elected—she had long been thinking about the “real divisions on the right and the left and the exacerbations of differences” in America. In the 1930s, she said, FDR was “attacked from the right and the left,” but he was at least able to develop a kind of centrism and common ground that she doesn’t think America is striving for today.

Perhaps the most pessimistic part of Albright’s worldview is her personal opinion of Trump. Asked if she thinks Trump has the capacity to learn, she said: “I do not. That’s the sad part. I have worked for a lot of political people, and they all had the capacity to learn and to understand that there are things that are a little bit different than they thought. I don’t get that feeling at all about Trump.” While Albright said she is not interested in meeting Donald Trump, she also said that if the Trump administration asked for her help in dealing with North Korea, she would be willing to speak with him.

Despite her concerns, Albright is not despondent. “I have my to-do list,” she said, which includes encouraging Americans to participate in government and pay attention to local elections. “We can’t operate on the basis of fear all the time.”