

The Last Trump?

Regime Change:

Inside the Imperial Presidency of Donald Trump

Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan

London: Simon and Schuster, 2026, £28, h/b

John Newsinger

On day 17 of the US-Israeli attack on Iran, Donald Trump sat down for an interview with the authors of this book. There were already thousands of Iranian dead, including 120 schoolgirls killed on the first day when a US missile hit their school. To Haberman and Swan's surprise, however, there was no map of the Middle East on Trump's desk, but instead 'printouts of maple trees'. As Trump told them: 'I know how to buy good trees. Maples'. Next, he showed them another printout with the headline screaming '339 billion all-time views' of Trump TikToks. 'Can you believe it?' the President asked. 'That's some numbers'. Lastly he showed them two printouts of the ballroom he is attempting to have built in the White House grounds. The war 'seemed the furthest thing from Trump's mind'. Eventually they got him talking about government policy and about the war, although he was, as they expected, 'digressive, boastful, charming, combative, veering from subject to subject'.

At the end, they tried to get him talking about what he saw as his place in history and he gave them a two-page document that had been written by an 'historian'. The document opened with a description of Trump as 'the most powerful man that the planet has ever known – by a long way', before going on to compare him with lesser figures like Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, William the Conqueror, Genghis Khan, Attila the Hun, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin and Mao. None of them had the power that he had! Indeed, Trump was an eagle, while compared to him, William the Conqueror 'was merely a sparrow'. They later found out the 'historian' who had written this document was, in fact, Gary Player's golf caddy. (pp. 408-411) This anecdote, on its own, tells us much about Trump, but what about the rest of the book?

Regime Change is an account of the first year of Trump's second term. It is essential reading, although the authors do seem torn between whether he is 'a clown' or 'a political superpower'. (p. xxvii) Nevertheless, they relentlessly

chronicle the grim story of this increasingly authoritarian and openly corrupt regime, erratically overthrowing both the international and the domestic order, according to the presidential impulse.

One very interesting dimension they spotlight is his embrace in his second term of the Tech Lords and their eagerness to reciprocate. As Haberman and Swan observe, 'few things pleased Trump as much as the giants of Big Tech grovelling before him'. He was, after all, a great believer in humiliating people. The Tech Lords were invited to pay homage to him in Mar-a-Lago where they had to sit through a version of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' performed by the so-called 'J6 Prison Choir', made up of 'twenty men detained for their alleged involvement in the attack on the Capitol'. Mark Zuckerberg, we are reminded, had banned Trump from Facebook and Instagram after the 6 January insurrection and now had to sit through this. (Trump also accepted 'roughly \$25 million' from Meta in compensation!) Weeks later, according to our authors, 'Trump was still regaling visitors with stories of how the tech titans were now "kissing my ass"'. He was passing round his iPhone showing people 'the ingratiating messages' he had received from the likes of Mark Zuckerberg and Jeff Bezos. (pp. 5, 8). In return, the tech lords got a Trump AI plan 'that amounted to a tech industry wish list'. (p. 263) And then there was Elon Musk. . .

According to Haberman and Swann, what had pushed Musk to the right and prepared the way for his embrace of Trump, was President Biden's pro-trade union stance. This outraged him. He went on to throw himself behind Trump in the 2024 election, giving up his business activities to devote himself to campaigning and in the process spending 'at least \$300 million . . . more on Trump than any single donor was known to have spent to elect an American President'. A crucial figure in managing Musk's rallying to the MAGA cause was White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller. In return, Musk was given the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to run. He promised to do to the federal government what he had done to Twitter – where he claimed to have sacked some 80% of the workforce – and to create a massive bonfire of regulations. The result was a disaster, with all constitutional niceties overthrown, increasing chaos and savings in federal expenditure that actually came nowhere near what was promised and even claimed. Musk's dismantling of USAID has already cost thousands of lives, not that either he or Trump care.

In the past such a blatant display of monumental incompetence would have led Republicans in Congress to take steps to bring the administration

under control, to rein in the President, but those days were gone. The Republican Party today is controlled by the MAGA movement and found itself bending to Trump's whims, even as it became increasingly clear that he was not fit for office. (pp. 42-44)

One other example of Trump in action is worth mentioning: his Oval Office meeting with the hard right-wing influencer and Islamaphobe, Laura Loomer. She told him about the traitors in his administration, giving him a list of names. An increasingly angry Trump demanded they all be immediately fired. In the event, 'without any inquiry, and solely on the word of an internet provocateur, six of the officials on Loomer's list would be fired in short order'. (p. 154) Inevitably, we are reminded of the official who, during Trump's first administration, described the White House as being like a care home where an elderly man was always 'running pantsless across the courtyard . . . as worried attendants try to catch him'. Today the attendants are no longer trying to catch him but are also running about pantsless and the elderly man is waving a gun!¹

Nevertheless, Republicans in Congress welcomed Trump 'as a godlike figure . . . and members competed to see who could pay him the most lavish respect'. Some of their crass grovelling 'would shock students of history'. My personal favourite is Representative Anna Paulina Luna of Florida who, in 2025, introduced legislation 'to commission the carving of Trump's face in granite at the Mount Rushmore National Memorial'.

Haberman and Swann also chronicle the fate of those Republicans who tried to stand up to Trump. They look at Senator Joni Ernst of Iowa, a survivor of sexual assault, the first female combat veteran to serve in Congress and certainly not a liberal in any sense of the word. She had concerns about Pete Hegseth's misogyny and fitness to be Secretary of Defence. As a result 'Trump's social media army came down hard on her and a dark money group associated with Elon Musk began running digital ads in Iowa encouraging people to press Ernst to vote for Hegseth'. She caved in but the abuse continued and 'less than a year later this senator who had been seen as a rising star in the party announced she would not run again'.

¹ 'Anonymous', *A Warning* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2019) pp. 90-91. 'Anonymous' was, in fact Miles Taylor who had worked in the Department of Homeland Security as a senior adviser. In September 2018 he had published an article, 'I Am Part of the Resistance inside the Trump Administration' in the *New York Times* and later in 2019 after resigning he published *A Warning*. In 2023 Taylor published another book, *Blowback: A Warning to Save Democracy from Trump's Revenge*. See my review in *Lobster* 89.

Haberman and Swann go on to tell us about Trump's 'social media army – Donald Trump Jr, Charlie Kirk, Steve Bannon, the right-wing influencer Jack Posobiec, and so many others – who had massive audiences and threatened any Republican who would consider voting against Trump's nominees'. (pp. 215, 219)

While Haberman and Swann provide a very useful account of Trump's first year in office, nevertheless a good case can be made that they have not fully grasped the significance of his embrace of authoritarianism. His complete disregard for constitutional niceties and continuing attempt to rule as some sort of dictator is more than a personality disorder. Trump and those around him, in particular Stephen Miller, are engaged in an attempt to undermine US liberal democracy with all its limitations and reshape the country as an authoritarian pseudo-democracy. Putin's Russia seems the most likely model. I suspect that Trump would love it if his critics began falling off tall buildings. This is not a far-fetched smear because Trump has shown how little he is bothered by killing in his attack on Iran, in the murderous blowing up of boats in the Caribbean and in the shootings perpetrated by ICE agents – the killing of Alex Pretti and Renee Good for example. And he still regularly sings the praises of his good friend North Korea's Kim Jong-un, envious of the way that his murderous regime orchestrates the public displays of devotion from a controlled media and cowed population.

The creation of the massive ICE paramilitary army is very much intended to provide foot soldiers in the event of popular resistance to this authoritarian ambition and the pardoning of the 6 January insurrectionists was another attempt to rally hardline support for the cause. Realising this authoritarian ambition has become all the more urgent because in the event of the Democrats winning control of Congress, Trump, his family and his associates face serious retribution, not least for their massive, indeed unprecedented corruption. The problem facing those trying to carry through this authoritarian project is that the figurehead whom they are championing is a lying, ignorant, incompetent narcissist, without any attention span, incapable of reading documents, and prone to tantrums.

At the very same time as he is trying to entrench his power, he is also pursuing policies making him increasingly unpopular, even with many of his own supporters. A good example of how his stupidity and his authoritarianism combine is provided by his response to the damage caused by bad workmanship with regard to the reflecting pool in Washington DC. His

continuing demand that the innocent David Hearn be prosecuted for causing the damage is a classic example of an authoritarian tantrum, although the process of embedding authoritarianism has not yet gone far enough for him to be able to pull it off. And we have not even mentioned the Epstein Files!

One important development in Trump's second term is his foreign policy. Whereas in his first term Trump had portrayed himself as an isolationist, rejecting foreign entanglements, in his second term, while distancing himself from many US allies, he has embraced overseas intimidation and aggression, both verbal and physical. A clear statement of the fact that his administration is not bound by international law and can kill whomever it likes is provided by the blowing-up of boats in the Caribbean on the claimed suspicion that they were smuggling drugs; not stopping and searching them and arresting the crew if drugs were found, but blowing them up regardless. On 2 September 2025, Trump boasted to a group of journalists that 'We just, over the last few minutes, literally shot out a boat, a drug-carrying boat, a lot of drugs on that boat'. Later on Truth Social, he posted a video of the boat exploding, exulting in the killing of eleven alleged smugglers. As Haberman and Swann point out, many journalists were sceptical that a boat carrying eleven people was smuggling drugs, but then it was later revealed that two men had survived the initial strike and were filmed clinging to wreckage, pleading for help. Whereupon 'Frank M Bradley, the three-star commander of the Joint Special Operations Command running the mission, had ordered additional strikes which killed them'. (pp. 323-324) Now to be fair, every US administration going back to the 1890s has murdered people, but the Trump administration does it on the President's whim and without any serious strategic motive behind the crime.

Trump's pathological narcissism is driving him to accomplish some great deed of overseas intimidation or aggression, not to advance US strategic interests, but to secure his place in history as the greatest president ever. This prompted his demands that the US be given Greenland, something that the tech lords are very much in favour of; and that Canada should become a US state. It is certainly a factor in the US blockade of Cuba and it remains to be seen whether this will eventually escalate into full-scale intervention. Most successful, of course, was US intervention in Venezuela and the kidnapping of Nicolas Maduro. This success, however, seems to have played a part in convincing Trump that a similar operation could be carried out against Iran. In this area, Haberman and Swann are very good at chronicling Trump's relationship with Benjamin Netanyahu. He had been 'enthralled' by the Israeli

covert operation against Hezbollah in the Lebanon, Operation Grim Beeper, exploding thousands of pagers and walkie-talkies on 17 and 18 September 2024. Estimates of the number of fatalities vary with 42 dead seeming the most likely figure, along with thousands injured, including many civilians, women and children. Trump was full of admiration and Netanyahu exploited this by presenting him with 'a gold-plated pager'! Later, Trump was to show this trophy to Elon Musk, who was fascinated by it. Trump told him 'horror stories of the destruction the explosions had wrought. He had seen pictures, he said. Mutilated genitals and missing hands . . . He seemed at once enthralled and horrified'. (pp. 70, 73-74) This led on to Trump wanting to take over Gaza so that he could turn it into the 'Riviera of the Middle East', an idea that, as Haberman and Swann point out, 'represented the spur-of-the-moment nature of Trump's foreign policy that many had feared'. And in September 2025, Trump established his comic Board of Peace.

Most important, however, is the way that Trump was inveigled into launching a joint attack with the Israelis on Iran, a war that has been both a strategic disaster and a national humiliation for the United States, as well as being deeply unpopular among many of Trump's supporters. Even within the administration, the likes of J D Vance were opposed to the adventure. At the time of writing, Trump has threatened to bomb Oman, a US ally, and has declared his intention to annex the Strait of Hormuz. The scale of the incompetence on display will hopefully help undermine the administration's authoritarian ambitions, but we shall see. One last point is worth making here: all this was not just a result of the influence of Israel and its supporters, because Saudi Arabia, Israel's covert ally, was also very much involved; and the Saudi regime has the money and the Trumps love money.

What happens in the United States has repercussions throughout the world, not just in terms of economic impacts or the danger of war, but also because of the boost Trump and the MAGA movement have given to the far right everywhere. Haberman and Swann have written an indispensable volume, required reading for those interested in US politics and the challenges that confront us all.

John Newsinger is a retired academic.

His latest book is *Chosen by God:*

Donald Trump, the Christian Right and American Capitalism,
published by Bookmarks. <<https://bookmarksbookshop.co.uk/>>

