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Historians Shouldn't Be Pundits

By Moshik Temkin

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Americans and a danger to the world, but he has been a boon to historians. The more grotesque his presidency appears, the more historians are called on to make sense of it, often in 30-second blasts on cable news or in quick-take quotes in a news article.

As a historian, I'm glad to see my profession getting some much deserved publicity. But I also worry about the rapid-fire, superficial way history is being presented, as if it's mostly a matter of drawing historical analogies. The result is that readers and viewers get history lessons that are often misleading when it comes to Mr. Trump, and shed little light on our current travails.

This is partly because this is not what historians should be doing. We teach our students to be wary of analogies, which are popular with politicians and policy makers (who choose them to serve their agendas) but often distort both the past and the present.

To take just one example, during his campaign, Mr. Trump was frequently compared to Huey Long, the Depression-era governor of Louisiana. Sure, there are similarities: Like Mr. Trump, Long ran in the name of the "people," attacked the establishment and was labeled a demagogue and fascist by his critics. But the differences are even more important: Long was self-made, a genuine populist who took on powerful interests, and as governor was responsible for building roads, bridges and hospitals and helping the poor. He never engaged in race baiting — astonishing for a populist Southern politician in that era. The point isn't that Mr. Trump is or is not like Long (and he's not); it's that the analogy is meaningless.

In fact, such analogies are more than useless; they can be dangerous. Yes, history has much to teach us. But one of its lessons is its own limits: Things rarely repeat themselves. Just because Mr. Trump's lies and evasions bear some similarity to those of Richard Nixon, that doesn't mean that we're watching a repeat of Watergate.

Watergate, after all, has a happy ending of sorts; Nixon was undone by the scandal. His story is thus meant to reassure us that our system works, that the president is not above the law and that we have a functioning democracy. Maybe Mr. Trump will face a similar disgrace, but maybe not. Almost everything about the context is different: In 1974 there was no Fox News and similar commercial propaganda outlets, and there were Republicans in Congress who cared more about democracy and the Constitution than about tax cuts for wealthy donors.

If analogies and comparisons with former American presidents and politicians are deeply flawed, what should historians do? What is their role in the age of Trump?

For one thing, they should take advantage of this media attention by dismantling facile analogies. Among their many ripe targets are the fashionable comparisons drawn between Mr. Trump and various foreign dictators of the past, above all Hitler and Mussolini. Again, similarities abound, like their jingoism and contempt for democratic institutions.

But so do the dangers: Compared to Hitler, Mr. Trump looks less threatening than he actually is. Unlike Mr. Trump, European fascists were deeply ideological and would have despised his decadence and view of himself as a great dealmaker. And the story of Hitler and Mussolini is flattering to most Americans: We defeated them. Ultimately, the most important thing historians can do is to leave the analogies to the pundits, and instead provide a critical, uncomfortable account of how we arrived at our seemingly incomprehensible current moment (many do just that, though not in the media spotlight).

This isn't a radical idea; in fact, it's something that the best politically engaged historians have always done.

In 1955, the Southern historian C. Vann Woodward published "The Strange Career of Jim Crow," a masterfully concise history of the origins of post-Civil War segregation. He did not seek analogies from the past, but instead demonstrated that, contrary to the perception of many Southerners, Jim Crow laws were not a tradition from time immemorial but a more recent product of the heightened racism of the late 19th century.

By showing social and political change over time — really the meat and potatoes of the historian's craft — the book made clear that progress was possible. Woodward did not speak in sound bites or pundit-friendly analogies. And yet his work had an enormous impact on postwar racial politics: The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. referred to "Strange Career" as "the historical bible of the civil rights movement."

In the case of Mr. Trump, such a clear-eyed historical account would show that despite his seeming hatred for Planet Earth, Mr. Trump is not from another world. While his rise clearly coincides with a global turn toward authoritarianism and away from democracy, he is very much a product of recent American history.

He may not be usefully analogous to politicians of the past, but like them he benefited from historical processes that we can understand and respond to: our worship of celebrity; the persistence of gender, racial and economic inequality; the devastation of foreign wars; voter suppression; and a political system that does not reflect the diversity or policy preferences of the American people.

Here are some questions: How did a rich guy who never contributed a thing to the public good become a public figure? Why did his ill-informed opinions on everything from China to Barack Obama's birthplace matter to millions? How did private wealth come to provide such access to power and influence in politics? Why has xenophobia been such a force in a country built by immigrants?

Historians have done illuminating work on these questions, and are best placed to answer them. Trading in such complexities might get lower TV ratings than drawing parallels with prior presidents, but it would do a better job of explaining Mr. Trump, and make clear that Americans can make a better history for themselves.

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