Leading US historians issue warning on the rise of Trump

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Nearly 800 historians, academics and professionals across the United States have signed an "Open Letter to the American People" warning of the danger, seen from a historical perspective, of Trump and "Trumpism."

The recently formed group, Historians Against Trump, explains in its letter that "The lessons of history compel us to speak out against Trump." The letter lists as members of the Historians Against Trump Organizing Committee Brian Dolber, Amy Harth, Caroline Luce and David Schlitt.

The letter, posted on the Internet on July 11, states, in part:

"Historians of different specialties, eras and regions understand the enduring appeal of demagogues, the promise and peril of populism, and the political uses of bigotry and scapegoating. Historians understand the impact these phenomena have upon society's most vulnerable and upon a nation's conscience. The lessons of history compel us to speak out against a movement rooted in fear and authoritarianism."

Alluding to the fascistic and right-wing populist movements that sprang up during the first half of the 20th Century, the letter includes a photograph of Charles Lindbergh addressing an America First rally in October of 1941. Lindbergh, the famous aviator, was a fascist sympathizer and anti-Semite whose demagogic America First speeches downplayed the crimes of the Nazis and promoted neutrality in World War II.

The letter's authors claim not to support any particular party or politician, but to be united by the belief that Trump "poses a threat to American democracy." They denounce Trump's attacks on the press and highlight the Republican presidential candidate's misogyny, racism and bigoted attacks on immigrants. They describe Trump's spoken and written words as an "archive of know-nothingism and blinding self-regard." They characterize Trump's campaign as one of violence "against individuals and groups; against memory and accountability; against historical analysis and fact."

The most significant aspect of the letter is the writers' insistence that history has something to say about the present, and that Trump, far from an accident or aberration—as he is often characterized by Democrats and Republicans alike—is the outcome of a historical process of political degeneration of American society.

The authors write:

"Donald Trump's candidacy is the latest chapter in a troubled narrative many decades in the making. In another era, civil society institutions such as the academy, the free press and the judiciary were counted on to safeguard constitutional democracy. That this is no longer the case cannot be blamed solely on Trump. Donald Trump's candidacy has profited from the fears of people living precariously and a political culture of spectacle and cynicism, both of which long predate his emergence as a candidate. The impulses and ideologies that animate the Trump campaign will not disappear once he is defeated in November."

This statement is correct, as far as it goes. But it avoids an examination of the relation of the process it describes to the class and economic interests that largely determine the course of American politics. Nevertheless, the recognition that the Trump phenomenon reflects a broader social crisis represents a certain advance beyond the platitudes offered up by the Democratic Party and its apologists.

In a pointed criticism of the complacency that prevails among American academics, the letter encourages historians to undertake the task of "equipping the public with historical skills and narratives that are 'factual, accurate, comprehensive,

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meaningful, useful, and resistant to cynical manipulators who sell snake oil as historical truth.'"

Not surprisingly, this statement has come under sharp attack by a leading postmodern academic.

In a column published in the *New York Times* on July 15, Stanley Fish, a literary theorist and legal scholar, denounced the Historians Against Trump letter for its "hubris" in claiming that "historians, because of their training, are uniquely objective observers."

Fish headed Duke University's English Department from 1986 to 1992 and now has a visiting professorship at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law in New York City. He is a frequent contributor to both the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* .

In this op-ed response to the professors' letter, he writes:

"By dressing up their obviously partisan views as 'the lessons of history,' the signatories to the letter present themselves as the impersonal transmitters of a truth that just happens to flow through them. In fact they are merely people with history degrees, which means that they have read certain books, taken and taught certain courses and written scholarly essays, often on topics of interest only to other practitioners in the field."

Fish continues:

"While this disciplinary experience qualifies them to ask and answer discipline-specific questions, it does not qualify them to be our leaders and guides as we prepare to exercise our franchise in a general election. Academic expertise is not a qualification for delivering political wisdom."

Fish, in short, asks the professors to stick to their "discipline," telling them that their place is in the classroom where they teach students to ask the right questions and discern good evidence from bad.

It must be asked, if historical knowledge is a purely academic affair—which Fish makes it out to be—what is the use of studying history? If history has *no* bearing on politics, then what is the point of it?

As a literary scholar, Fish is known for his 1982 book *Is There a Text in This Class?* published by Harvard University Press. Harvard's blurb for the book explains that "in arguing for the right of the reader to interpret and in effect create the literary work, he [Fish] skillfully avoids the trap of subjectivity."

It is entirely unsurprising that Fish would be repulsed by a section of historians who feel compelled by the "lessons of history" to counter Trump's "violence" against "historical analysis and fact." The truth is that Fish and his postmodern cohorts are, in their own way, an expression of the same "culture of spectacle and cynicism" that produced Trump.

The Historians Against Trump document has been signed by at least 786 people. Leading historians such as Ellen Carol DuBois (University of California, Los Angeles), Geoff Eley (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), Glenda Gilmore (Yale University), Mary Hancock (University of California, Santa Barbara), Mary Nolan (New York University), Thomas McAfee (University of Nevada, Las Vegas), Deborah Dash Moore (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), Claire Potter (The New School), Vicki Ruiz (University of California, Irvine), Maurice Isserman (Hamilton), Valerie Johnson (Bennett College) and Kevin Mattson (Ohio University) have added their names.

The letter can be accessed here.

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