

The American Conservative

David Frum: The Wrong Man

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March 23, 2018

Nobody asked me to sign a manifesto or anything, but if “Never Trump” means believing that our 45th president is dangerously unfit for the office he holds, then count me in. I feared from the first that a man who couldn’t laugh off a “small hands” jibe from Marco Rubio might not be adequately endowed with the maturity and self-restraint we’d hope to see in someone entrusted with the nuclear launch codes. Since the primaries, on a near-daily basis, Trump’s behavior has validated that fear. This is “not normal,” and it’s not good.

So right about now we could use a book that cuts through the social media outrage of the moment and takes a sober look at the dangers of the Trump presidency. Alas, David Frum’s *Trumpocracy* is not that book. “In the rush of immediate controversies,” the author cautions in the opening pages, “we can overemphasize things of no lasting consequence and overlook things that will prove supremely important.” In this case, the result is an indiscriminate, occasionally overwrought critique that’s nearly as exhausting as the Trump presidency itself.

Reading too much of *Trumpocracy* in one sitting felt something like being strapped to the chair for the “Ludovico Technique,” eyes pried open with specula, while a year’s worth of Trump’s Twitter feed races across the screen. Unlike *Clockwork’s* Alex, I didn’t end up in the fetal position, but the experience left my skull buzzing, temporarily unable to distinguish casual threats of thermonuclear annihilation from “covfefe.”

Make no mistake, Frum tells us: “We are living through the most dangerous challenge to the free government of the United States that anyone alive has encountered.” What’s at stake is “democracy’s undoing,” and “the crisis is on Americans, here and now.”

But if the threat Trump represents is so grave, why sweat the small stuff? In *Trumpocracy*, the petty grifts and indecencies threaten to crowd out the genuine enormities: Trump is “on track to spend more on travel in one year of his presidency than Obama in eight”; his inaugural committee raked in record-breaking donations without accounting for how they were spent; the president was mean to “Spicey” by not bringing him along to meet the pope. Imagine a book-length broadside against Barack Obama that whipsaws from the illegal war in Libya to the fashion crime of the infamous tan suit.

Frum, who can make marking the ballot for Hillary Clinton sound like an act of uncommon valor, has a flair for the melodramatic. “Will this generation be found wanting in its hour on the stage of history?” he demands in *Trumpocracy*’s introduction. “Someday the time will come to write the history of that hour. I undertake this book before that time, as my contribution to ensuring that the hour’s ending is one to be prouder of than its sorry opening.”

Throughout *Trumpocracy*, you get the sense that style is riding hard on substance, that Frum’s preferred tone—operatic and Manichean—colors his analysis. He wants to be Whittaker Chambers in *Witness*, but instead of an international communist conspiracy, history has served up a confederacy of dunces. Accordingly, Frum soft-pedals the stumblebum aspects of our 45th president’s reign and mines every detail, however contingent, for dark significance. November 9, the day of Trump’s election, is, he tells us, “the most portentous date in the German calendar: the day the kaiser abdicated in 1918, of Kristallnacht in 1938, and the opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989.” “Portentous” is right: after that business, I was almost surprised Frum didn’t make more of the 666 Fifth Avenue address of the Kushners’ skyscraper/money pit.

Though Frum maintains it isn’t old-fashioned despotism he fears, one could easily get confused on that point. It’s with good reason that Ross Douthat reads him as worrying more about “the president’s dictatorial tendencies” than his spectacular incompetence. Frum grants that “Trump operates not by strategy, but by instinct,” yet repeatedly suggests there’s a method to the madness—that Trump’s spastic behavior is all part of the plan.

The president “has plunged the government of the United States into chaos that enhances his personal power,” Frum declares; “chaos by design” gets five index entries. He spies sinister purpose behind Trump’s desultory approach to executive branch staffing: “Trumpocracy as a system of power relies...not on deconstructing the state but on breaking the state in order to plunder the state.” And while you might suspect that only an idiot could turn 3 percent growth and 4 percent unemployment into a 40 percent approval rating, Frum makes that feat sound like Machiavellian cunning. As he sees it, the president’s massive unpopularity actually *enhances* his power over Congress.

But on the available evidence, this administration is far more *Veep* than *House of Cards*. The simpler explanation for the staffing gap is laziness, incompetence, and a late start by a team that never expected to win. It’s not “chaos by design”: disorder follows in Trump’s wake like Pigpen’s dustcloud. There’s wisdom in the old saw “never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity.”

Trump has malice to burn, but it rarely finds expression in any scheme that requires sustained attention and a modicum of self-restraint. It’s a lot easier to shout at the TV. On the home front, Trump’s power has been checked repeatedly, thanks in large part to his pratfalling management style and pathological inability to get out of his own way. “At best,” Frum half-concedes, “the dysfunction of the Trump team has actively advanced the public interest by unintentionally thwarting the Trump administration’s more sinister instincts.” Which is an elliptical way of acknowledging that Trump has thus far proven too incompetent to be an effective authoritarian.

Frum is more convincing when he turns to the longer-term threat that Trump embodies: democratic rot fed by a “culture of impunity” and contempt for the rule of law. Trump cultists praise the man for “shaking things up” and “telling it like it is”—as if it’s only hypocritical Beltway pieties he’s skewering. Just as often, Trump tramples the sort of tacit norms that separate the United States from banana republics, like: a president shouldn’t tell active-duty military to “call those senators” on behalf of his agenda, suggest that his political opponents should be put in jail, or hurl playground insults at paranoid, nuclear-armed dictators.

Jack Goldsmith has argued that Trump’s successors “likely won’t repeat his self-destructive antics,” since his norm-busting hasn’t (yet) brought political success. Frum is less sanguine, with good reason. Even if Trump’s tenure ends in greater disgrace than it started, any half-bright successor should be able to take advantage of the way he’s defined deviancy down. The next president need only be half as much an apparent crook or clown to credibly claim to have lifted the moral tone.

For the time being, Trump’s lack of impulse control and self-discipline may frustrate his strongman tendencies at home, but that’s cold comfort, given the damage he can do with U.S. military might. In “the most powerful office in the world,” impulsive, ignorant incompetence can be just as dangerous as sinister purpose—but it represents a different set of threats than the ones that most concern Frum.

“Trumpocracy has left Americans less safe against foreign dangers,” Frum charges, by which he seems to mean mainly Russian cybermeddling. He spends an order of magnitude more time on that subject than on the foreign dangers Trump has gratuitously stoked with brinksmanship on North Korea.

In the near term, what’s to be most feared is the president lumbering into a major conflict with either (or both?) of the two remaining “Axis of Evil” members. Uncertain plans for a North Korean summit aside, that risk may be increasing. As the *New York Times*’s Maggie Haberman recently explained, Trump “was terrified of the job the first six months, and now feels like he has a command of it”—a terrifying thought in itself. Newly emboldened, the president wants unrepentant uber-hawks John Bolton and Mike Pompeo for national security advisor and secretary of state, respectively. “Let Trump be Trump” looks a lot like letting Trump be Bush-era Frum.

In fairness, Frum does seem queasy about all this, but he’s awkwardly positioned to sound the alarm. The author who declared that it’s “victory or holocaust” in the war on terror and lauded George W. Bush as *The Right Man* may not be the right man to guide us through the particular dangers of this moment in history.

We may yet avoid a disaster on the scale of the Iraq war, aided by what Frum terms “the surge in civic spirit that has moved Americans since the ominous night of November 8, 2016”—or God’s special affection for fools, drunks, and the United States of America. Perhaps, in hindsight, the Trump years will look more like a Great Beclowning than a Long National Nightmare. If so, we may look back on this period and say, as “43” apparently did of Trump’s First Inaugural: “that was some weird shit”—and give thanks that Trump wasn’t as competent as Bush.

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