

## **Making America Great**

*Siege: Trump Under Fire*

Michael Wolff

New York: Henry Holt, 2019

*The Ordinary Presidency of Donald J. Trump*

Jon Herbert, Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Wroe

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019

*Trump, the Alt-Right and Public Pedagogies of Hate and for Fascism:*

*What is To be Done?*

Mike Cole

London: Routledge, 2018

*Trump Aftershock: The President's Seismic Impact on Culture and Faith in America*

Stephen E Strang

Florida (US): Frontline, 2018

### **John Newsinger**

One of the most memorable moments in Michael Wolff's *Siege* has our hero whipped up into a ferocious rage, while watching 'Fox and Friends' one Friday morning. Sean Hannity and the rest of the Fox line-up were complaining about how Trump had betrayed 'Trumpism' at the behest of the Republican leadership in Congress. The President rushed into the Oval Office 'in a full-on rage so violent that, for a moment, his hair came undone. To the shock of the people with him, there stood an almost entirely bald Donald Trump.' (p. 28) The Emperor had no hair! This is essentially the message that Wolff's new book, a sequel to his earlier *Fire and Fury*, seeks to convey. This might seem merely commonplace at this point in Trump's Presidency, hardly deserving of yet another book. However *Siege* is well worth reading – both for what it has to say about Trump and his court and also for the serious misjudgement that it makes about his Presidency. Wolff assumes that Trump is finished. He writes that '(t)he wheels of justice are inexorably turning against him [. . .] even his own White House has begun turning on him. Virtually every power center

left of the far-right wing has deemed him unfit'. (p. ix) In the spring of 2018, there was, according to Wolff, a 'nearly apocalyptic mood [. . .] in the West Wing', (p. 101) with Trump's chances of surviving the multiple investigations into his criminality diminishing by the day and his people increasingly looking to protect themselves. Indeed, the book concludes that while he might have 'dodged a potential death blow' with the Mueller report, he was 'still guilty of being Donald Trump . . . his very nature would continue to repulse a majority of the nation, as well as almost everybody who came into working contact with him'. Wolf was confident that Trump's 'escape . . . would be brief'. (p. 315) This misjudgement derives from Wolff's focus on Trump's court, on his underestimating of the crucial importance of Trump's main activity as President: his incessant campaigning for the 2020 election by means of Twitter, MAGA rallies and Fox News, consolidating his so-called base within the Republican Party. While Mitch McConnell, the Republican leader in the Senate, could dismiss Trump as 'the stupidest person McConnell had ever met in politics – and that was saying something', (p. 116) Trump's support among the Republican voters and activists remained strong.

Wolff situates Trump as very much a 'B-level' capitalist, whose real estate business was from the 1990s 'designed to appeal to money launderers', (p. 13) mainly Russians. His 'primary business strategy' had always been '. . . lying. Trump Tower, Trump Shuttle, Trump Soho, Trump University, the Trump Casinos, Mar-a-Lago – all these enterprises were followed by a trail of claims and litigation that told a consistent story of borderline and often outright fraud'. (p. 78) He was very much a minor player in what Wolff describes as our 'oligarch-billionaire world', in which the super rich – men often richer than governments – were confident that they were untouchable and that, in the last resort, 'anyone could be bribed'. According to Steve Bannon, one of Trump's great fears was that investigations into his business affairs were going to reveal that he was not the great business success he continually proclaimed himself to be, but just another 'crooked business guy, and one worth fifty million dollars instead of ten billion'. (p. 299) Far from being one of the major players, he was one of their accessories, laundering other people's money and never paying his legal bills. This failure to pay his legal bills came back to haunt him when he tried to hire a major law firm to represent him regarding the Mueller and other investigations. The President of the United States, no less, could not find a firm prepared to represent him! He even approached Alan Dershowitz, the man who had defended his one-time friend, Jeffrey Epstein, against accusations of underage sex back

in 2004,<sup>1</sup> but he demanded 'a retainer of a million dollars'. (p. 47) Instead, Trump ended up with Rudy Giuliani who agreed to represent him either out of the kindness of his heart or the opportunity to make multiple TV appearances. Even Trump thought that Giuliani's TV appearances sometimes made the former mayor of New York look 'like a mental patient'. (p. 71)

Much of Wolff's inside information actually seems to originate with Steve Bannon. Since his exile from Trump's court, Bannon has been desperately trying to establish himself as both the guru of the international Far Right and as someone who can influence Trump from outside the White House. As Wolff reports, Bannon is in great demand. In October 2018 he spoke at 'a conference of hedge funders who were brought together every year by Niall Ferguson, the British historian, writer and conservative commentator'. (p. 265) He was also involved in trying to secure alternative funding for Marine Le Pen's Front National. He proposed they replace their Russian backers – 'Russian gangsters likely fronting for Putin', who had loaned the party \$13 million – with 'right-wing Jews and supporters of Israel'. (pp. 162-163) The Russian involvement with the European Far Right is obviously a subject that requires considerable more attention, especially considering that it has, as Wolff puts it, been 'only loosely hidden'. (p. 162) Bannon has also met with Nigel Farage and with Boris Johnson. (Johnson would have rather this meeting remained secret, but Bannon needs the publicity.) One interesting comment that Wolff makes is that Bannon was always adamant that, whatever else was going on within Trump's Presidential campaign, *he* certainly had no contact with Russians. As for the pee-pee tape, Bannon thought that – if it ever came to light – Trump would just dismiss it as 'fake news' and deny that it was him no matter how clearly he could be identified. Much more damaging for Trump's self-esteem would be if the Russians got hold of his college transcripts and revealed 'his steady semesters of Ds'. (p. 175)

According to Wolff, Bannon's attitude towards Trump 'ranged from exasperation to fury to disgust to incredulity'; but this man, for better or worse, was the standard bearer of the Nationalist Right in the United States. One way to influence him was through Fox News. Trump has spent much of his Presidency 'glued to the television', (p. 55) in particular to 'Fox and Friends'. Indeed, to a considerable extent Fox News has set the White House agenda. As Wolff puts it:

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<sup>1</sup> Dershowitz himself has since faced allegations of underage sex courtesy of Epstein. See, for example, <<http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/07/alan-dershowitz-jeffrey-epstein-case.html>>.

'. . . the Fox team served as a public channel between the Trump base (the Fox audience) and the Trump White House. Likewise, many of the messages from the Bannon side of the Trump party were delivered through and supported by the Fox prime-time schedule – most consistently and succinctly, the message on immigration.'

This was, as Wolff observes, something 'new'. (p 147) Sean Hannity, in particular, has become a major influence on Trump, with the two men often speaking 'six or seven times a day. The calls sometimes lasted more than thirty minutes'. (p. 148) The way to influence Trump was through Hannity, who apparently even nurses his own presidential ambitions! By the winter of 2018, however, even Hannity was confiding to Bannon that Trump seemed 'totally fucking crazy'. (p. 287)

Wolff provides an interesting account of the role of Jared Kushner in the workings of the Presidency, both in the unrelenting battle for influence over the easily distracted Trump and also in the similarly unrelenting pursuit of financial benefit. He writes of how Kushner's 'desperate need for cash was turning US foreign policy into an investment banking scheme dedicated to the refinancing of the Kushner family debt'. (pp. 133-134) The Gulf states and Saudi Arabia were desperate to win favour with Kushner as a way of influencing Trump and he consequently found himself 'positioned . . . as one of the essential players in one of the world's largest pools of unregulated free cash flows'. (p. 132) There were problems, however. Trump's daughter Ivanka persuaded him to take the former governor of South Carolina, Nikki Haley, on board and he appointed her US ambassador to the UN. Haley's long-standing contempt for Trump was only strengthened when she heard rumours that he was having an affair with her, rumours apparently fuelled by his telling 'multiple confidants that Haley had given him a blow job – his words'. (p. 259) This was a President who in his seventies boasted that, far from having to use Viagra, he needed 'a pill to make my erection go down'. (p. 94) Haley resigned at a time calculated to do Trump the most damage in October 2018. But while the administration was in chaos, the Vice President, Mike Pence, went quietly about his business. Trump dismissed him as 'a religious nut', (p. 52) but Pence went on performing 'daily acts of obeisance to Trump and demonstrated an abject and almost excruciating loyalty' regardless. This was all in readiness for taking over 'if impeachment and expulsion or resignation came'. (p. 54) The Christian Right, whom Wolff barely mentions, had their man in place.

Although Wolff has a great deal of interest and importance to say, he has focused too heavily on Trump's personal shortcomings. His extensive

coverage of the Trump court, and on the contempt that he is held in by most of those who have worked for him in government, has led him to overestimate his vulnerability. While the Republicans in Congress stand by him, he is likely to be the Republican Presidential candidate in 2020 – one is tempted to say that this will happen no matter what he does or what comes to light. His success in maintaining the support of his base has been decisive in this regard.

A very different perspective on the Trump Presidency is served up by Jon Herbert, Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Wroe in their *The Ordinary Presidency of Donald J. Trump*. They argue, that far from Trump being the great disrupter who has captured the Republican Party, the evidence actually points to the Republican Party having 'coopted him'. As they put it:

'If one cuts away the outer layers of bluster, populist rhetoric and administrative chaos and instead examines the inner core of substantive policy achievements, this superficially disruptive representative of the American people looks like a pretty ordinary Republican.' (p. 67)

They certainly acknowledge the extent to which Trump himself is 'extraordinary'. The way he secured the Republican nomination and his campaign for the Presidency violated all the conventions of American electoral politics ('more outlandish and abnormal than any in American history'. (p. 51) His surviving the Access Hollywood tape – where he boasted of regularly sexually assaulting women – was certainly unprecedented and seems to have convinced him that he can get away with just about any criminality. And once in the White House, the new President spent 'between four and eight hours' watching television every day, focussing in particular on the coverage he was getting. Herbert and co. write of the 'especially close relationships', Trump has developed 'with Fox News and its hosts'. Indeed, we are told that there are some in the White House who describe Sean Hannity as his 'shadow Chief-of Staff'. What we have is a 'rather surreal presidency' where 'the most powerful man in the world spends hours each day watching Fox News covering him'. (pp. 110-111) On top of that, he is 'spectacularly ignorant on the details of most aspects of public policy'. He claims to be an expert on most things, indeed to be a genius, but can only answer 'policy questions with rambling, incoherent discussions that reveal only fragments of relevant information'. At the same time, he has shown no 'willingness to learn about policy', not even with regard to national security. (p. 139) The

greatest influence on his thinking is not official briefings, but 'Fox News and Sean Hannity'. As they put it:

'Fox's fierce ideological angle, its lack of factual fidelity, its sympathy for conspiracy theories and the style in which it covers news and politics combine with Trump's reluctance to absorb expert advice, meaning the president does not receive a balanced assessment of issues, or even a clear sense of what issues matter.' (pp. 140-141)

Nevertheless, they still insist that his is an 'ordinary' Presidency. Herbert and co. argue that when we come to look at the Trump administration's actual policy achievements, rather than at the bluster that emanates from the man himself, they are very much mainstream Republican. The 2017 tax cuts were 'the signature domestic policy achievement of Trump's first two years in office' (p. 6) and yet, far from being some populist triumph benefiting the 'little man', this measure 'protects the interests of big business and the wealthy at the expense of ordinary Americans'. It demonstrated that 'Trump is governing as a traditional Republican plutocrat, influenced by the same organized interests and economic ideology as his recent predecessors'. (p. 75) As Trump told his wealthy guests at Mar-a-Lago on the day he signed the tax bill: 'You all just got a lot richer'. (p 76) He actually commented on Twitter about how those multi-billionaire and major polluters, the Koch brothers 'love my Tax & Regulation Cuts [ . . . ] I made them richer'. (p. 77) At the same time as preaching right-wing populism at MAGA rallies across the country, he shamelessly courts the super rich in more salubrious venues. In December 2017, Trump made a speech at an event organised by Stephen Schwarzman of the Blackstone Group at 'Schwarzman's palatial Manhattan triplex'. (p. 86) Schwarzman, it is worth noting, was paid a modest \$799 million in 2015. Trump's super rich audience paid \$100,000 a head for a twenty minute speech from the great man. These private audiences with the super rich go unnoticed while his MAGA rallies garner massive media attention, especially from Fox News.

Far from 'draining the Swamp', Trump has made it deeper, wider, more foul smelling and disease-ridden, with his own family all the better placed to be able to both defecate into it and to drink from it. This is hardly surprising. What would have been astonishing is if the crooked businessman in the White House had proposed tax measures to the detriment of the super rich. Similarly with his administration's dismantling of the regulatory state, something that will impact on the health and well-being of millions of ordinary Americans, including many who voted for him, all for the benefit of big business. The roll back of regulation also

freed up the financial sector from the controls that were imposed to avoid a repeat of the 2008 Crash. As Herbert and co. point out, this is all mainstream Republicanism, implemented under a President who is constantly preaching a right-wing, anti-elite populism. Indeed, as far as anything that challenges 'Republican orthodoxy' goes, or that is in line with Trump's proclaimed 'populist and nationalist agenda', such measures remain 'largely unfulfilled and opposed by elites in his own party'. (p. 7) Trump's concern for American workers 'is largely verbal' and he has 'no experience of poverty or even a life less than wealthy'. His cabinet reflected the real concerns of his administration: it was 'the wealthiest cabinet in history'. Far from being a 'radical populist', Trump is, Herbert and co insist, 'an ordinary Republican'. (p. 87) This is true even with regard to his playing the race card and his vicious anti-immigrant stance. Trump is very much in line with traditional Republicanism: what is different is his style and relentless pursuit of these themes, rather than the content. More problematic is his trade policy and his readiness to fight trade wars, most notably with China. Here 'America First' does seem to have 'trumped' the concerns of the Republican establishment. And the same goes for his readiness to embrace deficit spending, with Republican politicians long committed to cutting the deficit now apparently unconcerned by its growth.

There is much to recommend the case put forward by Herbert, McCrisken and Wroe. They provide considerable detail to establish Trump's 'ordinariness', not least in their examination of who voted for him. They insist, for example, that 'there is no evidence of a large switch to Trump among the left-behind'. (p. 58). Their book is essential reading for anyone concerned with understanding the Trump phenomenon. Nevertheless, a good case can be made that they underestimate the importance of the criminality and corruption of Trump and his people for the future conduct of US government; criminality and corruption colluded in by the Republican establishment and altogether disappeared by Fox News. And, of course, there is the enormity of having a President who was installed in office with the assistance of the Putin regime: historians will undoubtedly see this as of considerable importance. He might not be the first President to be a compulsive liar, incredibly ignorant, semi-literate, incoherent, corrupt, a crook, even a rapist, but he is surely the first to be elected with the help of a hostile foreign power. And there is his impact on US culture made by the nexus of his rallies, Fox News' coverage of him and his own Twitter presence. Trump, as Herbert and co acknowledge, is engaged in continual campaigning, more concerned with keeping alive a Trumpist movement of adoring followers that flatters his

ego, than he is with actually governing. This movement is sustained by misogyny, racism, xenophobia and nationalism; by a harsh brutal rhetoric that has already resulted in serious lethal violence, with more to come before the game is finally played out. His 'America First' rhetoric has undoubtedly helped create a breeding ground for the Far Right in the USA. It has only been in the aftermath of the El Paso massacre that he has disassociated himself from these forces. Before El Paso he seemed actually quite happy to give them a covert endorsement. Once again, the likelihood is that historians will see this as an important feature of the Trump Presidency.

Trump's relationship with the US Far Right is the subject of Mike Cole's short book (140 pages for £40) *Trump, the Alt-Right and Public Pedagogies of Hate and for Fascism*. For Cole, the election of Trump, 'a ruthless sociopathic, racist, misogynist, disablest' was 'a quantum leap in the degeneracy of (especially American) capitalism . . . a massive lurch in the direction of fascism'. (p. 1) He writes of Trump's 'racist and fascist rhetoric' (p. 5), but in the end concludes that while he 'cannot be considered a fascist, he is "fascistic", in the sense of leaning towards fascism, being open to fascist ideas, defending fascists on the ground'. (p. 20). The man practices a 'public pedagogy of hate', the notion around which Cole organises his discussion. Cole identifies the Charlottesville episode of August 2017 as being 'a historical turning point in the development of fascism in the US', (p. 15) 'a milestone'. (p. 67) While Trump might not actually be a fascist, he is nevertheless engaged in attempting to normalize and promote fascism. As part of his evidence Cole refers to Trump's retweeting three anti-Muslim videos from 'British fascist group Britain First' (p. 40) and his tweeting of a quote from Mussolini ('It is better to live one day as a lion than 100 years as a sheep') – although it is possible that Trump has no idea who Mussolini was. Cole also briefly chronicles the rise of the neo-Nazi alt-right and the support that it has given to Trump, as well as looking at the opposition that 'the pedagogies of hate' have provoked. But while his is an extremely useful book, both informative and an important contribution to debate and discussion, how accurate is his diagnosis of a 'massive lurch towards mainstream fascism'?

One mistake that Cole makes is to look at the contemporary US Far Right from the perspective of 1920s and 1930s European fascism. A much better starting point would have been the various fascist organisations and movements that were formed in the USA in the 1930s. What becomes clear is that, while sections of the US capitalist class had no problem with using some of these groups against the labour movement,

they never had any intention of subordinating themselves to them. A strong fascist state, indeed a strong domestic state of any description, was never and is not now on the agenda of the US capitalist class. Fascism in the USA has a history distinct from that of European fascism.

Secondly, far from Charlottesville being a 'milestone' in the rise of American fascism, a good case can be made that from the alt-right's point of view their taking to the streets was premature. They were not strong enough to conquer the streets and Charlottesville actually demonstrated their weakness and lack of support, as well as giving their enemies plenty of warning of what they intended or hoped to eventually achieve. Trump has certainly had no problem with fascists, neo-Nazis and white supremacists supporting him, but they are definitely in a subordinate, supporting role. And his wholly insincere condemnation of racism, fascism and white supremacy in the aftermath of the 3 August 2019 El Paso massacre shows that even Trump will distance himself from the consequences of his rhetoric when politically necessary. While Trump clearly has a predilection for strong leaders, indeed seems positively envious of them, he is himself very much a comic opera authoritarian. These disagreements aside, Cole's book certainly deserves, indeed demands to be reprinted in a cheap paperback edition.<sup>2</sup>

The emergence of a mass Fascist movement in the United States cannot be ruled out if the conditions were right. A new deeper and more damaging economic crash, together with environmental catastrophe and mass migration from Central and South America, would seem to be essential components for such a development. In such circumstances, Trump's Presidency would certainly be seen as having helped prepare the way. One peculiarity of a mass American fascist movement would be that it would parade behind the Cross and proclaim its Christianity. This brings us to Stephen Strang's *Trump Aftershock*, the sequel to his best-selling *God and Donald Trump* (reviewed in *Lobster* 76). Indeed the new book actually includes a full-page photograph of Trump proudly waving Strang's earlier volume, presumably unread. Strang is already promising/threatening another volume in the New Year, *God, Trump and the 2020 Election: Why He Must Win and What's at Stake for Christians if He Loses*.

Here we enter an alternative universe, the world as seen by the evangelical Right, a crazed upside down place of demonic conspiracies. In this world, Fox News is 'the only channel offering a fair and balanced

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<sup>2</sup> He is also the author of *Theresa May, the Hostile Environment and Public Pedagogies of Hate and Threat* (Routledge, 2019), and although one is reluctant to wish it on anyone, he seems ideally placed to write a similar volume on Prime Minister Johnson.

picture of what's actually happening'. (p. 221) In this world, according to Strang, the Trump Presidency 'has exceeded all expectations', and this is despite the powerful demonic forces arrayed against him. (p. xv) The book actually has an Appendix chronicling the Trump Presidency's '500 DAYS OF AMERICAN GREATNESS'. (pp. 229-234) Indeed, so Christian in its achievements has the Trump Presidency been, Strang just cannot understand why the one in five evangelicals who did not vote for him in 2016 have not rallied to him since. They obviously do not know him. He is not the dissolute man he was, but is 'changed', has become God's instrument. And the forces trying to bring him down are terrifying. At their centre is the 'Hungarian billionaire György Schwartz, better known as George Soros'. (p. 22) He is not alone. There are an army of 'Far Left billionaires' that has been at work 'over the past fifteen years, buying newspapers, funding websites, and creating a phalanx of nonprofit advocacy groups to promote ultraliberal policies'. (p. 112) The people 'who hate Trump hate him only because he is standing up for the kind of values Christians believe are right'. In this world that Strang has invented, 'most of the billionaires are leftists, and they are investing their billions to promote ungodly agendas from abortion to LGBT issues to political policies such as open borders and socialism'. Strang thanks God that there are still some few billionaires 'who are examples of godly values. But they make up only a small fraction of US billionaires'. These people are waging 'spiritual warfare' against President Trump and have an 'insidious agenda that is demonic to its core'. George Soros is, inevitably, 'the undisputed ringleader of this globalist cabal'. (p. 118). In this universe, Hillary Clinton is inevitably cast as 'Jezebel'! (p. 132) And, of course, Trump has also taken a stand against the 'environmental extremists' with their fake warnings of global warming. (p. 222)

Not only has Trump handed over the federal judiciary (including the Supreme Court) to these people, he has also taken a stand against abortion. Even further, his moving of the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem powerfully resonated with their end of times theology. There is a peculiar irony in the evangelical support for Israel because, in their theology, it hastens Armageddon. That means that the great majority of Jews, those who refuse to convert, will soon be condemned to the everlasting torments of Hell along with the rest of us.

Strang repeats the evangelical claim that Trump is the new Cyrus the Great, a profane man chosen by God to do his will, a sort of holy sleight of hand that enables them to excuse all of his missteps. One does wonder, of course, what Cyrus's response would have been if anyone had compared him to someone like Trump in his day. He would have probably

given them a painful death. Still the analogy is meant as much to flatter Trump as it is to provide evangelicals with a theological justification for supporting him, no matter what. In Israel, the Mikdash Educational Center has actually minted a memorial coin with images of Trump and Cyrus 'to honor Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital', (p. 199) something also Strang celebrates. As for the way forward, Strang advocates the majority of the Palestinian population should be paid to leave the West Bank and that those who choose to remain should be given 'full rights of citizenship except the vote'. (p. 201) One problem that Strang will have to deal with sometime soon is Trump's attitude towards North Korea. As he quite correctly points out, the regime there has been a ferocious, indeed murderous, persecutor of Christians. Accordingly, he strongly supported Trump's confrontation with Kim Jong-un. What, one wonders, does he make of Trump's more recent bromance with the North Korean dictator, actually praising him as someone he had fallen in love with. Obviously some way will be found to explain this away and evangelical conservative support for Trump will survive. One cannot help thinking that the only thing that would compromise this support is if Trump announced that he was gay, was marrying Steve Bannon and that Melania Trump was having an abortion.

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