

Review - Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic

Written by Thomas Zeiler

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THOMAS ZEILER, JUN 5 2018

Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic
By David Frum
New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018

David Frum does not like Donald Trump. Although this prolific senior editor of *The Atlantic* largely refrains from taking cheap shots at Trump's ridiculous physical appearance (though he does rank him among the fattest presidents in history), an adolescent speaking style, and Trump's constantly unpresidential campaign mode, Frum obviously disdains the guy. And rightly so. Trump is bad for the country, democracy and conservatism – president in name only who falls well short of meeting the moral, work and intellectual standards of his predecessors, even the most mediocre among them. Frum details the horrors as a plea for resistance by decent people. His is a powerful message, especially coming from a conservative who served in the George W. Bush administration, surely competitive with this one in terms of disasters. That this author is a Reaganite, who hopefully believes that conservatives can redeem themselves, makes *Trumpocracy* all the more powerful, and scary.

How did we get here, to a point that a “cruel, vengeful, egoistic, ignorant, lazy, avaricious, and treacherous” (p.235) and simply dumb person, who bullied his way through failed careers to the top of the American government, now undermines democracy as he seeks profit for his family as well as attention to satisfy his 15-year old's ego? The kleptocratic profiteering, for one, is shocking; every member of his family enjoys expensive federal protection for supposed “business” trips like ski and golf outings. Conflict of interest, nepotism and the like do not apply to him. Above all, Trump's immature, spasmodic urge to dominate, rather than cooperate, has undermined every element of this administration – from relations with allies abroad, to treasonous defilement of US national security, to workable constitutional executive orders at home. Yet while Trump “may not be a proper president, or a competent president, or a patriotic president, or even a legitimate president in any larger ethical sense of the word ‘legitimate’” (p.174), we must deal with him because he was lawfully elected. This foolish slob is our problem.

A drumbeat of chapters systematically dissects how and why Trump was elected, and what is wrong with his rule. Some reveal how he has ridden, rather than masterminded, his rise by drawing on the darkest impulses of Americans, including the resentments of white men and the cravenness of followers. How Trump demands loyalty, to the detriment of the country's best interests, or cries and lies about media oppression, are among Frum's interests. Fissures in a disunited conservative movement, and an instinctual understanding of how to succeed in the attention economy – Trump's only gift, and even at that he is illiterate – follow Frum's expert rendition of the sorry state of politics over the past half-decade. Chapters deal with foreign policy, in which Trump comes off as either stupid, uninformed or a rube for the likes of Putin and other dictators. From under rocks emerge white nationalists, now egged on by the White House. The culmination of this appalling state of affairs is Trumpocracy: “the stealthy paralysis of governance . . . an accumulating subversion of norms . . . the incitement of private violence to radicalize supporters” (p.xi) that foments hatreds, divides Americans and makes possible “the aggrandizement of one domineering man and his shamelessly grasping extended family” (p.xiii) and their enablers. This book is a call to arms for conservatives to stop the madness.

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Admirably, Frum places blame squarely at the feet of his own Republicans. He builds a case that the GOP, along with its talk radio/Fox News facilitators, created the dysfunction that Trump exploited for his own gains by attacking government as the culprit of (largely) white America's (supposed) economic struggles and cultural alienation. Trump, who lacks either the savvy or optimism to devise an agenda acceptable to many Americans, as Reagan did, merely became the unthinking but unflinching missile who launched his nasty, divisive messages toward the truly vulnerable or those who perceived themselves as victims. His targets were as much Republican as Democrat. The elites wrongly thought they could use him, and the rank-and-file wrongly thought he would help them, although they still enjoy the spectacle of his outrageous remarks and his tweaking of elites (like Frum). The Republican coalition of the traditional rich, evangelicals and Tea Partiers arose from "the nation's biggest winners from globalization and its biggest losers" (p.36). The former wrote the policies; the latter voted for them but has come to oppose them. Trump came along to champion their causes against immigration and liberal culture (but in favor of universal healthcare, which he initially supported). The globalizers eventually fell in line behind Trump even though they, including his former campaign opponents Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz, thought him a swindler. Republicans adopted a new philosophy of conservatism that Frum sums up as a Gingrich/Limbaugh/Hannity-fueled "fuck you, leftists" (p.49). Not the stuff of enlightened leadership, but do not be surprised if Republicans continue their folly. Frum warns that Trump could be re-elected if the GOP rallies around a fellow embattled Republican, especially if the Democrats take Congress in 2018.

Yet the theme running through this book is the danger of Trumpocracy to America as a whole. This is apparent, for example, in Trump's infantile but dangerous demand for total loyalty that attracts sycophants, most of whom exit the government stage because they are unfit for service. Trump returns not loyalty but humiliation, yet his followers (and most Republicans) ride along with him, abetting his corruption. Even the good people who hope to steer him boost his treasonous stance (toward Russia, for instance) by flattery or not speaking out. This is a man who has no interest in, or knowledge of, policy, and cares only about himself, but is helped along by desperate Republicans willing to make deals with the devil in exchange for seeing their agendas through. Trump simply lets things happen, as he did in the transition, the illegal immigration ban, the tax bill or simply by his spasms of incoherent blurts or name-calling about trade, allies and nuclear weapons on twitter because he is too ignorant and lazy to lead. He also lies so much that one wonders if we've become inured to his remarks; it is tiring to keep up with his constant fabrications and defamatory statements that threaten democracy by questioning the press. Such McCarthyite behavior, notes Frum, sows chaos and policy paralysis that Trump wants so he, alone, can command. That is the invidious chipping away at democracy of Trumpocracy at work, or, as Frum fears, the ebbing "de-democratization" (p.122) that has occurred in other countries. So, must we now compare America to semi-authoritarian Hungary and Turkey?

I noted at the outset that Frum shies from in-depth criticism of Trump the man himself, though that does not let Donald off the hook on the character issue. That Trump has tantrums and viciously blames others for his many faults is clear. A reporter on the 2016 campaign called the candidate "the meanest man I've ever met" (p.72). That he also "looks like a complete moron" (p.161), as a veteran of his campaign noted, is now a given. But it is his wimpy victim mentality – one shared by all the supposedly manly white guys at his rallies – that is striking. Frum polishes off the book by quoting fellow conservative Peggy Noonan: Trump actually undermines American masculinity because "He's not strong and self-controlled, not cool and tough, not low-key and determined; he's whiny, weepy and self-pitying... He is a drama queen" (p.227); in short, a wuss, like all bullies.

Is there a solution to this disgrace of a human being and his rule? Frum ends this book somewhat optimistically that the better angels in America will prevail and that a certain truth will win out. Perhaps, though, he needs to jettison some of his conservatism and urge Republicans to reach out to Democrats to re-establish the vital center of American politics. This Never Trumper, who continues to stick it to Trump in his columns, must be true to his own words that reconciliation – with the opposing party – is the way forward. We can overcome Donald Trump, but can Republicans overcome their intractable partisanship? Frum advocates civility *within* each party, but moderation must come *between* them as well to counter the scourge of Trumpocracy.

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