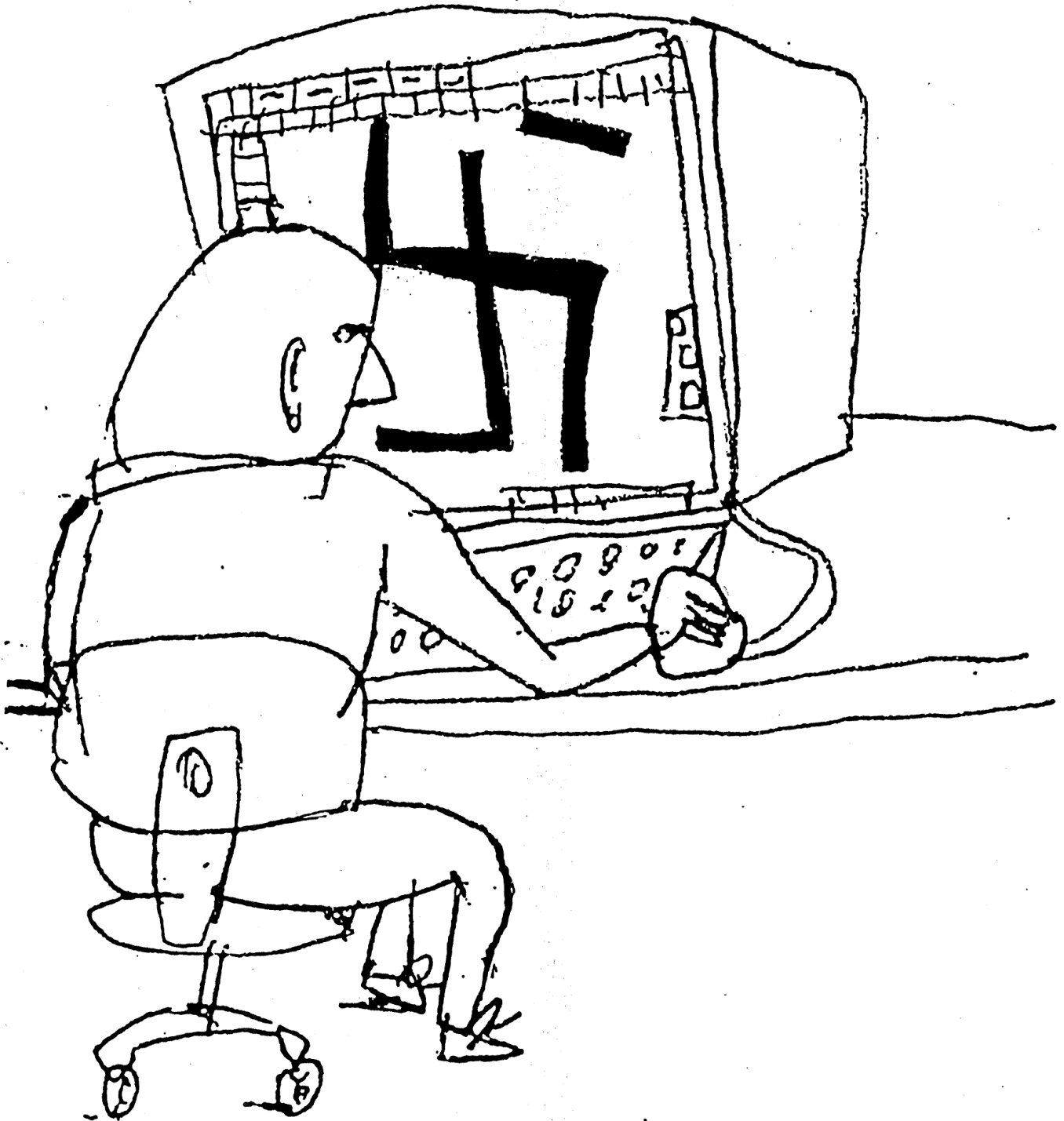


It Didn't Happen Here

Stanley Payne



Did It Happen Here?: Perspectives on Fascism and America

Edited by Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins

Norton, 385 pages, \$28.99

Fascism in America: Past and Present

Edited by Gavriel D. Rosenfeld and Janet Ward

Cambridge, 461 pages, \$34.99

The chief radical ideological narratives of the 20th century—variants of Marxism-Leninism, fascism, anarchism, National Socialism—largely died toward the end of that era, followed by the supposed end of history. During the initial heyday of neoliberalism, they were already being superseded by the only new radical ideology born in North America, stemming initially from the cultural revolution of the 1960s. This new radicalism was the most polyvalent of all, having no primary canonical source nor even a name, though it was commonly described by its critics as “political correctness.” Only in the 21st century did this form of identity politics emphasizing race and gender come to be known as “wokeism,” an American term that soon passed into international usage.

A focus on ethnicity and sex, combined with the growing search for ever more “victims” to champion, provided dialectical and mobilizational potential. Of course, the search for victims to employ in political disputation was hardly invented by wokeism, for the tendency is as old as political controversy itself. Bismarck, for example, reportedly stressed that in international controversies one

should always assume the position of the previously aggrieved party, no matter what.

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Controversy over comparatively recent history grew steadily during the 20th century, fueled by the emergence of new nations and newly emancipated ethnic groups. All the radicalisms of the era rehearsed elaborate historical justifications, but they usually also presented themselves as the logical culmination of historical trends, according to their own particular interpretations. Even Soviet Marxism-Leninism eventually came to paint itself as the radical perfection of key aspects of Russian tradition.

Twenty-first century wokeism attempts to be more fully transformational than the preceding radicalisms, proposing to eliminate the past altogether, while completely transforming humanity of the present and future. Perhaps only the most extreme, semi-anarchist form of Maoism came near to equaling it in this regard.

The current conflict over history has assumed somewhat different forms in various countries. In Ukraine, prior to the present war, it focused on the attitude toward anti-Soviet Ukrainian patriots and volunteers during World War II, some of whom cooperated with the German invaders, even though their principal leaders were executed by the latter. Most Ukrainian fighting men, however, were drafted into the Red Army, in whose victory they played a major role. Ardent Ukrainian nationalists have been eager to honor the anti-Soviet volunteers as patriotic opponents of Stalinist totalitarianism, but as many as fifteen different initiatives to recognize them have either died or been defeated in the Ukrainian parliament, most of whose members have seen this as tarnishing the luster of the Ukrainian contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany.

One of the most extreme controversies has taken place in Spain. After the death of Franco, the parliament leading the transition to liberal democracy declared a complete amnesty from prosecution for all participants in the political violence of prior decades, leading to general agreement that arguments drawn from history

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would not be employed in current political competition. Intensive research and discussion about the recent past was being conducted by historians and in all manner of public media. History was to be left largely to the historians.

This salutary arrangement lasted for nearly two decades, facilitating the consolidation of democracy. It was first broken by the Socialist government of Felipe González in 1993, when polls revealed the Socialists were in danger of losing an election for the first time in eleven years. A vote for the moderate conservative opposition was declared to threaten the “return of Franco,” and the left has used “antifascism,” normally termed “anti-Francoism,” as its principal appeal ever since. By 2006 this went so far as passage of national legislation restricting historical debate, going beyond any precedent in the history of Western liberal democracy, subsequently reinforced by a draconian law ironically titled the Law of Democratic Memory, approved 15 years later, which threatened its targets with heavy fines, disqualification from teaching and even imprisonment. The Spanish government has not gone so far as to impose any of these extreme penalties, brandishing the law instead as a sort of Damoclean sword.. This transformation has been facilitated by the remarkable ignorance, ineptitude, and sheer cowardice of the large minority of moderate conservatives in Spain, a group that is as numerous as any single constituency in that severely divided country.

In the United States, controversy about history has recently centered on slavery and the suffering of ethnic minorities. Complicity with these historic injustices is invoked to discredit national icons. At the same time, the past is invoked to justify fears about an undefined “fascism.” For an entire century, ever since the 1920s, this has served, as Bruce Kuklick has shown, as a multidimensional historico-political fantasy, applied to all manner of ills, past, present, and future.

The current agitation isn't really about history itself and the study thereof, but is stimulated primarily by current political objectives. Perhaps the most notorious example is the “1619 Project,” originally conceived by a political journalist lacking

scholarly credentials. The resulting polemic was less about history than about the elaboration of a 21st-century political diatribe applied arbitrarily to aspects of history.

Historians have no alternative to living lives in the present, and contemporary concerns have usually played some role in their thinking. What is different in the 21st century is the consistent usage of *conscious* presentism, and, even more, the public insistence on imposing it.

This has now moved beyond political journalism and dominates academic scholarship as well. In 1946 the incoming president of the American Historical Association (AHA), the distinguished historian Carlton J. H. Hayes, had urged that amid the euphoria attending the total military victory over fascism, it behooved serious commentators to take a more objective attitude toward the recent historical circumstances of Spain. A minority of militant Young Turks, certain of the sinister fascism of the Franco regime, sought to have Hayes censured by the AHA but were voted down. Some 75 years later, James Sweet, another distinguished historian who in 2022 was president of the AHA, warned in the Association's *Bulletin* of the current danger of a dominating "presentism" that obfuscates understanding of the past by imposing present political values on its study. The culture of historiography had shifted so much between 1946 and 2023 that, though his remarks should have been much less controversial than those of Hayes, Sweet was subjected to a veritable firestorm of denunciation, and felt compelled to express contrition. Telling the truth in turbulent times is sometimes simply not permitted.

"Fascism-mongering has a long history."

What may be termed fascism-mongering has a long history. For an entire century the term has been zealously applied as political epithet and form of

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stigmatization, a practice remarkably unaffected by the almost absolute obliteration of (to use the Soviet term) “really-existing” historical fascism, as distinct from the perpetual political specter of “fascism.” The disappearance of fascism itself was a blessing in disguise for fascism-mongers, for it simply opened the way for the most elastic use of the epithet, freeing the term from any empirical definition or limits.

The rise of “Holocaust consciousness” since the 1960s gave the term even greater potency. It surpassed even Stalinism, becoming the standalone super-demonic political ideology, almost beyond normal empirical political analysis. Thus “fascism” further lost touch with once really-existing fascism and could be read far back into the past in increasingly fanciful ways. By the present century, the tendency was enhanced by the decline of neoliberalism, the rise of radical populism and new authoritarian regimes in numerous countries, and finally by the political rise of Donald Trump in the United States. All this has generated a growing literature since 2016 that applies the stigma to US history and current affairs on the one hand and to international politics on the other, often generating much more heat than light.

Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, assistant professor of history and social theory at Wesleyan University, has edited an anthology of highly diverse treatments of the question of whether “fascism” has been a real threat in American history. He prefaces this with an overall survey and concludes with the helpful suggestion that the most productive action would focus clearly and precisely on current really-existing problems, rather than obsessing about abstractions and interpretations drawn from the past.

The book begins with seven “classic texts” dealing primarily with “fascism,” but also to some extent with really-existing fascism. The authors of these range from Hannah Arendt to Angela Davis, Leon Trotsky, and Sinclair Lewis; for the most part they are a veritable cornucopia of disinformation. Much more helpful is Part II on “fascism analogies,” in which scholars concede that imputations of “fascism” can only achieve very limited analogies with the real thing. The inadequacy of

current analogies between fascism and Trumpism is convincingly laid out by such luminaries as Jan-Werner Müller, Richard J. Evans, Victoria de Grazia, and Samuel Moyn.

Part III deals specifically with “fascism” and American politics, the most categorical statement being “One Hundred Years of Fascism” by Jason Stanley, the Yale philosophy professor who seems to be the currently reigning king of conflation. One might think that a philosophy professor would be specially trained to avoid such a thing, but apparently not. The cultural historian Sarah Churchwell is more empirical, offering a useful brief summary of the various evanescent American “shirt movements” of the 1930s. The most skeptical and usefully analytic article in this section is by the NYU historian Nikhil Pal Singh.

Though not particularly featured in this section, the most sweeping of all arguments promoting the concept of “American fascism” is what has been called the “Black radical thesis,” which holds that since most American history has been marked by slavery and racism, America has always been “fascist.” Since nearly every historic culture from the highest to the lowest has practiced slavery to some degree, not least the African tribal cultures themselves that originated much of the African slave trade, this achieves the ultimate reductio ad absurdum. This is all the more the case when one reflects that slavery in Ethiopia (surviving there in part because indigenous African slave culture had never been uprooted by European colonialism in the last surviving independent African country) was nominally ended through conquest by Italian Fascist imperialism in 1936. As is sometimes argued, Italian Fascism was never thoroughly “fascist.” Indeed not.

More useful are the final two parts. The fourth section on “Global Perspectives” contains sometimes helpful analyses of contemporary authoritarians abroad. Worth noting are the treatments of Narendra Modi’s Hindutva politics in India by the novelist and intellectual historian Pankaj Mishra and of Vladimir Putin by the French scholar Marlène Laruelle. The latter’s “So, Is Russia Fascist Now?” is

probably the best dissection of Putin's politics from this perspective that has yet appeared in English. (The answer is no.)

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Part V deals with the question of whether “fascism” has “taken on a new form today.” Anton Jäger, a postdoctoral fellow at Leuven, presents a comprehensive brief analysis of contemporary social atomization, its expressions and effects, while Udi Greenberg, a Dartmouth historian, points out the differences on gender matters between Trump and the contemporary far right when compared with historical fascism.

“The term is virtually meaningless.”

Altogether, this is an uneven anthology apparently designed to be more representative of political and scholarly opinion than to be analytically persuasive and authoritative. It does not propose a definitive answer to the query in its title, but half or more of the articles it reproduces may indeed be read with some profit. As far as the larger question is concerned, the reader may more usefully spend his time with Bruce Kuklick's *Fascism Comes to America*, which concludes that the term is virtually meaningless other than to express vehement disapproval.

While Steinmetz-Jenkins's anthology offers a broad spectrum of analysis, interpretation, and opinion, the volume edited by Gavriel Rosenfeld and Janet Ward has quite a different objective: to “survey the history of fascism in the United States,” since supposedly “fascist ideas have long been present in the United States.” There is occasionally a bit of waffling. At the outset they concede that the ideas examined may be only “potentially fascist” and state that the gravest problem is “right-wing extremism.” Nowhere, however, is any serious effort made to define what is or is not “fascist.” Some of the contributors, in fact, reject outright so-called “rigid definitions,” the general attitude being that “fascism” does not primarily refer to specific historical phenomena but to a broad “spectrum” of themes, attitudes, and actions. These

include racism, xenophobia, authoritarianism, political violence, and strong patriotism or nationalism. Any time any single characteristic of alleged “fascism”

can be identified in any particular individual or group, the latter is denounced as “fascist,” regardless of historical context or perspective, or other coexisting features. According to some of the key criteria invoked, all Marxist-Leninist regimes must be considered “fascist,” as would many other political systems around the world today.

In their introduction, the volume’s editors make no effort to hide their presentism, launching into a discussion of Trump as a “fascist,” and then lamenting the previous lack of attention to “fascism in American history,” with no consideration that this may be due to its limited relevance. The first article is by the veteran Germanist historian Geoff Eley, who admits that the strict historical definition of European fascism in the 1930s describes a “classical kind that will not reappear,” but nonetheless cites various “fascist characteristics” that have appeared ubiquitously and are a constant danger. He avoids the obvious comparison with Marxist-Leninist regimes (which both anticipated and indeed invented fascist style and tactics). Such admission might tar a self-confessed Marxist with his own brush. Instead, Eley insists on the need to “decontextualize” “fascist characteristics” in order to see how they function.

A slightly more measured approach is offered by Thomas Weber, an able German historian who teaches at Aberdeen and has done the best work on the first phase of Hitler’s career. He contrasts the “illiberalism” of Trump and Hitler, not surprisingly identifying profound differences, though but concluding that Trump’s rambling and irresponsible speeches have a “fascistic style” and some of Trump’s followers are “fascists”—or at least rioters, as if the two were the same thing. The following chapter, by Matthew Specter and Varsha Venkatasubramanian, examines expressions of “America First” since 1880, and finds isolationism and anti-militarism gravely redolent of fascism. We are further informed that the “diasporic fascism” of the contemporary world has enabled

Donald Trump to achieve “the neofascist synthesis.” (I’m not making this stuff up.)

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The title given Part II is titled “Homegrown Nazis,” as though “fascist” were inadequate for the American extreme right. Linda Gordon begins this section by drawing on her book treating the Ku Klux Klan and also offers a brief summary of the shirt movements of the '30s. As a professional scholar of some distinction, she is somewhat more careful in her use of language, employing more the adjective “fascistic” than the noun “fascist” and emphasizing a common thread of “hate speech.” An accurate observation of this sort does return the reader to reality, but since “hate speech” has been a feature of radical left-wing rhetoric ever since the French Revolution, and on every continent, one wonders why this characteristic is considered unique to the American extreme right.

Bradley Hart examines several political figures who opposed Franklin Roosevelt’s foreign policy. Richard Steigmann-Gall moves beyond his spotty early career in German history to examine the “genocidal” proposals of the leader of the transient “Silver Shirts,” in some respects the most extreme of the short-lived American shirt movements. Part III then changes the focus to devote most of its nearly one hundred pages to black “antifascism,” ignoring the overtly “fascistic” characteristics of some black radical movements.

Though most of the authors are professional scholars, this is not primarily a work of history but of political advocacy, and thus the concluding Part IV gets down to brass tacks by addressing “Countering Fascism in Culture and Policy.” In surveying American attitudes, Gavriel Rosenfeld insists that “ordinary Americans also display Nazi tendencies, especially in their hostility toward Jews.” This presumably explains why recent antisemitic and anti-Israel riots have been carried out almost exclusively by left activists and by Muslims, in some cases at universities with which the academics who contributed to the volume are associated. Most of this chapter is devoted to cultural and political fantasy, a genre to which the greater part of this book contributes.

Such a dubious volume of political advocacy is presented by the Cambridge University Press as a work of scholarship. It is thus representative of

contemporary academic culture, itself a symptom of the decay about which it nominally proposes to rouse alarm. Such an enterprise would never have been approved for publication by the late Lewis Bateman during his distinguished career as History and Political Science Editor with Cambridge.

Unlike *Fascism in America*, the Steinmetz-Jenkins anthology endeavors with at least some success to offer a balanced perspective on evaluations of contemporary problems partly associated with concerns over “neofascism” and other pathologies. Steinmetz-Jenkins sensibly concludes that

We should be suspicious of historians moonlighting as prophets of doom and democratic avengers. Their desire to sound the tocsin against the threat of recurrent heresy too often obfuscates, rather than clarifies, the complexity of current events. Being overfixated on the traumas of history can make it difficult to grasp what is new. It also leads to a never-ending blame game as to who is responsible for the collapse of the older order of things. The way forward is to put the fascism debate to rest, even as we try to come to terms with the neurosis it has revealed in us.

Three further conclusions are worth stressing. One is that since 1945 most major threats to democracy and freedom have come from the left and its allies. The current cultural revolution was not initiated by the radical right or by “fascists” but by the New Left of the 1960s. The principal current challenges to the United States stem not from “illiberal Hungary” or even from Putin’s declining Russia but from Communist China and jihadist Islam.

The second concerns the failure of political science to come to conceptual and analytical grips with 21st-century authoritarianism. There have been several book-length attempts to survey such phenomena, but they are relatively

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unsystematic and sometimes lacking in objectivity. The enormous resources of
elaborately funded Western universities seem helpless in the face of such

problems, preferring self-referential political advocacy and grasping at strawmen to conceal their own intrinsic intellectual vacuity. The predominant concern with a ubiquitous yet phantasmal “fascism” only serves to conceal, confuse, conflate, and distort.

“Is the American system transitioning into some kind of hyphenated democracy?”

There are rare exceptions, such as Michael Doyle’s *Cold Peace: Avoiding the New Cold War* (2023). This study evaluates the principal category of authoritarianism as “corporatist, nationalist autocracies,” a category that would include such different systems as those of China and Russia, as well as a number of others. There are obviously additional regime types, such as relatively unreformed Communist regimes, semi-traditional sultanates, Islamist autocracies, and multiple failed mafia states.

The final concern has to do with the inability to conceptualize the current American system, lauded by its champions as “democracy.” Leaving aside the fact that the American republic was never designed by the Founding Fathers as a pure democracy, this is increasingly doubtful. Federalism steadily gives way to centralism, most new procedures and regulations stemming from appointed life-term bureaucrats rather than from elected representatives, a system that the Biden administration has doubled down on and that Congress shows little capacity for reforming. Key institutions such as the courts are increasingly weaponized for partisan purposes, as in autocracies and in African and Latin American states. The federal government has become a “scofflaw” that refuses to enforce the law and also seeks to prevent other branches from doing so, while denying constitutional equal protection to its opponents. Is the American system

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transitioning into some kind of hyphenated democracy or post-democracy? So it would seem. This is not “fascism,” but appears increasingly distant from what has been known as representative constitutional democracy.

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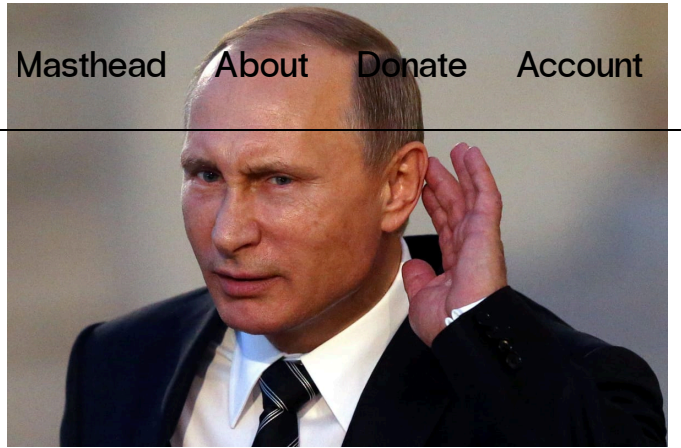
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