A few days after Donald J. Trump lost his reelection bid in November 2020, I wrote an op-ed in the Washington Post, warning of the possibility of a coup attempt if the defeated president continued to deny the election results.¹ I argued that Trump was edging away from being a typical right-wing populist and moving toward becoming a fascist—a dire threat to our democracy. While some considered this to be an alarmist take, the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021, proved otherwise. My op-ed wasn’t the first time I had published a warning. Before Jair Bolsonaro was elected president of Brazil in 2018, I outlined the parallels between Bolsonaro’s tactics and those of the Nazis in an article for Foreign Policy. These pieces, among others, point to my primary concern as both a historian and a citizen: global populism is turning into fascism and this trend represents a major threat to the future of democracy.²

The subject of this book is personal to me. I was born in Argentina one year before a gruesome dictatorship took shape.³ Like many other Argentines, I am still trying to come to terms with the fascist crimes against humanity committed in the country of my childhood—the disappearances, the concentration camps, the citizens tortured, drugged, and thrown into the Atlantic from military
planes. Official estimates range from ten thousand to fifteen thousand murder victims. Human rights groups estimate that thirty thousand disappeared. There was also the theft of babies born to illegally detained mothers. One of the reasons I became a historian was because I wanted to understand how the so-called Dirty War and its fascist ideology became a reality in a modern nation with a strong, progressive civil society. I migrated to the United States in 2001 and even here the presence of fascism continues to shape my focus as a writer and citizen. As in Argentina and other parts of the world, “the long shadow of fascism” is a clear and present danger in the United States, but it appears under the guise of a new breed of politician whom I call the wannabe fascist. Like the fascists and dictators of my youth, this new political archetype aspires to destroy democratic institutions, yet has, so far, failed to succeed. I see this book as contributing to the historical and present understanding of this peril to democracy. Trump may no longer be president, but he and his followers are still flying alarmingly close to fascism. The more we know about past fascist attempts to deny the workings of democracy, the more alarming these wannabe fascists appear.

Wannabe fascism is an incomplete version of fascism, characteristic of those who seek to destroy democracy for short-term personal gain but are not fully committed to the fascist cause. In 1924, the first fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, explained the difference between true fascists and fake ones: “I will distinguish between the fascists by will, by passion and by faith and, on the other hand, those fascists who are semi-wandering men, who have always raised their ears to feel the voice of public opinion.” For Mussolini, the former were the true fascists who did not stumble on the road to power, while the latter aspired to fascism but lacked resolve and ultimately wavered, proving to be weak and ineffectual.
While Mussolini might have been disappointed by the wannabe fascists, I see them as a dangerous threat to democracy, extremists who have not (yet) reached the levels of ideological fervor, violence, and lies achieved by historical fascists. Wannabe fascists do not openly advocate for fascism, but they gravitate toward fascist political styles and behaviors. The historical fascists, wannabe fascists, and many populists are traveling different but interconnected paths.

Trump’s hesitation to go full fascist in 2021 put him in the category of wannabe fascist, a semi- or pseudofascist wannabe dictator who lacked the ideological commitment and extremism of Adolf Hitler and Mussolini. The same, of course, applies to a long list of mini-Trumps: Jair Bolsonaro, Nayib Bukele, Narendra Modi, Viktor Orbán, and others. They have blurred but not erased the separation of powers. They have not succeeded in unifying the state and civil society. They have not fully destroyed the legal system. In terms of violence and militarization, they have not matched the extremism of classic fascism. In terms of hatred, they have not unlocked its genocidal potential. They employ propaganda and lies but have not fully developed an Orwellian state machine. Somewhere along the road to creating totalitarian dictatorships, they faltered. Their fascism is aspirational. Today’s wannabe fascists are weaker and more incompetent than classical fascists, but this should not ease our minds.

Since they travel the same paths, and since they seek fascist politics as a vocation, we should not shy away from using the f-word to call out the violence, xenophobia, lies, and dictatorial behavior of the wannabe fascists. Leaders like Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, and Orbán are helping to take contemporary far-right populism back to its fascist roots. Their style and behavior display key features of
fascist rule: the glorification of violence and the militarization of politics; racism and discrimination; and propaganda techniques that were pioneered by Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels.

This book defines and is organized around the four key elements of fascism: political violence, propaganda and misinformation, xenophobia, and dictatorship. In order to underscore the risk of fascism in the present, I will explain how new challenges to democracy can be countered by learning some of the lessons from history. The antidemocratic radicalization of populist movements such as Trumpism echo the fascist era of the mid-twentieth century, when dictatorial regimes adopted xenophobia, violence, coups, and anti-science to seize and retain power. Paraphrasing the philosopher Walter Benjamin, my idea is to brush Trumpism and its global associates against the grain of previous histories. More precisely, I will consider them as representing a different chapter in the long history of antidemocratic politics. In other words, they represent different “documents of barbarism” to think about in the present. Learning about the connected histories of fascism and populism, but also their contextual distinctions, reminds us why democracy matters and why wannabe fascists need to be stopped.

Additionally, this book will challenge two mutually exclusive assumptions of the prevailing wisdom, that either we are currently witnessing extreme cases of populism, or that fascism and not populism is the key to analyzing the present. While populism leads to democracy’s deterioration, fascism destroys it. In this context, seeing something like Trumpism as a populism-only approach does not fully appreciate that democracy is in grave danger, while seeing it as a fascism-only approach often does not recognize that democracy can still be defended and saved from fascism. I don’t believe these views are incompatible, and I will locate the source of the
present danger of fascism in the histories of both fascism and populism and explain how it has led to the present outcome: the wannabe fascist leader.

The recent debates that scholars have undertaken around the use of the f-word with regard to Trump have, to my mind, only yielded more confusion. Many of them are centered on arcane epistemological issues, simplistic ideas about the lack of correlations, and ignorance about the historiography of fascism. Indeed, it is peculiar that although many of these scholars are not experts on fascism, they often stress an essentialist reading of what is and what is not fascism. I also part ways with these scholars on important issues, such as the relevance of non-European and non-US sources; nearly all of these approaches fail to take a larger, global view of the question. Indeed, as a specialist in both Latin American history and European history who is also interested in primary and secondary sources from and about India, Egypt, China, Japan, and the Philippines, among others, I take a global perspective on fascism and populism. In this book, as in my work as a whole, I let these sources speak for themselves, giving the reader a clear view of the problems.

As a historian of fascism and populism, I am frequently asked whether the recent rise of right-wing populists really represents a threat to democracy around the world. Are we living on the edge of a new dark age of fascism? People ask me whether Trump and others, like the leaders of India, Brazil, Hungary, and El Salvador, are really populist demagogues, and what fascism actually is. Drawing on my three decades of research on the histories of fascism and populism in Latin America and Europe, I will answer these questions in this book and explain clearly the current state of world autocracy. My aim is to help establish a better understanding of
this dangerous and frightening political turn for those may want to push back against these antidemocratic threats. It will examine the ideologies and actions of autocratic leaders both past and present and will offer lessons on how to quash them in the future.

What is fascism? In historical terms, fascism can be defined as a global ideology with separate national movements and regimes. A counter-revolutionary formation of the extreme right, it was ultranationalist and xenophobic. Fascists were essentially anti-egalitarian and despised liberalism and socialism. The primary aim of fascism was to destroy democracy from within in order to create a modern dictatorship from above. Fascists proposed a totalitarian state in which plurality and civil society would be silenced and there would be few distinctions between the public and the private, or between the state and its citizens. Fascist regimes shut down the independent press and destroyed the rule of law.

Fascism defended a divine, messianic, and charismatic form of leadership that conceived of the leader as organically linked to the people and the nation. It considered popular sovereignty to be fully delegated to the dictator, who acted in the name of the community of the people and knew better than they what they truly wanted. Fascists replaced history and empirically based notions of truth with political myth. They had an extreme conception of the enemy, regarding it as an existential threat to the nation and to its people. Such an enemy had to be first persecuted and then deported or eliminated. Fascism aimed to create a new and epochal world order through an incremental continuum of extreme political violence and war. Global unity came through conquest and domination. A global ideology, fascism constantly reformulated itself in different national contexts and underwent constant national permutations.
Fascism was officially founded in Italy in 1919, but the anti-liberal and anti-Marxist politics it represented appeared simultaneously across the world. From Japan to Brazil and Germany, and from Argentina to India, Nicaragua, and France, the antidemocratic, violent, and racist revolution of the right that fascism epitomized was adopted in other countries under different names: Nazism in Germany, nacionalismo in Argentina, integralismo in Brazil, and so on. Fascism was transnational even before Mussolini used the word fascismo, but when fascism became a regime in Italy in 1922, the term received worldwide attention and acquired different meanings in local contexts.

What is populism? Populism is an authoritarian form of democracy. It first came to power after 1945 as an original historical reformulation of fascism. Historically, it has subsequently thrived during political crises, when it has offered itself as the antidote to the politics of the day.9

While fascism involves fanatical right-wing ideological beliefs, populist leaders and followers are more pragmatic in their antidemocratic beliefs than fascist. Unlike with fascism, which is always a right-wing ideology, movement, and regime, populists can identify with the right and left of the ideological spectrum. Like the classic fascists, wannabe fascists are always right-wing populists.

Populist leaders claim to do the work of politics while keeping themselves free from politics. They increase the political participation of their own followers while excluding others, notably limiting the rights of political, sexual, ethnic, and religious minorities. Populism conceives of the people as One—a single entity consisting of leader, followers, and nation. This trinity is rooted in fascism but is confirmed by votes and elections, which populist leaders embrace. While populism stands against liberalism, it abides by
the ballot box. Populism’s homogenizing view of the people conceives of political opponents as the antipeople. Opponents become enemies—nemeses who, consciously or unconsciously, stand for the oligarchical elites and traitors to the nation. Populism defends an illuminated nationalist leader who speaks and decides for the people. It downplays the separation of powers, the independence and legitimacy of a free press, and the rule of law.

The relapse of populism into fascism or semi-fascism is not a new phenomenon. A few significant historical examples of this relapse have appeared in the past century, ranging from neofascist Peronism in the 1970s to the Golden Dawn in Greece and other European movements of the extreme right. Even if it does not renounce democratic electoral procedures, populism as a movement can become neofascism when it transitions from viewing its population as homogenous to basing its national identity on a particular ethnic community, while simultaneously sharpening its rhetoric about the nation’s enemies from the general (elites, traitors, outsiders, etc.) to a specific racial or religious foe who is the target of political violence. As a regime, populism becomes a dictatorship (fascist, neofascist, or nonfascist) when it voids its association with its defining democratic features. To put it differently, when elections are finally banned or are no longer free, when the intimidation of the independent press leads to its suppression, when dissent is not only deemed illegitimate by those in power but is also prohibited and punished, when undermining the separation of powers morphs into unifying them under the leader, and when the populist logic of polarization is translated into actual political persecution, populism ceases to be populist. In these cases, the populist tendency to corrupt constitutional democracy leads to its violent elimination.
Populism and fascism are connected and yet separate forms of autocratic leadership. Fascists and populist leaders are autocrats in the sense that their politics aim to impose their undisputed authority. However, only fascists seek to become full-fledged dictators, wishing to fully impose their will with permanent power. By contrast, populist leaders challenge but do not destroy democracy.

After 1945, it was believed that fascism had been stamped out forever. It had not. Fascist thought and fascist movements retained some of their strength and appeal even though they no longer controlled states and they were significantly diminished in numbers and legitimacy. The fact that Trumpism rose to the center of world power must now give us pause. This book will examine the national and international implications of this new type of post-fascist politics that reformulated right-wing populism and fascism and materialized in America on the escalator of a golden Manhattan tower on June 16, 2015, when Trump launched his candidacy for the presidency. When Trump was elected president the following year, the United States became the epitome of what a twenty-first-century novel threat to democracy looks like, a newer version of fascism and semi-fascism mixed with previous populist traditions.

By reconnecting fascism and populism in unexpected ways, Trump represents a new type of global autocratic ruler: the “wannabe” fascist. This new type of populist politician is typically a legally elected leader who, unlike previous populists who were eager to distance themselves from fascism, turns to totalitarian lies, racism, and illegal means to destroy democracy from within. The wannabe fascist can be defined as a populist aspirant to fascism. Wannabe fascism remains a vocational form. It is not full-fledged fascism because it has not yet descended into dictatorship.
and has not fully relied on terror to monopolize violence and use it without restraint.10

To understand the wannabe fascist, we need to go back to the moment in history when populism was for the first time born out of fascism after World War II, initially with Juan Perón in Argentina and then with other Latin American leaders like Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, Rómulo Betancourt in Venezuela, and Víctor Paz Estenssoro in Bolivia. These populist leaders created a new form of political regime that combined democracy with illiberalism. Populists invoked the name of the people to stress a form of highly hierarchical leadership, to downplay political dialogue, and to solve a perceived crisis of representation, increasingly by attacking institutional checks and balances. They asserted a direct link between the people and the leader, relying on a form of leadership that might best be described as religious, namely, a political theology. Populists bolstered social and political polarization. In their view, fewer public spaces should be left for the expression of the views of political minorities. The political rights of these minorities are not eliminated, but their democratic legitimacy is undermined. Populists conceive of these minorities as enemies of the people and the nation. Populism, in short, is an authoritarian form of democracy.

Nonetheless, populists rejected key aspects of fascism, including extreme forms of repression and racism, and although they were intolerant of political diversity they recognized that, by 1945, a continuation of fascism would need to renounce some of its dictatorial dimensions, reforming its legacy in a democratic key.

Consider the case of Juan Perón and Peronism, the movement he created in Argentina. Perón was the strongman in a military junta dictatorship that ruled from 1943 to 1946. As a young officer he had participated in the pro-fascist coup of 1930 and was later