

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a work in progress. So is democracy's undoing. Between 1975 and 2000, countries in every continent turned from repressive regimes to the rule of law, away from dictatorships of a single man or a single party toward multiparty democracy. Since then, democracy has gone into retreat. From Russia to South Africa, from Turkey to the Philippines, from Venezuela to Hungary, authoritarian leaders have smashed restraints on their power. Media freedom and judicial independence have eroded. The right to vote remains, but the right to have one's vote counted fairly may not.

Until the US presidential election of 2016, the global decline of democracy seemed a concern for other peoples in other lands; a matter for US foreign policy, yes, but not for America's internal affairs. That complacent optimism has been upended by the political rise of Donald Trump.

The crisis is upon Americans, here and now.

I write this book in the midst of that crisis. My choice of timing imposes on this project many risks of error and misunderstanding. In the rush of immediate controversies, we can overemphasize things of no lasting consequence and overlook things that will prove supremely important.

INTRODUCTION

But if it's potentially embarrassing to speak too soon, it can also be dangerous to wait too long.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if some forward-thinking member of Congress had devoted his or her career in the late 1990s to fighting for the hardening of airline cockpits against hijackers. He or she would have battled a cost-conscious industry, faced election opponents lavishly funded by airline lobbyists, and might have prevailed just in time to prevent the September 11, 2001, attacks from taking the form they did—meaning that nobody would ever have known the service that member had rendered. Instead, he or she would forever be known as that bore who droned so uselessly about a threat that never materialized.

Not all premonitions come to pass. But if we are saved, we never know for certain what we were saved from.

Even now, the severity of the Trump challenge to American democracy remains a disputed question. Some more tradition-minded Republicans will point to the Trump administration's chaotic decision making and policy failures as reassurance. "How can he be an autocrat when he botched his own agenda in Congress? He can't do anything for fifteen consecutive minutes, let alone overthrow a system of government that has lasted more than two hundred years."

The buried premise in these assurances is that the only leaders we need to fear are those who are strategic, methodical, and deft—and that the only threats a democracy need worry about are open and overt attacks on its legality. The Founders of the American republic knew better. One of the political thinkers who most influenced them, the French philosopher Montesquieu, warned that a free society must guard not only against "crimes" by powerful leaders but also against "negligence, mistakes, a certain slackness in the love of the homeland, dangerous examples, the seeds of corruption,

INTRODUCTION

that which does not run counter to the laws but eludes them, that which does not destroy them but weakens them.”¹

So it is now. The thing to fear from the Trump presidency is not the bold overthrow of the Constitution, but the stealthy paralysis of governance; not the open defiance of law, but an accumulating subversion of norms; not the deployment of state power to intimidate dissidents, but the incitement of private violence to radicalize supporters. Trump operates not by strategy, but by instinct. His great skill is to sniff his opponents’ vulnerabilities: “low energy,” “little,” “crooked,” “fake.” In the same way, Trump has intuited the weak points in the American political system and in American political culture. Trump gambled that Americans resent each other’s differences more than they cherish their shared democracy. So far, that gamble has paid off.

“Democracy,” as you were taught in high school civics, is a word that traces its origin back to two Greek words: the word for “people” and the word for “rule.” I call this book *Trumpocracy* because it is a study of rulership, not a study of personality. My topic is President Trump’s power: how he has gained it, how he has used it, why it has not yet been effectively checked.

An American president is not some tribal chief, ruling by personal charisma and brute force. He (or someday she) works through systems: through a party in Congress and the states, through supportive media organizations, through national political networks of donors and voters, through the hundreds of staffers included in the term “the White House,” and through the thousands of senior functionaries who together administer the executive branch.

This book is the story of those who enable, empower, support, and collaborate with Donald Trump. Many of those people have found ways to express their personal discomfort and disquiet with Trump. Those expressions may well be to some greater or lesser

INTRODUCTION

degree sincere. They may someday even become important. But as of the time of the publication of this book, they remain ineffectual.

If (when?) his enablers withdraw from Donald Trump, he will be left isolated and helpless, a dead tooth in the gums of the US government. Yet the opportunity he discovered and the danger he presented will not end with Donald Trump's career. The vulnerabilities Trump exploited will remain vulnerabilities still. Political decisions and economic trends have deeply riven the contemporary United States along lines of class, race, region, national origin, and cultural identity. Even the bonds between men and women have become attenuated. Those are not rhetorical claims; they are measurable facts. Diversity brings distrust—and the mutual distrust among Americans has been Donald Trump's most important political resource.

Since the election of 2016, much has been written about the campaign decisions that supposedly brought the United States to its present pass. Why didn't Hillary Clinton commit resources here instead of there? Why visit this state instead of that? I propose we put the spotlight on the voters rather than the candidates; on longer-term trends, not dramatic incidents; on the game as it is played, not the ballyhooed game changers who so seldom actually change anything.

Even before Donald Trump thrust himself forward as a presidential candidate, American politics had been veering toward extremism and instability. Trump seized a dark opportunity, but that opportunity had been opened and enlarged for him by others. Trump's election was a system failure, but the system did not fail out of the wild blue yonder.

Institutions do not matter for themselves. They matter because of the way they serve, or fail to serve, the people of the country. Trumpocracy has left Americans less safe against foreign dangers,

INTRODUCTION

has diverted their money from its proper purposes to improper pockets, has worked to bias law enforcement in favor of the powerful, and has sought to intimidate media lest they report things the public most needs to know. To shrug and say, “What does it all matter?” is not only to dismiss the poor and the vulnerable but to submit your own interests to the mercy of the greedy and unscrupulous. It is to submit to life as a subject rather than a citizen.

A human catastrophe is unfolding on the US territory of Puerto Rico as the editorial process for this book comes to its close. I do not know the ultimate toll in human life, but the whole world has caught its first glimpses of the scale of suffering on the island in the wake of Hurricane Maria. This is what it means for government to fail. Trump’s government has failed not only because of indifference and incompetence, although he abounds in both, but because from the start it has been redirected from the service of the public to the aggrandizement of one domineering man and his shamelessly grasping extended family.

Every book is a journey, and the wise reader will examine the credentials of the guide. When Donald Trump entered the presidential race in the summer of 2015, I hoped for some good from him. Could he be the wake-up call that Republicans needed? Trump, you’ll recall, launched his campaign not only with name-calling, but also with a fresh message. Rather than end the Medicare guarantee for people under the age of fifty-five, he would protect it. Rather than propose upper-income tax cuts, he would focus on middle-class opportunities. Rather than terminate the step toward universal health coverage in the Affordable Care Act (ACA), he would improve and enlarge coverage. Rather than propose amnesty as a solution to illegal immigration, he would secure America’s borders. Perhaps as important as any of these things, Trump might at last force Republicans to confront the Iraq trauma.

INTRODUCTION

Trump of course flagrantly lied about his own history with regard to the Iraq War.² He repeated a fantasy about opposing the war so strenuously that President George W. Bush sent representatives to Trump to beg him to be quiet. It was all utterly untrue. Yet if he is dishonest about his own history, Trump smashed the taboos that had squelched honesty in others. Perhaps now we conservatives and Republicans could talk openly about what had gone wrong and what should be learned. (I've placed my own retrospectives on Iraq on the public record for anyone interested. You can find them archived at DavidFrum.com.)

Pretty transparently, Donald Trump had no credible plans for doing any of these good things. But even to articulate such challenges to party dogma amounted to a public service of a kind. By showing that Republican voters would reward a candidate who promised to protect health care and reduce immigration, rather than the usual other way around, Trump opened the way (or so I then hoped) for some more responsible politician to adopt these issues and shove Trump aside.

I expected the good sense of Republican voters to reassert itself. I refused to allow that the party could actually nominate him, or that an unlucky bounce in the Electoral College might somehow elect him. Pro-Trump talkers cite the underestimation of Trump's chances by people like me as proof that the media "got it wrong" in 2016 and have remained "always wrong" about Trump ever since.³

But a wrong prediction about Trump's chances is not the same thing as an inaccurate assessment of Trump's character and behavior, or of the consequences of that character and behavior for the government of the United States. If anything, Trump's Electoral College fluke has forced a clearer and grimmer reckoning with the ominous anti-democratic forces Trump represents.

INTRODUCTION

*... rats running in the roof-beams, ants
Chewing at the foundations.
Death-beetles tick under the wall-paper, punctuate the evening
quiet
Of families gathered at home.*⁴

That haunting vision was composed almost a century ago by James Neugass, an American who fought in the Spanish Civil War. It warns that societies can dissolve into rot, as well as erupt into violence.

Trump gained the presidency thanks in great part to voters disgusted by a status quo that was ceasing to work for more and more of them. The largest and most loyal subset of those voters were men who felt devalued in the economy and disrespected in the culture, who chafed at being scolded for their “privilege” even as they succumbed to disability, drugs, and early death. Trump has not kept faith with those voters. But they have kept faith with him. For fear of them, Trump’s party stays bolted to him. Members of his party may denounce him in “on background” interviews. His own staff will leak their disgust at his antics and cruelties. Yet whatever these powerful people say in private, they continue to enable him in public. It is their public actions, despite their private qualms, that sustain Trumpocracy.

President Trump has plunged the government of the United States into chaos that enhances his personal power. He has persuaded millions of Americans to ignore information they need as “fake news” from a “corrupt media.” He has allowed foreign states and local politicians to tamper with the integrity of American elections to his own benefit. He demands that high officials disregard the law in favor of personal loyalty to him. He has concentrated power in the hands of military men—better men than himself,

INTRODUCTION

but not the right hands for the job of civilian government. He has alienated allies, appeased large enemies, and goaded small ones to the edge of war. He has brutally inflamed the ethnic and class divisions that empowered him in the first place. He has enriched himself in government in a way that disheartens every honest public official, and invites dishonest ones to imitate him.

But that cannot be the final word—and it will not be. We can choose our futures, not merely submit to them. Past generations of Americans have faced and overcome severer tests. Will this generation be found wanting in its hour on the stage of history? 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.