

## **Gone but not forgotten . . .**

### *UnPresided:*

*Politics, pandemics and the race that Trumped all others*

Jon Sopel

BBC Books, 2021, £20.00, h/b

### *The Useful Idiot:*

*How Donald Trump Killed the Republican Party with Racism, and the Rest of Us with Coronavirus, And Why aren't We Done With Him Yet?*

S V Date

Self-published, 2021, ISBN-13: 979-8711544289, \$17.99, p/b

### *Bearing Witness To America's Worst president:*

*Essays on the Trump Disaster*

Ray Smock

Self-published, 2020, ISBN-13: 979-8669189563, \$17.95, p/b

### *The Room Where It Happened:*

*A White House Memoir*

John Bolton

London: Simon and Schuster, 2020, £25.00, h/b

### *Hatemonger:*

*Stephen Miller, Donald Trump, and the White Nationalist Agenda*

Jean Guerrero

New York: William Morrow, 2020, \$28.99, h/b

## **John Newsinger**

**I**n the 2020 Presidential election, Donald Trump received the second highest vote in the history of US presidential elections. Incredibly, more than 74 million Americans voted for a crooked, lying, bullying, incompetent, misogynist, racist and authoritarian con-man. He got considerably more votes than he did when he won in 2016. Only a record turnout and Joe Biden's 81 million votes kept Trump from a second term. What the result dramatically indicates is how deeply and bitterly divided the United States is today. The subsequent storming of the Capitol,

together with Trump's claim that the election was rigged and that he in fact won in 2020, very much suggests that the assault on US constitutional democracy that Trump was carrying out while in office is going to continue regardless. Inevitably comparisons with Weimar Germany come to mind. There are neo-Nazi militias (thankfully few in number at the moment) openly parading in the US; the Republican Party seems wholeheartedly committed to a racist voter suppression campaign across the country; the Christian right are firmly entrenched in the federal judiciary; and Trump has invented his very own 'Stab in the Back' myth. Just as the myth that Germany lost the First World War because of the 'stab in the back' on the Home Front was used to delegitimize and destabilise the Weimar Republic, so Trump's obsession about the 'Stolen Election' is being used in the same way today. It seems clear that much of Trump's post-election posturing is primarily intended both to protect him and his family from prosecution for a variety of crimes and to help fleece his supporters, to raise millions of dollars for his personal benefit. Whether that remains the case, however, depends very much on how the political and economic situation develops. If there is another economic collapse with a hung Congress, all bets are off. But whatever the outcome, Trump and his MAGA movement remain a significant force in US politics. In the circumstances, the tidal wave of books chronicling his presidency is only to be expected. Here we look at a number of recent volumes. Let us start with Jon Sopel's new volume, *UnPresidential*.

*'It's a formidable achievement'*

**S**opel, the BBC's North American editor, is already the author of two of the worst journalistic accounts of the Trump years, *If Only They Didn't Speak English* and *A Year at the Circus*.<sup>1</sup> These two resolutely mediocre volumes show how the BBC's conservative even-handedness makes it unable to deal seriously with the likes of Trump and the MAGA movement. What of *UnPresidential*? This takes the form of a diary chronicling the presidential election campaign. He starts out very much in awe of Trump and his achievements. With regard to the failed impeachment of Trump over his attempt to pressure the Ukrainians into helping discredit Biden, Sopel quite correctly puts it down to 'the complete and total grip that this president has on the Republicans in the House and the Senate'. He goes on: 'never has a party been so cowed – so owned – by its president. The Republican party is now a wholly owned subsidiary of Trump enterprises.'

---

<sup>1</sup> I reviewed *A Year at the Circus* in *Lobster* 79 at <https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster79/lob79-reporting-trump.pdf>.

It's a formidable achievement'. (pp. 33-34) 'A formidable achievement'! It would certainly have resulted in the impeachment of any previous president – except perhaps Ronald Reagan. Is Soper's response really the right one when a president clearly demonstrates a determination to stay in office by any means necessary? And when Trump turned on his national security adviser, John Bolton, for potentially blowing a hole in his lying defence, how does Soper respond? 'You have to give it to Trump – when it comes to invective on Twitter, boy, can he deliver'. (p. 31)

Soper's 4 February 2019 diary entry discusses Trump's State of the Union address which contained 'plenty of red meat' for his base. There was 'the award to Limbaugh, tough talk on gun rights and clamping down on abortion. Strong words on immigration, promises to defeat socialism' – that is the Democrats. What really impresses Soper, however, is Trump's apparent reach-out to 'the African American community'. This, he argues, had nothing whatsoever to do with African American voters, but was rather an attempt to win back the 'white college-educated women' who had voted for him in 2016, but whose support he had since lost. They had come to regard him as 'a racist, a misogynist' and his address was really intended to appease them. This was, according to Soper, 'clever'. He has nothing to say about whether or not Trump actually is a racist and a misogynist. That is clearly beyond the BBC remit, but he can admire his cleverness. Indeed, that week, which also saw his impeachment fail, was 'Donald Trump's best week since moving into the White House'. (pp. 43-44) The impeachment vote showed that had 'total control of all the levers in the Republican Party. This was now his party. They now march to Donald Trump's raucous and unconventional tune.' The party of Lincoln now belongs to Trump and the Republicans in Congress are 'the servants of Trump'. Trump is 'unquestionably in charge. Chaotic and noisy it may be, but he's bloody formidable'. (pp. 49-50) This goes beyond even-handedness; Soper time and again appears to indicate that he actually admires Trump!

Before moving on, it is worth considering Soper's account of an interview he had with Steve Bannon. He found the man 'charming . . . well-read', someone with 'a sense of history'. He notes Bannon's attempts to 'evangelise his message of right-wing populism across Europe' with right-wing populism being BBC shorthand for racist, islamophobic, homophobic authoritarianism. While Bannon joked about Trump's shortcomings before the interview, during the interview he mounted 'a straight down the line defence of the President'. And, as Soper observes, Bannon made 'a persuasive case about the need for a wall'. This interview

provoked an extremely hostile response, with Soper being accused of being 'an enabler of fascism, a racist lickspittle'. The BBC were making Bannon's political views 'respectable and bringing them into the mainstream'. (pp. 7-9) He mounts a predictable free speech defence along with the argument that Bannon's political views are today very much mainstream. The idea that authoritarian right-wing politics have to be fought never even occurs to him. It is not his job. His job is to report and that is it. One thing he does not seem to have asked Bannon about is his relationship with Boris Johnson. Johnson has done his best to keep this quiet, while Bannon is quite happy to boast of the advice he gave Johnson, indeed to use the relationship for self-promotion. Soper's attitude to Johnson is also very revealing regarding his mindset. He knows Johnson, has interviewed him many times and always found him 'infectiously . . . good company . . . Whatever charisma is, Boris has got it'. He could 'be a rogue and opportunistic . . . but he won the election decisively, he does seem to have a plan . . . and he is *our* prime minister'. (p. 94) One can only hope that he isn't tempted to follow-up the success of his Trump books with a trilogy on Johnson! To be fair to Soper, however, he does express incredulity at the British government's incompetent response to the pandemic, even though he is certainly not 'anti-government . . . I am desperate for the Bojo administration to succeed'. (pp. 126-127) Johnson, it is worth noting here, has a long history of trying to import the hard-line Republican culture wars agenda into Britain. This goes right back to his time as editor of the *Spectator*, something that has been pretty much ignored by commentators. His government is pushing this agenda extremely aggressively today and, of course, they now have the support of a TV news channel, GB News, which has the same objective.

What quite dramatically changes Soper's attitude towards Trump is his response to the pandemic. On 26 February 2020, he actually writes that 'coronavirus feels like it is changing everything'. (p. 55) Suddenly, the very aspects of Trump's conduct that only a short while before appeared 'formidable' now seem to be narcissistic stupidity that is costing thousands of lives. And to his credit, Soper makes absolutely clear that those who are dying are disproportionately black and poor. As he puts it: 'The figures are startling. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin – so far – nearly three quarters of those who've died are black, but they represent just a quarter of the residents in the city.' (p. 94) It is the same across the whole country. Instead of admiration, Soper increasingly seems to regard Trump with almost open contempt. He describes the famous Trump press

conference where, among other things, he advocated injecting disinfectant as a cure for Covid. It was like 'open mic night at Trump University medical school, junior common room'. Soper's 'head is spinning . . . I honestly think I've misheard'. He acknowledges that in the past Trump might sometimes have 'been insensitive. He's been a bit sexist, or perceived to be a bit racist. But tonight he's said something off the scale dumb'. (p. 107) Leaving aside the 'been a bit sexist' and 'perceived to be a bit racist', this is a remarkable development. Then comes George Floyd's murder on 25 May 2020. Coming after and overlapping with the disgust at Trump's response to Covid, Soper shows dismay turning to anger – not only at the police's killing of a black man but also at how Trump did his best to exploit the outrage it provoked for his own advantage. This, together with the inexorably rising Covid death toll, actually seems to overwhelm Soper's staunch BBC sensibilities. The book actually becomes worth reading.

Trump, according to Soper, responded to the George Floyd murder by deciding to fight the Presidential election on 'culture wars issues', turning it into a 'culture wars confrontation'. (p. 175) One episode in this confrontation particularly outraged him. On 1 June he threatened retribution against Black Lives Matter protestors and even while he was speaking 'you could hear muffled thuds and bangs being picked up by his microphone'. This was the sound of the police and other agencies driving away 'a crowd of peaceful protestors across from the White House with stun grenades, rubber bullets and tear gas'. These were peaceful, respectable people, 'the Whole Foods crowd . . . the US equivalent of Waitrose or M&S', protesting against racism, being brutalised as the police went in with 'batons flailing'. All this so Trump could march out of the White House once he had ended his press conference and pose outside a church holding a Bible, in an attempt to look both tough and Christian. Soper writes with outraged incredulity: 'innocent protestors exercising their First Amendment rights' were 'tear-gassed and rubber-bulleted out of the way' for 'a photo op pure and simple', featuring a 'steely-jawed president'. He cannot think of anything else that Trump has done that comes even near this for 'sheer brazenness'. And there was not even one 'off-white face' there: 'What a photo-call of white power this was at a time when the African American community is hurting'. (pp. 145-146)

One other episode is worth noticing here and that is Trump's tweets of 17 April 2020 where he 'in effect, called for insurrection against three Democratic-run states: Minnesota, Virginia and Michigan'. This was just Trump chucking his base 'some red meat', Soper assumed at the time, but

even so it was '(b)loody dangerous and irresponsible'. (pp. 103-104) Exactly how dangerous was shown some six months later when he records the arrest of '13 men who were part of a right-wing militia', the Wolverine Watchmen, who planned to kidnap and put on trial the Democratic Governor of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer. And this was only a week after Trump had told the neo-fascist Proud Boys to 'stand back and stand by' during a debate with Joe Biden. (pp. 282-283) The storming of the Capitol building on 6 January 2021 should certainly not have come as a surprise.

*'America, we got lucky'*

**S**hirish Date, a White house correspondent for *Huffpost*, really 'did not want to write this book', but the threat posed by Trump, his enablers and his supporters posed forced him to do so. In 35 years working as a journalist he had never seen 'anything as ridiculous yet also as terrifying as that man and that White House'. He was probably 'the most ignorant, least emotionally stable, most openly corrupt and most cheerfully dishonest president' ever, certainly in the last century. (pp. x-xi) The first edition of his *The Useful Idiot* was published in 2020, but in the six months since he finished writing it 'Trump took everything he had been doing over the first three and a half years of his presidency and ramped it all the way up. The corruption became more brazen, the irresponsibility even more breathtaking and the lying simply went off the charts'. And now, of course, with the pandemic the character of his administration was actually costing lives – first thousands, then tens of thousands and finally hundreds of thousands of lives. What Date finds deeply disturbing is that despite all this even more Americans, in fact eleven million more, voted for Trump in 2020 than did in 2016. Many were seemingly prepared to see liberal democracy effectively overthrown in order to keep him in the White House. America, he insists 'got lucky'. Trump's incompetence fortunately extended to his attempts at 'transforming our country into a fascist autocracy'. Bad as the years of the Trump Presidency were, 'it could have been worse'. Fortunately, 'Trump had zero capacity for strategic thinking, no interest in learning from his mistakes, a non-existent attention span' so that his attempts to steal the 2020 election, including 'the deadly QAnon Coup attempt of January 6', failed. Trump thankfully 'was inept, and terrible at implementing his impulses'. (pp. 20-21) The revised edition of *The Useful Idiot* certainly repays reading.

How did someone like Trump ever get to become US president? He was certainly not the choice of the Republican establishment, but as Date insists they were in the main not the slightest bit concerned about his

ignorance, his lying, his incompetence as long as he could win them the presidency. In fact, they regarded him as a 'useful idiot' who enabled them to get 'the regulatory rollbacks, the tax cuts, the right-wing judges they had always dreamed of'. This was all that mattered. For the emerging far right was embodied, as far as Date is concerned, by Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller (and they get a chapter to themselves). For those proto- and neo-fascists – Trump's major achievement was returning open racism to the political mainstream. The election of Obama had outraged many Americans and this was one of the factors that fed in to support for Trump. By the time of the Black Lives Matter protests, Trump had presided over 'the most stunning display of open racism in national politics in nearly five decades', since George Wallace had run for the Presidency in 1968. And for the Christian Right his judicial appointments promised to 'bring back 1950s America', a white America where women knew their place and gay rights were unheard of. (pp. 6, 53). We shall return to the Christian Right.

Another interested party was the Russian government. Date makes the point that covert Russian intervention was almost certainly one of the factors that helped elect Trump in 2016, given how close the contest was in a number of states. In Pennsylvania, Trump only won by 44,292 votes, in Michigan by 10,704 and in Wisconsin by 22,748 – less than a percentage point in each state. Russian interference might well have been enough to tip the scale and swing those states, giving Trump his Electoral College majority despite his losing the popular vote by nearly 3 million. Putin certainly never believed that Trump would actually win but wanted to weaken the US in any way he could. Once Trump was installed he got a bigger reward than he could ever have imagined with a president who, over the next four years, seriously weakened the American position in the world and seriously damaged the US system of alliances, not least NATO. Moreover, Trump was on numerous occasions openly sympathetic to Russia and admiring of Putin, even to the extent of 'siding with Russia's dictator over his own intelligence agencies'. (p. 58) Hitherto this would have been completely unthinkable, completely unacceptable to Republicans who would, without any doubt, have denounced such a president as a traitor. Instead, Trump's subservience to Russia 'has ended Republicans' claim to be the party of national security'. (p. 140)

What of the Christian Right? As Date makes clear, while the right-wing white evangelicals today claim that it was the issue of abortion that led to their entry into politics, this is just a myth. It was the ending of segregation, in particular the integration of schools, that provoked them

to organise and led to them becoming a major influence within the Republican Party. In this way, their concerns overlapped with those of the far right. Trump promised to fill the federal judiciary with their people and they celebrated him as having been sent by God. The sheer obscenity of this notion sometimes makes it hard to take it seriously this side of the Atlantic, but we have to. There is nothing comparable to the US Christian Right in the UK's political experience (outside of Northern Ireland) but millions of devout Americans seriously believe that Trump won the Presidency because of divine intervention; and, moreover, that this miracle was foretold in prophecy. Date scores a somewhat cheap point by asking that if God installed Trump, what was he doing when Obama was elected – twice? The answer is, of course, obvious: Obama was installed by Satan. Right-wing evangelicals believe that a battle for America's soul has been going on for decades. They hold that demonically-inspired secularist liberals are trying to bring Christian America down and usher in the reign of the Anti-Christ. Whatever his faults, the evangelicals say, Trump is God's chosen champion in this war. One consequence of this is that remarkably, while polling halfway through his Presidency showed that 'pretty much every single demographic group in the country disapproved of Trump. Blacks, Latinos, Asian-Americans, Catholics, Jews, college-educated white people', there was 'one notable exception: white evangelical Christians'. As Date puts it: those Americans who regard themselves as 'more moral than everybody else constituted the only group . . . who continued to support *the* most amoral man, if not the most actively immoral, to occupy the Oval Office in modern times'. (pp. 153, 155). One other important point that he makes is that many on the Christian Right also admire Putin for once again making Russia a 'Christian' country, obviously in the worst possible sense of the word. (p 157)

Which brings us to the pandemic. Trump showed how dangerous he could be in a potential crisis when on 1 September 2019 he warned that Alabama was one of the states threatened by Hurricane Dorian. It wasn't. He had made a mistake, but instead of admitting it, he insisted he was right for the next ten days, actually demanding that 'his entire administration join him in this Orwellian double-think exercise'. Most famously, he even appeared on TV touting a clumsily amended Hurricane Centre forecast map, almost certainly changed by the president himself with his own sharpie. This was not an episode without consequences because his mistake that quickly became a lie had the potential for causing panic, with preparations for the arrival of the Hurricane involving



mass evacuation and other measures. As Date observes, Trump's people rallied round their man, shrugging off his behaviour as 'that's just Trump'. (pp. 193-194) The so-called 'Sharpiegate' episode demonstrated such colossal stupidity as to defy belief. But now comedy was to become tragedy. Such extraordinary, lying incompetence and irresponsibility was to cost hundreds of thousands of American lives when the pandemic gripped the country.

An incredulous Date records how on 23 April 2020 'The president of the United States suggested that people inject disinfectants into their lungs'. This was at a time when Covid was killing 'more than a thousand Americans a day'. And this was nowhere near the worst thing that the Trump administration did during the pandemic; indeed it might even have been a good thing because it showed how unfit the man was 'to be in that job'. Trump displayed 'incompetence bordering on criminal malfeasance'. Indeed, there can be no doubt whatsoever that his continued campaigning killed people. The Tulsa rally of 20 June 2020, for example, certainly contributed to a tripling of the number of daily Covid cases in Oklahoma over the subsequent thirty days and may well have cost the life of multi-millionaire Herman Cain, a resolute face mask refuser and chair of Black Voices for Trump. Date estimates that Trump's incompetence caused 'two hundred thousand deaths, at least'. (pp. 202, 215, 241) But the president had become bored by the whole crisis by the end of April and was wholly focussed on holding on to power. Despite everything, Date is terrified by the prospect that he might return or even that someone worse, a competent authoritarian, might become US president in the future.

### 'This Trump Virus'

**R**ay Smock was the Historian of the US House of Representatives from 1983 until 1995 and from 2002 until 2018 was the director of the Robert C Byrd Centre for Congressional History. His *Bearing Witness* volume is the third collection of commentary on the progress of the Trump Presidency, all three self-published.<sup>2</sup> Like the earlier volumes, it is written looking through history's window, bearing witness to the enormity of the danger that Donald Trump posed to both America and the world. Like the previous two volumes, it is written with a mixture of incredulity, outrage

---

<sup>2</sup> The earlier volumes were *Trump Tsunami: A Historian's Diary of the Trump Campaign and His First Year in Office* and *American Demagogue: Critical Essays on the Trump Presidency*. The volume under review includes a number of essays from the earlier two.

and anger; and this was before the storming of the Capitol. He lays his cards on the table in the book's Introduction:

'I never expected the United States of America to elect a man so totally unqualified, so mentally unstable, so crooked, and so dangerous to the well-being of our government and the national security of the United States. While we have had some presidents who have failed miserably in office, we never had one that had a long career of fraud and deceit before being elected. We elected a crime boss who has no common decency.' (p. xii)

What he has trouble comprehending is that millions of people voted for this man and still support him. Smock's account is noteworthy for his concern for the climate catastrophe that is beginning to transform our planet and Trump's role in opposing attempts to respond to this global crisis.

As far as Smock is concerned there can be no doubt whatsoever that Trump was working for the Russians while he was president. The only question is whether he was aware of this. 'Trump', he writes, 'may not even comprehend that he has acted as a tool of the Russian government. He sees Russia as a cash cow. I do not think national security concerns ever entered Trump's head. He was and is thinking about personal riches from Russia . . . He likes the exotic thrills of a country where the rich and powerful don't have to play by the rules and laws of the United States. He sees himself as the American version of an unfettered Russian oligarch . . . He has a natural affinity for Russia. Russia treats him nice'. (p. 9) And this is quite a convincing argument. What we have is not a deliberate calculated conspiracy, something that Trump is not really capable of, but rather the Russians covertly supporting Trump and manipulating his affinity with – and liking for – Putin's Russia. Certainly there can be no question regarding Trump's admiration for Putin and sympathy for Russia; what remains to be uncovered is the ways in which the Russian state made use of this.

Smock also sees 'Sharpiegate' as a particularly telling episode. What started out as 'another of his minor gaffes' became a major incident with Trump demanding that his mistake become official policy. To this end, Trump falsified an official weather map, something that normally carries 'a penalty of a ninety days in jail'. But as 'the president is above the law while he is in office, he cannot be indicted for this crime'. And when the Alabama office of the National Weather Service issued a statement making clear that Hurricane Dorian would not impact the state, 'Trump

had a fit'. The president actually phoned the top officials at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration who then instructed the National Weather Service not to respond to the president's tweets. While this might seem to be 'a tempest in a teapot', Smock, writing in early September 2019, makes clear it indicated what a 'disaster' this man was. He was thinking at this time of Trump's response to global warming ('He fiddles while the climate burns'), but the pandemic was to demonstrate the point much more immediately. (pp. 83-84) As far as Smock was concerned, America was already suffering from 'a serious political virus' when the pandemic arrived. 'Trumpism was spread from person to person with lies, deception, propaganda, and with bullying and smear tactics'. Trump's rallies were important spreaders of the infection. As a 'disease of the mind', it could also be spread by Fox News and by right-wing radio stations. And those 'who caught the disease proudly wore red hats to prove they had it'. (p. 145). As if this was not bad enough there was the Covid pandemic and America found itself reliant on a lying, ignorant, incompetent crook whose only concern was to secure re-election. (Smock's indictment of the administration's handling of the crisis could just as easily apply to the Boris Johnson government's response.) Rather than the federal government using its powers to mobilise resources to fight the virus, it was used as 'a back-up to private enterprise and its profits'. (p. 176) Smock identifies Jared Kushner as one of the principle architects of this ideologically driven incompetence. Of course, the high or low point of Trump's response, the 'defining moment' in 'the Era of Pandemonium', was the president discovering 'that disinfectant kills the virus . . . Maybe injecting the right kind of disinfectant might kill the thing'. (pp. 184-185) At the time of writing the US death toll from the pandemic has just exceeded 600,000 people.

Smock is also outraged by the way Trump has consistently done his best to stoke up anti-immigrant sentiment and racism. Much of this he blames on Stephen Miller whom he describes as Trump's 'Darth Vader'. At his February 2020 State of the Union address, Trump awarded the Presidential Medal of Honour to the right-wing radio broadcaster, Rush Limbaugh, 'the most controversial act ever conducted during a State of the Union address'. He compares Limbaugh to Father Coughlin, 'the first radio demagogue' whose audience at its height was some 30 million listeners and who was openly sympathetic to fascism in the 1930s. Limbaugh had made himself 'Trump's mouthpiece' and had been energetically going after Joe Biden's son, Hunter. This gesture was Trump showing his racist supporters that he stood with them even though the

address, as we have already seen, made some gestures towards African Americans. Smock's outrage is palpable: 'For a racist president to come into the House of Representatives and give a racist, misogynous, radio broadcaster who has been a leading voice in the nation for the past 30 years this high honour was as low as it can get. Until he finds a way to go lower'. (pp. 141-143) And, of course, he went considerably lower with his incitement of an attack on Congress on 6 January 2021.

More generally, the Trump Presidency has 'opened even wider the racial wounds of the past' even while both the president and his cabinet have 'declared that they did not believe the United States suffers from systemic racism'. Once again, the similarity with the Johnson government is obvious. In fact, as far as Smock is concerned, what is manifesting in America is 'a new version of Jim Crow'; and this was before the Republicans' current attempts at strengthening voter suppression in state after state. For Smock, the fight against 'the pandemic of racism that has kept the United States unhealthy for centuries' is unending. What gives him heart is that the murder of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter have produced 'mass protests for racial justice in the United States and Europe' even during the pandemic. He fervently hopes that Trump will 'go down in history as the last racist ever to occupy high office in the United States'. (pp. 205-208) Indeed, Smock just cannot believe that Trump's conduct in so many areas has not finally 'stripped away all the hidden things that made him appeal to 60 million Americans'. Writing on 5 August 2019, he hoped that millions of those who voted for Trump in 2016 had seen and heard enough not to vote for him again (remember this is before the Covid catastrophe) and he somewhat uneasily predicted that Trump would lose by a 'landslide'. (p. 81) If Smock is wrong about the possibility that Trump voters might be swayed away from him by a dose of reality, he might have to re-examine his understanding of America's narrative.

Two last points. As an official historian, Smock raises the interesting question of how scholars charged with editing Trump's papers are going to cope with the task. How will they deal with Trump's tweets for example? This cannot be avoided because so many policy announcements were made on Twitter. How will they deal with Trump's atrocious spelling? Smock has great fun considering the problems future scholars will face. And how will they deal with what he confidently expects will be Trump's systematic destruction of all record of his crimes in office. This was made illegal after Nixon, but no one seriously expects Trump to take any notice of that. (pp. 60-64) On a more serious note, Smock assesses what history's verdict is likely to be on Trump's presidency. What he will be

remembered for is his failure to address the climate catastrophe. This is all that will matter. A few generations down the road, he will be remembered for having dismissed global warming as 'a hoax . . . For the rest of human history, Trump will be nothing but a tragic Nero-like fool responsible for the utter failure of the United States to act against a threat that makes the horrors of 9/11 pale to a minor footnote'. Indeed, while Nero fiddled, Trump has been 'playing with himself as the earth begins to burn'. He goes on: 'Global warming should be the topmost priority with both political parties, the governors of all fifty states, and every corporation in America and the world'. (pp. 15-16)

*'The most irrational thing I ever witnessed any president do'*

**J**ohn Bolton's memoir of his time as Trump's National Security Advisor, *The Room Where It Happened*, is a relentlessly self-serving volume. He confidently expected to be invited to join the administration right from the start, hoping to be Secretary of State, but had to wait until April 2018. If only he had been brought on board at the very beginning then everything could have been different. He could have educated Trump, channelled his impulses and prejudices in constructive directions and got the new administration up and running. Instead, by doing their best to thwart Trump, the so-called 'axis of adults' had only made things worse. Trump became suspicious of all advice so that he always 'remained stunningly uninformed on how to run the White House'. (p. 2) By the time Bolton came on board, it was already too late because Trump did not trust anyone. This is totally unconvincing, but regardless of that his experience of the Trump presidency still throws some interesting light both on Trump and on Bolton himself.

Bolton is a hardline, right-wing Republican. He first got involved in politics in 1964, campaigning for Barry Goldwater and he was one of the architects of the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. He was a staunch advocate of regime change as a US strategy and was particularly exercised about Iran and the improvement in Iran's strategic position that resulted from the Iraq War. As far as he was concerned, the conflict in the Middle East could have been resolved if the United States had only moved on to deal with Syria and Iran after occupying Iraq. He took office as Trump's National Security Advisor determined to persuade Trump to deal with Iran, to bring about regime change. The first step was to end US support for the international agreement regarding the Iranian nuclear programme that had been concluded in July 2015. As far as he was concerned the deal was 'badly conceived, abominably negotiated and drafted, and entirely advantageous to Iran'. (p. 19) Interestingly, in a rare

display of naivety, when he met the then British Foreign Secretary, one Boris Johnson, who told him he 'fully understood the existing deal's weaknesses', he actually believed the words that came out of Johnson's mouth! As it was, it took him a month to persuade Trump 'to shred the Iran nuclear deal, showing how easy it was to do once somebody took events in hand'. There was still a lot to be done in order 'to bring Iran to its knees, or to overthrow the regime', but 'we were off to a great start'. (pp. 73-74) This seems to have been Bolton's only real success.

Trump's policy, if that is the right word, regarding North Korea, left him cold. When Trump received a letter from Kim Jong Un, describing it as 'a wonderful letter . . . a really nice letter', he and John Kelly, Trump's Chief of Staff, thought the letter might have been 'written by Pavlovians who knew exactly how to touch the nerves enhancing Trump's self-esteem'. He told Trump that Kim was 'the dictator of a rat-shit little country', but to no avail. And they had a real problem with Trump's 'relentless desire to withdraw US military assets from the Korean peninsula'. (p. 125) On top of that there was Trump threatening to both wreck and withdraw from NATO and his decision to withdraw US forces from Syria. The Syrian withdrawal, Bolton writes, was 'a personal crisis for me. [. . .] a huge mistake, because of both the continuing global threat of ISIS and the fact that Iran's substantial influence would undoubtedly grow'. (p. 194) Trump's biggest mistake, though, was with regard to US retaliation for the Iranian downing of a US Global Hawk drone in June 2019. Trump called off a retaliatory strike because someone had convinced him it would be disproportionate, resulting in many Iranian fatalities. Bolton describes this as 'the most irrational thing I ever witnessed any president do'. (p. 403) This obviously tells us as much about Bolton as it does about Trump. And this was the same president, who according to Bolton, was continually pushing for military intervention in Venezuela and the takeover of the country's oil industry. Trump apparently thought it would be 'cool' to invade Venezuela. (p. 225) Bolton preferred overthrowing the regime by assisting its domestic opponents.

Bolton reports various conversations he had with Chief of Staff John Kelly regarding Trump. On one occasion, Kelly asked him: 'Has there ever been a presidency like this?' Bolton assured him that there had not. (p. 225) Another time, Kelly was complaining about the 'shit' he had to take from Trump. 'What if we have a real crisis like 9/11 with the way he makes decisions?' Kelly asked him. (p. 232) What indeed! Meetings with the ignorant and yet opinionated Trump, that were supposed to discuss security issues, time and again degenerated into rambling diatribes that

Bolton, Kelly and Mike Pompeo did their best to contain. Trump's intelligence briefings were a joke. He only had two a week 'and in most of those, he spoke at greater length than the briefers, often on matters completely unrelated to the subjects at hand'. (p. 224) Bolton makes clear that it was always a problem to get Trump 'to focus . . . strategically'. (p. 380) Part of the problem was his colossal ignorance often put on public display in the most embarrassing fashion – such as the time he was surprised to discover that Britain had nuclear weapons. This was in front of the then British Prime Minister Theresa May. And then there was 'Trump's penchant to, in effect, give personal favors to dictators he liked, such as the criminal cases of Halkbank, ZTE, potentially Huawei, and who knew what else'. (p. 458) Which brings us to Putin and Russia.

Bolton admits he was not looking forward to having Putin 'alone in a room with Trump' at the July 2018 meeting in Helsinki. He regarded the 'entire summit as one massive exercise in damage control'. The two men had a nearly two hour, one-on-one meeting. The US interpreter, who Trump prohibited from taking any notes of the discussion, subsequently revealed that Putin had done 90% of the talking with Trump just sitting there listening. This was hardly Trump's normal behaviour and Bolton was relieved that the meeting ended without Trump making any concessions to Putin, 'no real change in substantive foreign policy'. Then came the press conference where Trump notoriously made clear that he accepted Putin's denial of any Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, accepting Putin's denial over the conclusions of the 'US intelligence community'. Both Kelly and Bolton 'were almost frozen to our seats by Trump's answer'. One of the US officials in attendance, Fiona Hill, has since admitted that she thought the press conference such a disaster that she seriously considered setting off the fire alarm to bring it to an end. As far as Bolton was concerned 'Putin had to be laughing uproariously at what he had gotten away with in Helsinki'. (pp. 157-158) But what about the sanctions that the US was to impose on Russia? According to Bolton, Trump was invariably opposed to them even though when it suited him, he would tout them 'as major achievements'. (p. 180) As for Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential election, Bolton seems to have had no doubt whatsoever that it had taken place and had even called it 'an "act of war" against our constitutional structures'. (p. 174)

Two last issues. Bolton has been criticised for his part in weakening the US response by closing down the office of the National Security Council responsible for overseeing the federal government's response to pandemics. Bolton has responded by minimising the effect of his

'restructuring' and arguing that in reality the changes he had made were 'no more than the quiver of a butterfly's wings in the tsunami of Trump's chaos'. The problem was that to all intents and purposes the seat behind the president's desk was empty during this crisis. On the issue of Trump pressurising Ukraine to find/invent evidence to damage Joe Biden's Presidential campaign, Bolton is very much a witness for the prosecution ('I knew more than I wanted to about Trump's handling of Ukrainian affairs'). However he makes it clear that he was opposed to the impeachment of Trump over the issue; indeed he describes it as 'impeachment malpractice'. (pp. 483, 484) It has to be said that at the end of the book he seems to be considerably more outraged by Trump's attempts to prevent the publication of *The Room Where It Happened* than by his Ukrainian scam or the pandemic catastrophe.

*'Miller is the architect of Trump's border and immigration policies'*

**J**ean Guerrero's biography of Stephen Miller, *HateMonger*, is of particular interest. It not only throws the spotlight on one of Trump's most influential advisors but it identifies him as the vector whereby far right ideas, prejudices and strategies have shaped the Trump administration. Miller is, as she points out, 'the architect of Trump's border and immigration policies'. He 'grasps Trump's grudges and goals'. It is 'impossible to understand the Trump era, with its unparalleled polarization, without tracing Miller's journey to the White House'. (p. 3) Before looking at her tracking of Miller's political odyssey through the intellectual universe of the US far right and into the Trump administration, it is worth noting one particular revelation regarding Trump and his campaign for the Presidency. According to Guerrero, Trump 'was focused mostly on his wealth'. In order to make sure that he remembered to talk about immigration as well, Sam Nunberg and Roger Stone came up with the idea of building a wall. This was not a serious policy proposal, but was rather 'a mnemonic device' to make sure he remembered to mention the immigration issue during his rambling speeches and interviews. No one took it seriously as a proposal, but it took off and developed a life of its own. Such is the nature of the Trump Presidency, this revelation is at the



same time both totally unbelievable and totally believable. (p. 146)<sup>3</sup>

But what of Miller? Even while he was still at school, Miller was establishing a reputation as a hard-line, right-wing activist. The description 'obnoxious right-wing prick' inevitably comes to mind, but that hardly does him justice. He regularly phoned in to right-wing radio talk shows, appearing on Larry Elder's show more than seventy times as well as on Rush Limbaugh's. Eventually he came to the attention of David Horowitz, the renegade's renegade. Horowitz had been a revolutionary Marxist back in the 1960s and early 1970s but had since transformed himself into a hard-line, right-wing culture warrior. He is virtually unknown in Britain, but has been a significant figure on the US far right for many years.<sup>4</sup> According to Guerrero, Horowitz 'groomed teenagers like Miller', he 'invited Miller over to his house', 'courted' him, recognising him as 'a potential recruit to his far-right movement', and the young Miller became 'a Horowitz acolyte'. Miller 'was awed by Horowitz's ideas', and came to see 'this country as a white-forged masterpiece, unfairly demonized by brown hordes'. (pp. 6, 7, 75, 77, 78) When he left school, Miller published a condemnation of it on Horowitz's website as 'Left-Wing', as 'an institution not of learning, but of indoctrination'. He proclaimed that 'Now is the time for a counter-revolution'. (p. 83)

He continued his career as one of Horowitz's culture warriors when he was a student at Duke University. He headed up Horowitz's islamophobic national Terrorism Awareness project. As Guerrero points out, 'its website conflated Muslims and Arabs with terrorists [. . . ]

---

<sup>3</sup> Trump, of course, was someone who had always 'prized cheap labor and readily available workers, no matter their legal status [. . . ] *The New York Times* reported in early December of 2018 that he employed many undocumented immigrants at his Bedminster, New Jersey, golf resort, and in the spring of 2019, that many more worked at his empire of resorts throughout the state of Florida'. See Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Michael D Shear, *Border Wars: Inside Trump's Assault on Immigration* (Simon and Schuster, 2019, p. 281).

<sup>4</sup> A prolific writer, his publications include the influential *The Shadow Party: How George Soros, Hillary Clinton, and Sixties Radicals Seized Control of the Democratic Party*, first published in 2006, but reissued in 2016. He has also published an avalanche of pro-Trump books: *Big Agenda: President Trump's Plan to Save America* (2017), *Dark Agenda: The War to Destroy Christian America* (2019), *BLITZ: Trump Will Smash the Left and Win* (2020), *The Enemy Within: How a Totalitarian Movement is Destroying America* (2021) and *I Can't Breathe: How a Racial Hoax is Killing America*. Horowitz's publications also include *Hating Whitey and Other Progressive Causes* (1999), *The Anti-Chomsky Reader* (2004), *Unholy Alliance: Radical Islam and the American Left* (2004), *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* (2006), *Indoctrination U: The Left's War Against Academic Freedom* (2007) and so on up to another classic, his *Progressive Racism: How the Civil Rights Movement became a Lynch Mob* (2016).

Horowitz and Miller used the term "jihad" to fuel hostility toward all Muslims'. (p. 100) Miller was even invited to talk about the project on Fox and Friends. And after he graduated, he helped organise Horowitz's 'Islamofascism Awareness Week . . . featuring terror memorials and teach-ins in more than a hundred colleges'. (p. 116) Horowitz repaid him by helping him get a job as press secretary with the reactionary Christian Right Republican Congresswoman, Michelle Bachmann. This was a stepping stone to going to work for one of Horowitz's old friends, the racist Alabama Senator Jefferson Beauregard Sessions, as his communications director. Once again Horowitz made the introductions. This was an important step for Miller, who apparently had (and presumably still has) Senate ambitions himself. At this time, Horowitz was urging the Republican right to counter Obama's politics of hope with the politics of fear, the politics of hate. He provided what little intellectual grounding the right's culture wars agenda had. It was while working for Sessions that Miller came into contact with Steve Bannon and *Breitbart News*, and it was to be Sessions who recommended Miller to Trump as a useful member of his presidential election campaign. According to Guerrero, 'Horowitz would play a significant role in Trump's campaign, with Miller as his vehicle'. On a number of occasions, Miller actually emailed Horowitz asking for advice with Trump's speeches. After one speech, Horowitz emailed his disciple: 'Great fucking ground-breaking speech. I spent the last twenty years waiting for this.' (pp. 7, 166). At many rallies, Miller was Trump's warm-up man. One other important job that Miller did for Trump was to persuade both the Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) trade unions to endorse his candidacy.

What is remarkable is that Miller successfully remained at Trump's side throughout his whole time in office. He seems to have put considerable effort into not falling out with the Kushners while staying in Trump's shadow and behaving loyally. On one occasion, some of Trump's opponents, trying to get Miller sacked, actually pointed out that accusing him of racism 'will only ingratiate him to his boss'. The way to get him fired was to emphasise that it was Miller who was running the administration's immigration policy, with Trump doing what he was told. (p. 266) Miller was too careful for even this to work. His whole focus was on whipping up hostility to immigrants. As Guerrero puts it, he saw the 'demonization of migrants' as a crucial 'tool with which to mobilise the base. With it, he sold cruelty and castigation toward brown youths'. One thing Miller continually pushed was the need to publicise and politicise

crimes committed by illegal immigrants – even though official statistics showed they were less likely to commit violent crimes than native-born Americans. Both ‘Miller and Trump are masters of messaging. But . . . they denied any role in the rising tide of white rage’. She goes on: ‘the duo packaged the hate that fuels white terrorism and sold it like cotton candy at an amusement park. Right-wing militias stocked up on weapons, preparing for revolution’. (pp. 4, 5) Standing by, so to speak! This is not just a rhetorical point, because as Guerrero points out, far right violence is on the rise in the US so that between 2008 and 2017 ‘seventy percent of extremist-related fatalities . . . were committed by members of the far right or white-supremacist groups’. In 2018, extremists ‘with right-wing ideologies were tied to at least fifty domestic murders . . . more than in any year since 1995, when terrorists bombed a federal building in Oklahoma City’. (p. 221) There can be no doubt that Miller did all he could to encourage Trump’s authoritarianism, his readiness to trample over democratic norms, and had no concern about the growth of the far right.

*This was the counter-revolution.*

**T**he cruelty of the immigration policies that Miller championed and implemented are fully chronicled by Guerrero, although she does make the point that Barack Obama, in a vain attempt to appease the right, had himself implemented vicious immigration policies. During his first term, Obama ‘deported a record 1.6 million people’ and was actually ‘known as “Deporter in Chief”’, but was still condemned as soft on illegal immigrants. (pp. 125-126) Now in the Trump administration, Miller was a key figure in constructing his base, in helping hold it together. Fear of and hostility towards immigrants, especially those coming from Mexico, was absolutely crucial. He was the man charged with keeping the hate and resentment topped-up and, according to Guerrero, Trump was genuinely fond of him, actually regarding him as ‘a son . . . a son who’d helped win him unprecedented power, and vice versa. They would always be there for each other’. (p. 275) One last point: an omission in her biography is any discussion of Miller’s relationship with Boris Johnson, but fortunately this has been chronicled elsewhere. According to Daniel Lippman and Nahal Toosi, when he was Foreign Secretary, Johnson ‘cultivated Trump aides such as Stephen Miller’. Indeed, he ‘fixated in particular on . . . Trump favorite Stephen Miller, the anti-immigration firebrand’. They met ‘somewhat surreptitiously’ and ‘swapped speech-writing ideas and tips with each other’! These meetings, ‘often held off the White House grounds, were kept quiet’ so that Prime Minister Theresa May did not hear

about them.<sup>5</sup> None of this, neither the deceit nor the flirting with the far right, will surprise anyone who knows anything about Boris Johnson. And we have certainly not heard the last of Stephen Miller. Or of Donald Trump.

*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/>>*

---

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Lippman and Nahal Toosi, 'Boris and Donald: A very special relationship', *Politico*, 12 December 2019 at <https://www.politico.eu/article/boris-johnson-donald-trump-special-relationship/>.