

The Tragic Myth of America's 2021 "March on Rome"

Stephen Blinder

Departments of Government & Philosophy, Georgetown University

Corresponding author: smb415@georgetown.edu

ABSTRACT

The parallels between the January 6th, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol and the March on Rome of October 1922 are intriguing, from Donald Trump and Benito Mussolini's leadership styles to their non-participation in the actual coup attempts to the unwavering commitment of their most zealous followers. Indeed, comparisons between these two figures and events have led scholars to label January 6th as a "Half-Baked March on Rome" or an "abortive March on Rome," among other similar references. While historically convenient and rhetorically appealing, these associations risk minimizing the requisite conditions that allowed the March on Rome to result in a successful coup and which, by contrast, were absent in the buildup to January 6th and its actualization. Moreover, referring to January 6th within the context of the March on Rome obscures the distinct possibility that the former could ultimately prove just the precursor to an eventual triumphant American iteration of the March on Rome. By using the March on Rome as a comparative lens, this paper seeks to properly place the January 6th, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol within the context of significant revolutionary events of the past and thereby explore its role in the broader arc of American democracy's future.

INTRODUCTION¹

Armed with weapons and convictions, a group of paramilitants approached the capital, aiming to influence and disrupt the government. Unbeknownst to them, it would be the *coup de grâce* for a much more significant political transformation. This is not the story of a violent insurrection to prevent the certification of the 2020 American presidential election results on January 6th, 2021, but the story of an armed demonstration seeking first to topple the established Italian government in October 1922. This is not the outgrowth of the 45th president of the United States, Donald Trump, but of Benito Mussolini, the architect of Italian fascism and then dictatorial Prime Minister of Italy from the mid-1920s to 1940s. Nonetheless, the surface-level parallels between these two events, the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol and the March on Rome, are intriguing, from Trump and Mussolini's leadership styles to their non-participation in the actual coup attempts to the unwavering commitment of

their most zealous followers. Trump even parroted Mussolini's ominous declaration that "[i]t is better to live one day as a lion than 100 years as a sheep."² Comparisons between these two figures and events have led scholars to label January 6th, 2021, as a "Half-Baked March on Rome" or an "abortive March on Rome," among other similar references.³ While historically convenient and rhetorically appealing, these associations risk minimizing the requisite conditions that allowed the March on Rome to result in a successful coup and which, by contrast, were absent in the buildup to January 6th and its actualization. Moreover, referring to January 6th within the context of the March on Rome obscures the distinct possibility that the former could ultimately prove just the precursor to an eventual triumphant American iteration of the March on Rome. Thus, this paper argues that despite the cults of personality that bind Trump and Mussolini together, Mussolini's March on Rome befell an already crumbling government, a vulnerability evident by his ability to coalesce a significant mass of

followers not just to embrace but emphatically pursue the revolution at all costs, including total destruction of the established regime. Trump had neither the conditions nor the support required to successfully reproduce the March on Rome's result in Washington, but whether he has learned a lesson from this failed revolution has yet to be determined.

THE REVOLUTIONARY MOMENT: A "ONE-OFF" OR CULMINATION?

While some argue that January 6th would have been successful if Trump had been allowed to join his followers at the Capitol, this suggestion assumes the existence of broader conditions conducive to his mere presence making a substantive difference in the result.⁴ Most striking within the context of comparisons to the March on Rome is that Mussolini decidedly chose not to join the paramilitants in the capital, remaining "in Milan to be near the Swiss border in case the coup attempt failed."⁵ Of course, his contingency plan ultimately proved unnecessary largely because the March was never predicated on his direct participation but on the preexisting conditions that enabled a successful political revolution. Thus, the connection between Trump's prevention from actively joining the attempted coup and its eventual failure seems shortsighted at best and contrived at worst.

Moreover, it equally reflects a tendency to examine January 6th as a "one-off event," a practice replicated by many scholars analyzing the March on Rome.⁶ As the March on Rome exemplifies, a successful political revolution requires more than a singular event but significant prior efforts to strengthen the revolutionary fervor and weaken oppositional forces so that the seminal occasion becomes essentially the inevitable culmination of these endeavors. Indeed, the March on Rome was preceded by "years of *squadristi* violence, occupations, local coups and overturnings and vast territorial marches where the blackshirts acted as a new and formidable kind of political militia, and the army made no effort to stop them."⁷ Although Trump and his most passionate followers had expressed consistent objections to the 2020 election results, producing scattered rallies and protests to "Stop the

Steal" in the buildup to January 6th, 2021, the dissent paled in comparison to the events preceding the March on Rome both in scale and relative success.⁸ In fact, the "Stop the Steal" efforts prior to January 6th nearly always were repressed quickly by law enforcement, sometimes through force.⁹

What Trump appeared not to realize, but which Mussolini came to terms with long before launching the March on Rome, was the vital importance of securing the army's tacit endorsement of the revolutionary cause or, at a minimum, its unwillingness to act on its disapproval.¹⁰ Indeed, Mussolini foreshadowed the failure of the 1914 "Red Week," writing, "Until we have part of the army with us, we must have the courage to say that...it will be better to postpone agitation until tomorrow."¹¹ Perhaps it was Trump's inexperience with something akin to the "Red Week" that accounted for his apparent naivete with respect to the role of the army and law enforcement in pursuit of a revolution.

THE "RED WEEK" VERSUS "STOP THE STEAL"

The June 1914 "Red Week" was a broadly successful series of mass strikes and protests against the government – primarily over disparities in living and working conditions – until part of its leadership unexpectedly turned against itself, allowing the state to restore order with the military's support.¹² As Errico Malatesta, Italian anarchist leader, revolutionary, and contemporary of Mussolini, noted shortly after the collapse of the "Red Week," "If it had not been for the betrayal of the Confederation [of Labour], though we could not yet have made the revolution for lack of necessary preparation and understanding, the movement would certainly have assumed larger proportions and a much greater importance."¹³ There are two key aspects of Malatesta's observations relevant to January 6th and its buildup.

First, the "Red Week" had a coalition of support from across the population that, had the Confederation of Labour not reneged on its pronouncements, would have continued to grow and strengthen. By contrast, the "Stop the Steal" rallies and protests in late 2020 drew almost exclusively from far-right extremists and militias,

the most dedicated among Trump's adherents.¹⁴ Although one could argue that the COVID-19 pandemic kept would-be revolutionaries at home, that would be inconsistent with the overall disdain of Trump supporters for stay-at-home orders and treating the virus as a serious risk. Thus, while undoubtedly threatening, one could hardly have confused these events as signifying the will of the majority of Trump's supporters, much less the majority of the American people, to pursue his revolutionary cause to such extreme lengths. This is in stark contrast to Malatesta's firm belief that the "Red Week" demonstrated that "the mass of the people hate [sic] the present order... are disposed to make use of all opportunities to overthrow the Government; and that when the fight is directed against the common enemy—that is to say, the Government and the bourgeoisie—all are brothers."¹⁵ Simply put, there existed no such devout and broad-based commitment to "stop the steal" among the American public. Moreover, the "Stop the Steal" protests and rallies in the lead-up to January 6th were not successful in producing anything material aside from swift efforts to suppress them.

Second, beyond these clear differences, it is critical to examine Malatesta's contextualization of the "Red Week," conceding that "we could not yet have made the revolution for lack of necessary preparation and understanding."¹⁶ Viewing the "Red Week" as an evolutionary step, not the finale, in the revolutionary movement underscores Mussolini's emphasis on securing the army, one way or another, prior to the March on Rome. In fact, the ultimate failure of the "Red Week" and Mussolini's growing concern "about the revolutionary potentiality of the working class only served to accentuate that preoccupation [with the army]: for the weaker the battering-ram available, the greater would be the difficulty of overthrowing the obstacle, and the greater the need to find some alternative means."¹⁷ In addition, the "necessary preparation and understanding" to which Malatesta alludes reinforces, in hindsight, the indispensable territorial and political advancements made by the revolutionaries in the lead-up to the March on Rome, gains lacking in Trump's movement prior to January

6th, 2021.

THE DECISIVE BUILDUP

A handful of years after the "Red Week" and in those directly preceding the March on Rome, Mussolini's fascist revolutionary movement gained unmistakable and eventually unwavering traction, destabilizing the established regime and leaving it increasingly vulnerable to collapse. Indeed, "the insurrection across Italy had already taken control of large parts of Italy well before the March on Rome itself," including decisive fascist victories in "large parts of the north and centre, as well as in Apulia in the south, and in many major cities – Bologna, Ravenna, Milan, Trieste."¹⁸ There was no evidence of this kind of momentum, that is, political or territorial advances, behind the "Stop the Steal" movement in the buildup to January 6th.

While the fascists toppled "[n]early 300 local councils" prior to the March, Trump's established political base for a revolution was relatively narrow.¹⁹ It consisted of little more than far-right members of the House of Representatives and the Senate, as well as their counterparts in Republican-controlled state legislatures, who were willing to cast serious doubt on the election results but evinced little to no desire to pursue revolutionary means – a violent overthrow of the democratic process – to achieve their goals.²⁰ In other words, Trump's affiliation with the Republican Party in no way compelled the majority of its members to pursue his campaign to "Stop the Steal." In fact, the Republican governors of swing states, like Arizona and Georgia, certified the election results much to Trump's chagrin and over his last-ditch efforts to compel and, in some cases, coerce them into "overturning" the results.²¹

Whereas the entirety of Mussolini's Fascist Party supported his explicit means and ends, the Republican party was fragmented at best when it came to the "Stop the Steal" movement.²² Trump's goal was not embraced as a mainstream revolutionary cause, battle-tested across the country prior to the execution of January 6th. While, as one scholar remarked, "[t]he March on Rome was tried out many times in the provinces before it aimed towards the capital and the central government,"

January 6th, 2021, was the “first take” in Trump’s attempted revolution.²³ Thus, Trump could not benefit from a democracy already on the verge of collapse and a military and law enforcement apparatus almost entirely complicit in the revolutionary cause. While, in Italy, “the army had rarely shown itself to be ‘loyal’ to the state, or to the rule of law, in the period 1920–1922, in the face of the Fascists...[t]he *norm* had been collusion, or at best tolerance,” there were no such preexisting conditions amenable to Trump’s goal of overriding the democratic process. However, it is this very goal of Trump’s that most differentiates January 6th, 2021, from October 1922 and the respective outcomes.

REVOLUTIONARY UNDERPINNINGS

While Trump sought to overturn a democratic election to illegally maintain his power, at the heart of Mussolini’s revolution was a vision of Italy that supposedly only he could deliver, one that necessarily required toppling the established regime.²⁴ Mussolini and his followers were committed to more than a political revolution, a mere change in leadership and the established government structure. Mussolini’s fascist revolutionary ideology was, as historian Robert Paxton describes, “an affair of the gut more than of the brain.”²⁵ Mussolini’s appeals to Italy’s “national promise” and the notion of a “new Italian,” more than the other vague fascist tenets he manufactured, allowed him to coalesce a significant mass of support behind the revolution.²⁶ With these loftier goals at the forefront, for which a political revolution was a conduit, political philosopher Hannah Arendt’s words are particularly insightful that “the whole record of past revolutions demonstrates beyond doubt that every attempt to solve the social question with political means leads into terror.”²⁷ In the case of January 6th, 2021, however, Trump’s intention to stop the election certification to remain in power involved nothing more than a political revolution. Thus, drawing on Arendt’s observation, there was no natural connection between the revolution Trump outlined, on the surface a purely political one, and the violent way by which he and his most devoted supporters sought to achieve it.²⁸

Further, whereas in the March on Rome, “[t]he violence really did kill and burn, but it also sent out messages (including the fact that *more* killing and burning could easily follow),” there was no immediately clear reason to believe the violence on January 6th would continue beyond the blocking of the 2020 election certification and the use of alternative electors to keep Trump in power.²⁹ Attacking the U.S. Capitol, a defining symbol of American democracy, was a devastating strike against the often unquestioned strength of the ‘American experiment,’ sending shock waves across the country and thus impugning suggestions that “the right wing mob...seem[ed] [not] to be rejecting democracy in principle.”³⁰ That said, the events on January 6th were inherently restricted by their narrow focus. While the March on Rome was one step toward a far greater goal, specifically the pursuit of a “new” Italy, January 6th was solely intended to keep Trump in power, a fundamentally antidemocratic outcome but not a wholly transformational agenda in the sense of Mussolini’s objectives for Italy. Though Trump had risen to the presidency largely on the back of his promises to “Make America Great Again (MAGA)” and “dismantle the establishment,” a similar platform to Mussolini’s in many respects, January 6th was not waged directly in furtherance of these ideals.³¹ Its purpose revolved singularly around Trump and his ability to stay in power by halting the election certification and transferring it to the states. Hence, the demonstrations in the buildup to January 6th were branded not as “MAGA” rallies but “Stop the Steal” rallies.

THE TRAGIC MYTH

The legacy of Mussolini’s March on Rome looms large over contemporary American society. Yet, it is primarily with the benefit of hindsight that scholars and students of history have objectively examined the March, its underlying revolutionary foundations, and subsequent effects, applying these insights within the context of the events on January 6th, 2021. Precisely for this reason, observers must exercise increased caution and restraint before drawing bold conclusions from January 6th. Should Trump win the Republican presidential primary,

as projected by the majority of polls, he will very likely stoke the same distrust regarding the integrity of U.S. elections.³² Further, should Trump lose in the 2024 general election, Americans may face another January 6th. This time, however, Trump has the experience of fueling an attempted revolution. He has had a “first take.” Mussolini used the lessons he gained from the “Red Week” to help ensure his revolutionary movement would not suffer the same fate. Whether Trump has done the same remains to be seen. It is also incumbent on the American people to ask whether a political revolution, achieved through violence, can accomplish anything more than a power grab. If Trump could not deliver the fundamental changes he promised in the first place, the American people must question why a political revolution would bring them about. Indeed, political scientist Domenico Settembrini warned many years ago, after examining the revolutions of the 20th century, that “[t]he idea that violence resulting from impoverishment is capable of transforming man and making him a more responsible civilized being, conflicts with all our knowledge of human beings and with common sense.”³³ It would be a tragic myth to call January 6th, 2021, America’s “March on Rome” if the true comparison materializes on January 6th, 2025. It would also be a tragic myth for those who commit themselves to Trump’s revolutionary cause in the hopes of achieving anything more than his own aggrandizement.

Notes

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²Christina Coleburn, "Donald Trump's History of Praising Dictators," *NBC News* online, July 6, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/donald-trump-s-history-praising-dictators-n604801>.

³Chris Vials, "Trump's Half-Baked March on Rome," *Verso Books* online, January 21, 2021, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/4977-trump-s-half-baked-march-on-rome>.; Sungur Savran, "Trump's abortive March on Rome," *Gerçek News* online, January 10, 2021, <https://gercekgazetesi1.net/english/trumps-abortive-march-rome>.

⁴"Trump's physical presence could have intensified the violence, prolonged it, and created a scenario where it would have taken police and ultimately troops longer, and with much more difficulty, to clear the Capitol and re-take the building. And if that had happened, it might have been unsafe for Vice President Mike Pence and Congress to resume Biden's certification. Trump might have declared the national emergency that the worst of his advisors had been urging." Will Bunch, "Cassidy Hutchinson and coup's great mystery: What if Trump went to the Capitol?," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* online, June 30, 2022, <https://www.inquirer.com/opinion/cassidy-hutchinson-testimony-trump-capitol-20220630.html>.

⁵H.D.S. Greenway, "Trump's Mussolini roots," *Boston Globe* online, October 21, 2022, <https://www.boston-globe.com/2022/10/21/opinion/trumps-mussolini-roots/>.

⁶"This analysis or counterfactual has dominated many accounts of the March...The March is seen as a one-off event..." John Foot, "The March on Rome Revisited. Silences, Historians and the Power of the Counter-Factual," *Modern Italy* 28, no. 2 (2023): 173, accessed October 7, 2023, doi:10.1017/mit.2023.5.

⁷Foot, "The March on Rome Revisited," 173.

⁸"The Road to Jan. 6: A Year of Extremist Mobilization," *Southern Poverty Law Center* online, December 30, 2021, <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2021/12/30/road-jan-6-year-extremist-mobilization>.

⁹"US election: Pro-Trump rallies see scuffles in US cities," *BBC News* online, December 13, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2020-55292610>.

¹⁰"Mussolini had in fact for some time been racking his brains to find a way of ensuring that the army should take the side of the revolution, or at least be neutralised by internal dissensions." Domenico Settembrini, "Mussolini and the Legacy of Revolutionary Socialism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 11, no. 4 (1976): 252, accessed October 7, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/260198>.

¹¹Settembrini, "Mussolini and the Legacy of Revolutionary Socialism," 251.

¹²Paul Corner, "The Road to Fascism: An Italian Sonderweg?," *Contemporary European History* 11, no. 2 (May 2002): 284, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20081832>.

¹³Errico Malatesta, "The General Strike and the Insurrection in Italy," ed. Davide Turcato, trans. Paul Sharkey, *The Anarchist Library* online, July 1914, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/errico-malatesta-the-general-strike-and-the-insurrection-in-italy>.

¹⁴"It was the culmination of a year of increasingly radical activity by a slew of extremists around the country." "The Road to Jan. 6: A Year of Extremist Mobilization," *Southern Poverty Law Center* online, December 30, 2021.

¹⁵Malatesta, "The General Strike and the Insurrection in Italy."

¹⁶Malatesta, "The General Strike and the Insurrection in Italy."

¹⁷Settembrini, "Mussolini and the Legacy of Revolutionary Socialism," 252.

¹⁸Foot, "The March on Rome Revisited," 174.

¹⁹Foot, "The March on Rome Revisited," 174.

²⁰See, for example, “During its last days of existence, the Capitol riot panel unleashed a massive trove of evidence with an unmistakable conclusion: At every stage of former President Donald Trump’s bid to overturn the 2020 election results, a phalanx of hardline GOP lawmakers were egging him on.” Kyle Cheney and Nicholas Wu, “Enablers, line-straddlers and quiet resisters: How GOP lawmakers contributed to Jan. 6,” *POLITICO* online, January 6, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/01/06/enablers-line-straddlers-and-quiet-resisters-how-gop-lawmakers-contributed-to-jan-6-00076581>.; “...a handful of Mr. Trump’s most loyal allies in the House had gone even further in the days and weeks before the riot, urging their supporters to come to Washington on Jan. 6 to make a defiant last stand to keep him in power.” Catie Edmondson and Luke Broadwater, “Before Capitol Riot, Republican Lawmakers Fanned the Flames,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/11/us/politics/republicans-capitol-riot.html>.; Ryan Grim and Aída Chávez, “Freedom Caucus Chair Andy Biggs Helped Plan January 6 Event, Lead Organizer Says,” *The Intercept* online, January 11, 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2021/01/11/capitol-plot-andy-biggs-paul-gosar/>.; Jon King, “Jan. 6 committee docs indicate five Michigan legislators agreed to support fake elector plan,” *The Michigan Advance* online, January 5, 2023, <https://michiganadvance.com/2023/01/05/jan-6-committee-docs-indicate-five-michigan-legislators-agreed-to-support-fake-elector-plan/>.

²¹Andrew Solender, “Trump Calls To Vote Out Republican Governors Who Refused To Overturn Election,” *Forbes* online, December 12, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewsolender/2020/12/12/trump-calls-to-vote-out-republican-governors-who-refused-to-overturn-election/?sh=44c24e56713d>.

²²See, for example, “Vice President Pence, along with many of the appointed officials who surrounded Donald Trump, worked to defeat many of the worst parts of Trump’s plan to overturn the election.” House of Representatives, Congress, “Final Report of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol,” *Government Publishing Office*, December 21, 2022, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-J6-REPORT/pdf/GPO-J6-REPORT.pdf>.; “...former Michigan Republican Party Chair Laura Cox had called a plan by the fake electors to hide in the Capitol building in Lansing and then try and cast their votes as the legitimate electors ‘a hair-brained idea,’ that was ‘insane and inappropriate.”” King, “Jan. 6 committee docs.”; see also Associated Press, “GOP state officials tell Jan. 6 committee how they resisted Trump’s pressure to overturn election,” *Chicago Tribune* online, June 21, 2022, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2022/06/21/gop-state-officials-tell-jan-6-committee-how-they-resisted-trumps-pressure-to-overturn-election/>.; Cheney and Wu, “Enablers, line-straddlers and quiet resisters.”

²³“As Dogliani puts it, ‘The March on Rome was tried out many times in the provinces before it aimed towards the capital and the central government.’” Foot, “The March on Rome Revisited,” 174.

²⁴Erin Blakemore, “How Mussolini led Italy to fascism—and why his legacy looms today,” *National Geographic* online, October 12, 2022, <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/history-and-civilisation/2022/10/how-mussolini-led-italy-to-fascism-and-why-his-legacy-looms-today>.

²⁵Fedja Buric, “Trump’s not Hitler, he’s Mussolini: How GOP anti-intellectualism created a modern fascist movement in America,” *Salon* online, March 11, 2016, https://www.salon.com/2016/03/11/trumps_not_hitler_hes_mussolini_how_gop_anti_intellectualism_created_a_modern_fascist_movement_in_america/.

²⁶Blakemore, “How Mussolini led Italy to fascism.”; Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, “1919-1922: Revolution in Italy?,” *Philosophy* 2552: Revolution (class lecture, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, October 5, 2023).

²⁷Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, “1919-1922: Revolution in Italy?”; Lynn Hunt, “The World We Have Gained: The Future of the French Revolution,” *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 1 (2003): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1086/533043>.

²⁸Vials, “Trump’s Half-Baked March on Rome.”

²⁹Laura Jarrett, "What to know about the Trump 'fake electors' scheme in the 2020 election," *NBC News* online, August 3, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/what-know-fake-electors-trump-indictment-2020-election-rcna98013>.

³⁰Vials, "Trump's Half-Baked March on Rome."

³¹Buric, "Trump's not Hitler, he's Mussolini."

³²"Latest Polls," *FiveThirtyEight* online, October 6, 2023, <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-primary-r/>.

³³Settembrini, "Mussolini and the Legacy of Revolutionary Socialism," 248.

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