

As Election Nears, Kelly Warns Trump Would Rule Like a Dictator

John Kelly, the Trump White House's longest-serving chief of staff, said that he believed that Donald Trump met the definition of a fascist.



By **Michael S. Schmidt**

Oct. 22, 2024

Few top officials spent more time behind closed doors in the White House with President Donald J. Trump than John F. Kelly, the former Marine general who was his longest-serving chief of staff.

With Election Day looming, Mr. Kelly — deeply bothered by Mr. Trump's recent comments about employing the military against his domestic opponents — agreed to three on-the-record, recorded discussions with a reporter for The New York Times about the former president, providing some of his most wide-ranging comments yet about Mr. Trump's fitness and character.

Mr. Kelly was homeland security secretary under Mr. Trump before moving to the White House in July 2017. He worked to carry out Mr. Trump's agenda for nearly a year and a half. It was a tumultuous period in which he drew internal criticism over his own performance and grew disenchanted and distressed by conduct on the part of the president that he considered at times to be inappropriate and reflecting no understanding of the Constitution.

In the interviews, Mr. Kelly expanded on his previously expressed concerns and stressed that voters, in his view, should consider fitness and character when selecting a president, even more than a candidate's stances on the issues.

“In many cases, I would agree with some of his policies,” he said, stressing that as a former military officer he was not endorsing any candidate. “But again, it’s a very dangerous thing to have the wrong person elected to high office.”

Mr. Kelly said that Mr. Trump met the definition of a fascist. Doug Mills/The New York Times

He said that, in his opinion, Mr. Trump met the definition of a fascist, would govern like a dictator if allowed, and had no understanding of the Constitution or the concept of rule of law.

He discussed and confirmed previous reports that Mr. Trump had made admiring statements about Hitler, had expressed contempt for disabled veterans and had characterized those who died on the battlefield for the United States as “losers” and “suckers” — comments first reported in 2020 by The Atlantic.

Steven Cheung, a spokesman for Mr. Trump’s campaign, assailed Mr. Kelly in a statement, calling Mr. Kelly’s accounts of his time in the White House “debunked stories” and saying Mr. Kelly had “beclowned” himself.

Here are excerpts from, and audio of, Mr. Kelly's comments.

Kelly said that based on his experience, Trump met the definition of a "fascist."

In response to a question about whether he thought Mr. Trump was a fascist, Mr. Kelly first read aloud a definition of fascism that he had found online.

"Well, looking at the definition of fascism: It's a far-right authoritarian, ultranationalist political ideology and movement characterized by a dictatorial leader, centralized autocracy, militarism, forcible suppression of opposition, belief in a natural social hierarchy," he said.

Mr. Kelly said that definition accurately described Mr. Trump.

"So certainly, in my experience, those are the kinds of things that he thinks would work better in terms of running America," Mr. Kelly said.

He added: "Certainly the former president is in the far-right area, he's certainly an authoritarian, admires people who are dictators — he has said that. So he certainly falls into the general definition of fascist, for sure."

Kelly said Trump chafed at limitations on his power.

"He certainly prefers the dictator approach to government," Mr. Kelly said.

Mr. Trump "never accepted the fact that he wasn't the most powerful man in the world — and by power, I mean an ability to do anything he wanted, anytime he wanted," Mr. Kelly said.

Mr. Kelly with Mr. Trump in the Oval Office in 2018. He said the former president's recent comments about using the military against what he called the "enemy within" were so dangerous that he felt he had to speak out. Eric Thayer for The New York Times

"I think he'd love to be just like he was in business — he could tell people to do things and they would do it, and not really bother too much about whether what the legalities were and whatnot," he said.

He said he was deeply troubled by Trump's recent comments about using the military against domestic opponents.

When Mr. Kelly left the White House in 2019, he decided he would speak out on the record only if Mr. Trump said something that he found deeply troubling or involved him and was wildly inaccurate.

Mr. Trump's recent comments about using the military against what he called the "enemy within" were so dangerous, he said, that he felt he had to speak out.

"And I think this issue of using the military on — to go after — American citizens is one of those things I think is a very, very bad thing — even to say it for political purposes to get elected — I think it's a very, very bad thing, let alone actually doing

it,” Mr. Kelly said.

Mr. Kelly said that Mr. Trump was repeatedly told dating back to his first year in office why he should not use the U.S. military against Americans and the limits on his authority to do so. Mr. Trump nevertheless continued while in office to push the issue and claim that he did have the authority to take such actions, Mr. Kelly said.

Police officers and members of the military faced protesters near the White House before a photo opportunity for Mr. Trump outside St. John’s Church in 2020. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

“Originally, conversation would be: Mr. President, that’s outside your authority, or you know that’s a routine use, you really don’t want to do that inside the United States,” he said. “But now that he’s talking about it as ‘I’m gonna do it’ is, again, it’s disturbing.”

He said he believed Trump stood alone in his lack of understanding of history and the Constitution.

Mr. Kelly said Mr. Trump lacked a fundamental understanding of basic American values and what being president is about.

“He’s certainly the only president that has all but rejected what America is all about, and what makes America America, in terms of our Constitution, in terms of our values, the way we look at everything, to include family and government — he’s certainly the only president that I know of, certainly in my lifetime, that was like that,” Mr. Kelly said.

“He just doesn’t understand the values — he pretends, he talks, he knows more about America than anybody, but he doesn’t.”

He said Trump wanted personal loyalty to outweigh loyalty to the Constitution.

Mr. Kelly said that in the first few days of working for Mr. Trump as his chief of staff in the summer of 2017, he had to explain to the president that top government officials like himself had taken an oath to the Constitution and would place that oath over personal loyalty.

Mr. Kelly said Mr. Trump pressed him about that pledge and seemed to have no appreciation that top aides were supposed to put their pledge to the Constitution — and, by extension, the rule of law — above all else.

“He and I talked about it — it was a new concept for him, I guess is the best way to put it, and I don’t think it’s one he ever totally accepted.”

Mr. Kelly said that personal loyalty “is virtually everything to him.”

Mr. Kelly said that Mr. Trump wrongly believed that the uniformed and retired senior generals he brought in to work for him would be loyal to him above all else. Doug Mills/The New York Times

As soon as someone in his orbit loses that loyalty, Mr. Kelly said, that person is then out of favor with Mr. Trump and “your time is short.”

Mr. Trump, Mr. Kelly said, wrongly believed that the uniformed and retired senior generals he brought in to work for him would be loyal to him above all else.

“Certainly, a big surprise for him, again, was if you remember at the beginning of the administration, he would talk about ‘his generals,’” Mr. Kelly said. “I don’t know why he thought that — but then a very big surprise for him was that we were — those of us who were former generals and certainly people still on active duty — that the commitment, the loyalty was to the Constitution, without question, without second thought.”

Mr. Kelly added: “That was a big surprise to him that the generals were not loyal to the boss, in this case him.”

Trump told him that “Hitler did some good things.”

Mr. Kelly confirmed previous reports that on more than one occasion Mr. Trump spoke positively of Hitler.

“He commented more than once that, ‘You know, Hitler did some good things, too,’” Mr. Kelly said Mr. Trump told him.

Mr. Kelly said that Mr. Trump had little appreciation for history — “I think he’s lacking in that,” he said — but said that he would still try to explain to Mr. Trump why those comments about Hitler were problematic.

Mr. Kelly in the Oval Office in 2017. He said Mr. Trump had little appreciation for history. Tom Brenner/The New York Times

“First of all, you should never say that,” Mr. Kelly said that he told Mr. Trump. “But if you knew what Hitler was all about from the beginning to the end, everything he did was in support of his racist, fascist life, you know, the, you know, philosophy, so that nothing he did, you could argue, was good — it was certainly not done for the right reason.”

Mr. Kelly said that would usually end the conversation. But Mr. Trump would occasionally bring it up again.

Kelly said Trump looked down on those who were disabled on the battlefield.

In response to a question about previous stories about Mr. Trump having disdain for disabled veterans, Mr. Kelly said Mr. Trump did not want to be seen in public with those who had lost limbs on the battlefield.

“Certainly his not wanting to be seen with amputees — amputees that lost their limbs in defense of this country fighting for every American, him included, to protect them, but didn’t want to be seen with them. That’s an interesting perspective for the commander in chief to have.”

“He would just say: ‘Look, it just doesn’t look good for me.’”

He said Trump called service members who were injured or killed “losers and suckers,” despite denials from Trump and some aides.

Confirming a statement he gave to CNN last year, Mr. Kelly said that on multiple occasions Mr. Trump told him that those Americans wounded, captured or killed in action were “losers and suckers.”

“The time in Paris was not the only time that he ever said it,” Mr. Kelly said, referring to reports that Mr. Trump told him that he did not want to visit a cemetery where American service members killed during World War I were buried.

“Whenever John McCain’s name came up, he’d go through this rant about him being a loser, and all those people were suckers, and why do you people think that people getting killed are heroes? And he’d go through this rant.”

“To me, I could never understand why he was that way — he may be the only American citizen that feels that way about those who gave their lives or served their country,” Mr. Kelly said.

Mr. Kelly said that on top of saying “losers” and “suckers,” Mr. Trump often questioned the decisions by Americans to sacrifice for their country.

Mr. Trump and his wife, Melania, visiting a cemetery for American soldiers in Normandy, France, in 2019. Doug Mills/The New York Times

At Arlington National Cemetery on Memorial Day 2017, Mr. Trump toured the section where recently killed service members are buried, including Mr. Kelly’s son Robert, a Marine who was killed in 2010 while fighting in Afghanistan.

While walking through the cemetery, Mr. Kelly recounted, Mr. Trump asked what had been in it for those who had given their lives.

“And I thought he was asking one of these rhetorical kind of, you know, questions,” Mr. Kelly said. “But I didn’t realize he was serious — he just didn’t see what the point was. As I got to know him, again, this selflessness is something he just didn’t understand. What’s in it for them?”

Mr. Kelly had nothing good to say about Mr. Trump

Mr. Kelly was asked whether Mr. Trump had any empathy.

“No,” Mr. Kelly said.

Michael S. Schmidt is an investigative reporter for The Times covering Washington. His work focuses on tracking and explaining high-profile federal investigations. [More about Michael S. Schmidt](#)

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 12 of the New York edition with the headline: Ex-Chief of Staff Says Trump Would Rule Like Dictator