



## The cult of Trump and fascism in America

### Description

# From an American Nazi rally to Jonestown Kool-Aid, to unhinged ramblings and my new play suggestion

By **Byron Toben**

Several commentators have described Donald Trump's followers as being a fascist cult. I have come to agree with that assessment. Some forewarnings were events in 1939, 1978 and this past week.

### American fascism

In the 1930s, inspired by Hitler's rise to power, there were movements to grow an American Nazi party. This may have registered well with Donald's father, Frederick, previously arrested for supporting the Ku Klux Klan.

Could this happen in America? In earlier articles, I reminded us of Sinclair Lewis's 1935 novel, [It Can't Happen Here](#), and Phillip Roth's 2004 alternative history imagining, [The Plot Against America](#).

An actual event highlighting the fact that these fictional works were manifest in reality was the **American Nazi party rally** at Madison Square Garden on February 20, 1939. Footage captured there was later made into a 7-minute short film by Marshall Curry in 2017, called ***A Night at the Garden***. Note the brown-shirted followers, the Nazi salute, and the crowd cheering the beating of the one protester.

This short film is made more powerful by omitting any voiceover narration. The head speaker, 43-year-old Fritz Julius Kuhn of the German American Bund, railed against "Jewish controlled" press and U.S. president FDR as Franklin "Rosenfeld". He also proclaimed, ridiculously, that George Washington was the first fascist president and did not believe that democracy was workable.



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The beaten and stripped protester was 26-year-old Isadore Greenbaum, a plumber from Brooklyn.

## American suicidal cultism

In 1978, the [People's Temple](#), a California cult following of poor persons organized by Indiana-born **Jimmy Jones**, moved with its crew of adherents to Guyana to establish an agricultural commune. Increasing suspicions of fraud and embezzlement led to a visit by congressman **Leo Ryan** to investigate. As Ryan was boarding his return flight, he was shot and killed by some cult followers. As a result, Jones then persuaded or forced the entire community to drink poisoned Kool-Aid to hasten an apocalyptic entry into heaven.



Jim Jones, leader of the People's Temple cult –  
Image: [Nancy Wong](#) / [CC BY-SA](#)

A total of 918 people died, the largest one-day massacre in U.S. history until the attacks of 911 in 2001.

Trump has frequently used the expression of taking the Kool-Aid. One can argue that the negligent spread of COVID-19 is a modern version of taking others down with him as the end is in sight. True, the above two events, one 13 years before Donald's birth and the other when he was 32, are not precise predictors but history, while it may not repeat exactly, sure does rhyme.

Add to this Trump's embracing of violence-prone groups such as QAnon, Proud Boys and Boogaloo Boys.

And this very week, he urged Attorney General Barr to arrest Obama, Biden and Hillary Clinton for vague



treasonous charges with the “we have sufficient evidence” bespeak of a failing mind of one who has gone off his rocker.

In 1920, acerbic journalist **H.L. Mencken** famously predicted that, one day, the American public would elect an “absolute moron” as president. One hundred years later, I would slightly modify that description to “raving lunatic”.

As a theatre reviewer, all this leads me to the conclusion that the time is ripe for a play along the lines of (Beyond the Fringe member) Alan Bennett’s 1991 ***The Madness of King George III***, which made a lot of money and earned its 1994 film version four Academy Award nominations. (George III was the documented mad British monarch against whom the American colonies revolted in 1776.)

Feature image: frame from *A Night at the Garden*, courtesy of PBS

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3. Donald Trump
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