

The End of the Republican Party: Three 'Never Trump' Conservatives on the Trump Presidency

*Everything Trump Touches Dies:
A Republican Strategist Gets Real About the Worst President Ever*

Rick Wilson

New York: Simon and Schuster/Free Press, 2018

*Trumpocracy:
The Corruption of the American Republic*

David Frum

New York: HarperCollins, 2018

*The Corrosion of Conservatism:
Why I Left the Right*

Max Boot

New York: W.W. Norton/Liveright, 2018

John Newsinger

The effective takeover of the Republican Party by Trump and his supporters is one of the most important developments since he first announced his intention to seek the Republican nomination. These three books by Republican insiders all provide very useful insights into that process, insights expressed with varying degrees of disgust. Max Boot being so effected as to decide that he can no longer call himself a conservative at all. Coming from the right they are all the more successful in conveying the enormity of the Trump phenomenon and deserve to be read by everyone concerned with US politics today.

First, Rick Wilson, very much a veteran Republican hatchet man, indeed, 'a gleeful hatchet man', in his own words (p. 6). The Republican nomination of Trump for the Presidency precipitated 'a kind of political midlife change' and he does not mince his words (p. 2). As far as he is concerned, Trump is 'the avatar of our worst instincts and darkest desires as a nation' (p. 2); 'crony capitalism in human form' (p. 36); someone who 'has monetized the presidency for the direct benefit of himself, his soft-jawed offspring, and his farflung empire of bullshit' (p. 176); a man with 'absolutely no interior intellectual life' (p. 228); 'a goddamned degenerate pussy-grabber with a lifetime of adultery, venality and dishonesty' (p. 63); and so on. What he can scarcely credit is the way that the

Republican Party has bowed down to this monstrous figure, slipping 'into the sewage tank of nationalist populism with barely a ripple' (p. 2).

His contempt for those leading Republicans, politicians, advisers and officials who have rallied to Trump – 'Vichy Republicans', as he calls them – is positively molten. How could Ted Cruz support Trump after he insulted his wife and accused his father of involvement in the assassination of Jack Kennedy? He had never seen any politician perform 'acts of greater self-abnegation and humiliation'. The only excuse he can think of is that Cruz hopes for a Supreme Court nomination! (p. 26) What Republican politicians and their big money backers collectively wanted from Trump, however, was his promised tax cuts. Trump surrounded himself with 'Goldman Sachs and other Wall Street alumni who behaved just as they always do: with weapons grade venality [. . . .] They were there for the tax bill. Only the tax bill.' And it was indeed, 'a spectacular, budget-busting payday for Wall Street' (pp. 191, 192).

As for Trump's own personal courtiers, Wilson regards them as the lowest of the low. Paul Manafort is '[c]rooked, corrupting, utterly amoral [. . . .] a scumbag lobbyist of the last resort for assorted kleptocrats, third world shitbirds, and international criminals'. This, of course, made him 'a perfect fit for Trump' (p. 234). Stephen Miller is 'the thinking man's racist on Team Trump' (p. 239), while Kellyanne Conway, in the history of White House advisors, sets the record in 'utter mendacity'. Her 'complete lack of scruples was a perfect fit for the Trump campaign and his administration' (p. 241). And as for Michael Cohen, he is 'a deeply revolting specimen even by the low standards of the Petri dish of Trump World scuzz'. 'Whenever one of Trump's girl friends phoned him to tell him, "Don, I'm late" [i.e. has missed a period]Cohen and his people take over'. He is the man charged with 'working to cover up, pay off, intimidate and silence women' (pp. 64, 235).

Wilson reserves his greatest dislike for Steve Bannon. Once Wilson began opposing Trump, it was Bannon set Breitbart – 'the *Der Sturmer* of our time' – on him, 'including stories that targeted my children'. Bannon was the 'brightest, hottest, weirdest, shittiest star in the Trump constellation'. He 'looks like the spokesmodel for a new line of gout medication'. It was Bannon who 'discovered immigration was the killer app'. Wilson had his revenge helping defeat the run for Senate by Roy Moore – 'the wee molester' – a defeat that seriously damaged Bannon, who was last seen 'cheering on the neofascist parties in European elections' (pp. 227–231, 276). Collectively they are, according to Wilson, 'the Axis of Assholes' (p. 245).

What of the Christian Right? The support that evangelical Christians have given to Trump is particularly astonishing to Wilson. He can scarcely believe the way in which they sold themselves for '40 pieces of silver', knowingly

embracing a 'degenerate, unrepentant man who represents everything evangelicals have railed against for generations'. Trump 'was a walking, talking, porn-star screwing offence to their every belief'. Nevertheless, they welcomed him as God's anointed, praying for his success, giving him their blessing and, moreover, damning his opponents and critics. And this was a man who had supported abortion right up until 2016, one of the evangelicals' cardinal sins, second only to homosexuality (pp. 62, 64).

Wilson identifies Rupert Murdoch's Fox News as another essential factor in Trump's success. Even though Murdoch privately dismissed Trump as 'a fucking idiot', Fox News gave him uncritical support and assailed his opponents with sustained venom. Indeed, Fox has become 'Trump TV, providing him with instant, fawning coverage'. A key role in all this is played by Sean Hannity, who reported the 2016 election campaign on Fox at the very same time as he was advising the campaign. Hannity speaks for 'woke workin' man', a pose that 'rings a bit hollow now that he lives in a multimillion-dollar mansion and owns a private jet' (pp. 31, 207, 206). According to Max Boot, Hannity 'makes roughly \$30 million a year . . . even while railing against "overpaid" media elites' (Boot p. 182).

What Wilson finds most objectionable about Trump, however, is his racism. As someone who spent years defending the Republican Party against accusations of racism from liberals, he has been left 'almost speechless with rage' to find that the Party has actually put in power 'a man racist in deed and word, tolerant of even more vile racists, and a hero to racists white supremacists, and anti-Semites'. He regards the emergence of the alt-right, 'an overtly racist, overtly anti-Semitic tendency in modern American politics' as particularly 'revolting and disturbing' and calls for a 'cleansing fire' to drive them 'back into the shadows'. For the moment, though, Trump is 'empowering, elevating and protecting the alt-right'. As he eloquently puts it 'Trump is the disease vector they felt they needed to infect the nation's body politic' (pp. 248, 249, 252). This particular dimension to the Trump Presidency, its role in fostering fascism in the USA, is still unfolding.

Just as hostile to the Trump Presidency is David Frum, a former speech writer for George W Bush, credited with inventing the 'Axis of Evil' formulation in 2002. He was the author of *The Right Man*, a staunch defence of the Bush administration, published in 2003. In 2016, he voted for Hillary Clinton! Frum recognises that Trump did not come out of the blue, but was someone who took advantage of the way American politics was 'veering toward extremism and instability' (p. xii). Trump and his coterie exploited the deep divisions that had opened up in American society, but they did not create them. As Frum puts it: 'The United States was living through an epochal shift of economic power and

cultural status and Trump's supporters perceived themselves as the targets and losers in that shift.' And it wasn't the working class, unemployed, casually employed and low paid so much as people who were 'solidly middle class or even rather affluent', but who 'felt that their world was turning upside down in the twenty-first century' (p. 27). For millions of white Americans living standards were falling; indeed for the first time in US history, 'life expectancy was actually declining'. He writes quite powerfully of suicides and of opioid overdoses, the 'deaths of despair' among white men (pp. 201-202). Neither the Democratic nor the Republican establishments concerned themselves with any of this, thereby creating the conditions for someone like Trump to emerge. He claimed to speak for these people, while all the time his main concern was to line his own pockets, enrich himself and his family and celebrate his greatness.

According to Frum, 'Trump tangled government, family, and business in the style of an authoritarian Third World kleptocrat' (p. 59). He details the damage the 2008 crash did to Trump's businesses, leaving him with little more than a brand to peddle. Before 2008, Trump did virtually no business outside the USA. This was about to change. The word went out to 'everywhere dirty money is gained and hidden', that Trump's services were available to 'shine you up' (p. 61). As Reuters reported in March 2017, no less than 63 individuals with Russian passports or addresses had bought \$98.4 million worth of property in Trump-branded luxury towers in Florida.¹ And far from all this coming to an end once he became President, it accelerated: in the year after Trump won the Republican nomination, '70 percent of Trump's customers made their purchasers through identity-shielding corporations. Trump sold \$33 million worth of real estate in this concealed way in the six months after the 2016 election' (p. 62). Of course, Trump himself has successfully hidden his own finances from the American people, effortlessly rolling back what were considered to be ethical imperatives right up until he took office. According to some estimates Trump owed, in 2017, more than \$1 billion dollars 'to about 150 different financial institutions', considerably more than he has disclosed (p. 64). Part of the problem is that Trump is the biggest liar in US Presidential history. Frum is clearly incredulous both that such a man could ever become President and that Republican politicians have been prepared to cover for him, indeed to flatter him and sing his praises, positively grovelling before him.

He looks at some of the people Trump chooses to surround himself with, people whose loyalty he can rely on, although loyalty is never something he reciprocates. There is Dan Scavino, a former golf caddy, who Trump put in charge of 'his online presence . . . It was Scavino who oversaw the retweeting from accounts like @WhiteGenocideTM (located in "Jewmerica")'. Then there is

¹ <<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-trump-property/>>

his son, Eric's former wedding planner, who was put in to 'oversee federal housing programs in New York City, a post in which loyalty matters even more than usual to Trump, since his company collects millions of dollars of revenue from that program' (pp. 82, 83). Frum also draws our attention to Jay Sekulow, one of Trump's legal team dealing with the Mueller investigation. One can see the attraction Sekulow had for Trump. He is a born again evangelical Christian, a convert from Judaism in fact, and 'ran a pair of nonprofit Christian advocacy groups from which he directed some tens of millions of dollars to himself, his family, and their businesses' (p. 74). Although Frum does not mention it, Sekulow is one of the top evangelical Christian lawyers in the US, heading up the American Centre for Law and Justice, the evangelical rival to the much-hated American Civil Liberties Union. The American Centre for Law and Justice is based at the evangelist Pat Robertson's Regent University.

What the USA has ended up with is a President 'beholden to Russia'. Frum describes Trump's election as 'the most successful foreign espionage attempt against the United States in the nation's history' (p. 134). His 'deference to Putin reverberated through the western alliance' (p. 155) and more generally, he has 'empowered dictators worldwide' (p. 154). The damage has so far been mitigated, in his opinion, by the fact that the White House is 'a mess of careless slob' and this 'dysfunction' has sometimes 'actively advanced the public interest, by unintentionally thwarting the Trump administration's more sinister instincts'. Another mitigating factor has been the culture of leaks which also 'thwarted many of the worst impulses of the new Trump administration [. . .] Leaks alerted the world that President Trump had blabbed a crucial military secret to the Russian foreign minister. Leaks deterred the Trump administration from lifting sanctions on Russia as soon as it entered office' (p. 171). As Frum observes, this is hardly a satisfactory state of affairs. He writes of widespread disenchantment with democratic government and growing support for authoritarianism in the US and grimly concludes that 'we are living through the most dangerous challenge to the free government of the United States that anyone alive has encountered' (p. 235). His somewhat pathetic answer is a 'more responsible conservatism' (p. 207). Considering that he probably considers George W Bush, Dick Cheney and Karl Rove as exemplars of this 'more responsible conservatism', the prospect is not very hopeful.

Which brings us to Max Boot's *The Corrosion of Conservatism*, by far the best of the three books under review. Boot is a security specialist, the author of a number of books on insurgency and counter-insurgency, most recently a study of Edward Lansdale (*The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam*), books that are certainly worth reading whether you disagree with him or disagree with him really strongly. He achieved a certain notoriety when he recommended that the United States embrace its

Imperial destiny and send out enlightened administrators to run Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere in the same way that the British Empire had been run (p. 49). He had obviously been reading too much Niall Ferguson! For Boot, Trump's election 'was one of the most demoralizing days of my life'. The day after the election, he changed his voter registration from Republican to Independent. What was 'most painful' was the way that people he knew and respected had rallied to Trump despite what the man was and what he stood for, a man who had 'few fixed convictions outside of narcissism and nativism, racism and sexism'. Marco Rubio's turnaround was the 'most painful of all for me'. His account is all the more powerful because it chronicles how his 'beliefs are shifting because of the rise of Trumpism'. He asks himself to what extent did his championing of the conservative cause over the years 'contribute to the rise of this dark force in American life'. His 'ideology has come into conflict with reality – and reality is winning' and he has been left hoping that the Republican Party will 'pay a heavy price for its embrace of white nationalism and know-nothingism'(pp. xv, xvi, xix, xxi). And, of course, his anti-Trump stance has brought the wrath of the President's followers down on him. The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, Boot writes that he had never encountered anti-Semitism in the US until he came out in opposition to Trump. Then his Twitter account and email inbox 'filled up with anti-Semitic, pro-Trump vitriol [. . . .] Some charming Twitter troll posted a picture of me being executed in a gas chamber by a smiling Trump dressed in a Nazi uniform' (pp. 83-84).

Boot looks back on his political trajectory, on his success at building a career as a right-wing 'journalist, historian, and foreign policy pundit' (p. 33). In 2007, he actually won the Eric Breindel Award for Excellence in Opinion Journalism, an award established by Rupert Murdoch no less. Nowadays, he regards Murdoch's Fox News as 'a pernicious influence on American life . . . a threat to this country's democratic institutions' (p 41). He inevitably supported, indeed cheered on, the invasion and occupation of Iraq, although he urged the adoption of a protracted counter-insurgency strategy, nation-building – or rather neo-colony building – championing General David Petraeus as the man showing the way forward. Looking back, after having defended it for years, he now acknowledges that the invasion was 'all a big mistake', and indeed that 'the failed policies I advocated in 2003 helped, thirteen years later, to elect a president who stands in opposition to nearly everything that I believe in' (pp. 54-55). He also blames the consequences of the 'laissez-faire ideology' that he advocated for its part in precipitating the 2008 crash and helping create the social conditions for the emergence of Trumpism. As he notes, between 1980 and 2014, 'the top 1 percent in the country experienced 205 percent growth in personal income; the bottom 50 percent saw only 1 percent growth' (p. 90). This is, as he recognises, a devastating indictment. It is this catastrophe that

has led millions of Americans to rally to Trump, conned into the belief that this narcissistic crook actually cares about their predicament, because they blame it all on immigration. Astonishingly, as Boot reveals, according to one poll, '61 percent of Republicans consider Trump a good role model for their children'!(p. 136)

As for Trump, he asks himself, 'who is worse: Trump or his enablers' (p. 152). Trump does not know any better, but his enablers are another matter. He writes of an unnamed Republican congressman who in private describes Trump as 'an evil, really fucking stupid Forrest Gump [. . .] He's just a fucking idiot' and then appears on Fox News singing his praises (p. 160). His particular scorn is reserved for the Christian Right. They are 'theological silly putty . . . twisting their supposed convictions to support whatever political outcome they favored'. Indeed, '[o]f all the GOP's toadies and hypocrites, the fundamentalists were the most egregious: these supposed champions of morality were willing to support a candidate who regarded the sins proscribed in the Ten Commandments as his personal to-do list' (p. 90). He describes evangelical support as 'Trump's "get out of jail free" card, at least when it comes to matters of morality'. Their silence has been deafening. They were, with few exceptions, silent when he refused to condemn the fascists and neo-Nazis on the Unite the Right march in Charlottesville; when the children of asylum seekers were separated from their parents and kept in cages; silent when he began singing the praises of North Korean dictator, Kim Jong-un. This last instance is particularly interesting because the Stalinist regime is a ferocious, indeed murderous, persecutor of Christians and Christianity. Trump has professed his love and admiration for a brutal tyrant and mass murderer, who relentlessly persecutes Christians. Yet there has been no condemnation from those evangelicals who have been campaigning against the regime for years. If any previous President had embraced Kim in the way Trump has, the Christian Right would have been very publicly and very noisily outraged. Their silence has even extended to Trump's exonerating Kim from any responsibility for the death of Otto Warmbier, the American student sentenced to fifteen years hard labour in early 2016. He was charged with removing a propaganda poster while on a guided tour visit to the country. He 'confessed' to having both Christian and CIA links (the Christian connection was not that convincing considering he was Jewish!) and was treated with such brutality that he was in a vegetative state when he was returned to the US in June 2017, dying six days later.

Boot writes of Trump's sympathy for authoritarians and dictators. He has 'a kind word for every strongman he chats with'. Kim Jong-un, for example, 'loves his people and in turn is loved by them'. And then there is his relationship with Vladimir Putin, a relationship that is 'so obsequious that former CIA director John Brennan and former director of National Intelligence James Clapper

suggested that Trump might have been compromised by the Kremlin' (p. 145). As he points out in his discussion of the 'Collusion' issue, the fact that the Trump campaign spent so much time trying to cover-up their meetings with Russians, certainly points in the direction of guilt (pp. 120-124). The impact of the 'Collusion' allegations on Trump's supporters, however, has been that a growing number of them are becoming sympathetic to Putin themselves!

As for Trump, Boot has, on occasion, called him a fascist, but this is not something to take too seriously. While Trump has no problem with fascists and neo-Nazis giving him their support, he certainly has not got the intellectual ability to be able to grasp their ideology. He is, as Boot puts it elsewhere, much more of 'a garden-variety strongman' whose Presidency feels 'more like the reign of a Roman Emperor than a normal American president' (pp. 99, 111). And he has certainly 'developed an authoritarian-style cult of the personality with the shameful connivance of those around him' (p. 53). There can be little doubt that Trump would very much like to be a dictator, a president for life, able to disappear people rather than having to pay them off, and that he is envious of the leaders he meets who do not have to negotiate the checks and balances of the US system. But at the moment his room for manoeuvre is constrained. This is not to say, of course, that a crisis of some kind – economic, political, military, or all three – might not change this situation.

What seems to have been decisive in Boot's break with conservatism is his recognition, prompted by Trump's open racism, that the Republican Party had been playing the race card since the end of the 1960s. He writes:

'As I now look back with the clarity of hindsight, I realise that, whatever Republican candidates claimed to stand for, what a lot of their voters heard was: this is someone who will put minorities in their place. [. . .] I am now convinced that coded racial appeals – those dog whistles – had at least as much, if not more, to do with the electoral success of the modern Republican Party than all of the domestic and foreign policy proposals crafted by well-intentioned analysts like me.' (p. 169)

Like Rick Wilson, he admits to rebutting those liberals who accused 'the Republican Party of racism', only to have Trump convince him they had been right all along and that he had, in fact, been 'in denial' (p. 169).

Under Trump, this racism extends to anti-Semitism. The Trump election campaign's closing TV commercial 'flashed photographs of such readily identifiable Jews as financier George Soros, Federal Reserve chair Janet Yellen and Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein'. For all Trump's embrace of ultra Zionism, his campaign was riddled with 'covert appeals to anti-Semitism' (p. 84). As far as Boot is concerned Trump was 'the most unapologetically racist major-party nominee in many decades – and quite possibly ever' (p. 85).

Much of Boot's account is an admission of what can only be described as astonishing naiveté on his part. This seems to have derived in good part from a tendency towards hero worship. He praises Barry Goldwater (although he admits that, only recently having read what he actually had to say, 'he really was an extremist' (p. 168)), and Ronald Reagan ('How I loved that man' (p. 19).) And the late John McCain is fulsomely praised. Inevitably he regards Trump's attacks on McCain as absolutely contemptible: 'I still cannot believe that Trump, who sat out the Vietnam War with five draft deferments and claimed that avoiding sexually transmitted diseases was "my personal Vietnam", has the temerity to criticise one of America's greatest war heroes' (p. 56). Boot actually worked on McCain's 2008 Presidential campaign as a security adviser. What he does not confront is McCain's decision to placate the Christian Right by installing Sarah Palin as his running mate. In many ways, she prepared the way for Trump and while Boot quite rightly condemns such remarks of hers as 'waterboarding is how we'd baptise terrorists' (p. 178), McCain on occasion sang from the same hymn sheet, indeed actually sang 'Bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb Iran' to the tune of the Beach Boys 'Barbara Ann' to appreciative audiences. McCain certainly repudiated claims that Obama was a Muslim, but his campaign, courtesy of Palin, helped shift the Republican Party in the direction of Trumpism.

One last point about Boot's retreat from conservatism (he hopes for a decent centre right party): he has not yet examined the domination of US politics by Corporate America, confronted the reality of America as a plutocracy. It will be interesting to read his conclusions, if and when he does. And more generally, none of these three books actually devote any serious attention to what one suspects will be seen in the future as the greatest indictment of the Trump Presidency: its denial of global warming, its rolling back of environmental protections in the USA, its lack of concern about the coming catastrophic impact of climate change. To be fair, they are far from alone in this neglect.

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