

IS TRUMP A FASCIST?

THE acquittal of Donald Trump on the impeachment charge of inciting insurrection means that, theoretically, he could run for President again. This raises the questions: how dangerous is this man and what has he done to American politics?

In the last issue of the *Irish Freethinker* Andy Barr stated his belief that Trump is a fascist. In the 15th January issue of the *New Statesman* the historian Richard J Evans argues that he and his followers are not. He thinks that fascism was an ideology peculiar to the 1918-45 period in Europe and was driven by the desire to refight the First World War. “You can’t win the battles of the present if you’re always stuck in the past”, he writes.

These are strange arguments. To take the last point first, you can certainly learn from the past. The Spanish philosopher George Santayana said that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”. Indeed, it is curious that an historian should himself ignore this lesson.

Bizarrely, he doesn’t ignore the fact that the First World War led to the Second World War. Santayana maintained that history is always repeating itself. Wars have ended with winners punishing the losers, inevitably breeding more wars. Again, revolutions in the name of the people and their liberty, like those in France and Russia, seem to lead to brutal dictatorships under a Napoleon or Stalin.

At an individual level observation shows that immature people never seem to learn from their mistakes and just keep repeating them.

As for suggesting that fascism was peculiar to the period 1918-45, this is an absurdly restrictive definition of a belief system that is a clear and present danger. If we define fascism as an onslaught on reason, liberalism, pluralism and constitutionalism in favour of aggression, irrationality, authoritarianism, nationalism, xenophobia and racism, then Trump is undoubtedly a vociferous modern proponent.

True, he didn't succeed in transforming American society into a totalitarian state, but more than 74 million citizens in the November election approved of the direction in which he was moving. To suggest that fascism as a label is only appropriate if it succeeds in its aims is ridiculous. Evans is hardly implying that the 1930s fascist movement in Britain wasn't fascist because it failed to take over the country.

Fascism succeeded in changing countries like Germany and Italy because liberal democracy

wasn't entrenched in them as it has been in America. The Founding Fathers of the United States cleverly drew up a constitution that placed several checks on absolute power. To transform America into a fascist state, Trump would have had to overthrow a constitution that has been in force since 1789. Yet who knows what he would have tried to do if given a second term?

A key aspect of fascism is its propensity to promote and use violence for political ends. Increasingly, Trump refused to denounce his most extreme and violent supporters, including the Neo-Nazis and white nationalists in Charlottesville and the Proud Boys group. "We love you", he told them. And, of course, after losing the election he denied the result, claiming he had won, and

incited a mob to attack the Congress. They included men in ‘Camp Auschwitz’ T- shirts, waving confederate flags, brandishing assault rifles, and shouting ‘total negro death’.

Many Republican supporters from ex-Confederate states want to refight the American Civil War and win it. It is above all in this support for violence that Trump and his supporters threaten to move America in a fascist direction. It won’t disappear any time soon.

Those who argue that Trump is not a fascist point to the fact that he fought no overseas wars whereas – as Evans says – fascism under Hitler and Mussolini was always “preparing for war, arming for war, educating for war and fighting a war”.

Yet this ignores the fact that Spain and Portugal had fascist governments in the 1930s but their leaders were also isolationist. Like them, Trump has effectively internalised this belligerence. Just as Mussolini’s March on Rome and Hitler’s Beer Hall Putsch were the beginnings of years of street violence, so the 6th January insurrection may presage years of US unrest and violence.

Trump’s cosyng up to dictators is a fascist trait and clearly indicates a feeling of kinship with the world’s tough guys. His narcissistic desire for the adoration of the crowd led him while in power to stage copies of the Nazi rallies. Indeed, his whole authoritarian and unconstitutional approach to the presidency flagged up his inherently fascist tendencies.

Trump may lack the discipline and intelligence of the 1930s leaders, but this renders him an incompetent fascist, not a non-existent one. Even if he does not return in 2024, other more coherent and effective leaders may be waiting in the wings of the Republican Party to follow in Trump’s distinctly fascist footsteps.