

EXTREMISM AND DEMOCRACY

FASCISM, POPULISM AND  
AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

LEONARD WEINBERG



ROUTLEDGE



'In the course of 2016, when the gathering momentum of Trump's presidential campaign of 2016 could no longer be dismissed as a blip, US journalists, celebrities, and self-appointed political pundits started engaging passionately in a protracted debate about the 'fascist' contents and dynamics of his growing popularity. Since most insisted on displaying an almost willful ignorance of both history and political science with respect to the key term 'fascism', even at the highest level of state politics, it was inevitable that far more heat was generated than light, muddying the waters of discussion and intensifying the general atmosphere of 'liberal hysteria' in ways which probably contributed to Trump's victory rather than impeded it.

Leonard Weinberg's *Fascism, Populism and American Democracy* finally offers genuine insights and considered analysis to those still eager to understand the complex relationship to actual *fascism* of the populist movement of support that Trump has whipped up with his rhetoric, rather than join in the public slanging match about it. Highly readable, but profound, the book gives intelligent readers the chance to regain a foothold on the *terra firma* of Enlightenment values based not on mythic thinking and visceral emotions, but on research-based knowledge and argument, the bedrock of all genuine liberal responses to the repeated threats posed by waves of irrationalism masquerading as the forces of liberal democracy all over the world.'

**Roger Griffin**, *Professor of Modern History, Oxford Brookes University*

'Weinberg, a preeminent scholar of radicalism after World War II, portrays an important and thought-provoking picture of the challenges that the populist right poses to the democracy in America. This excellent book is a must read.'

**Ami Pedahzur**, *Arnold S. Chaplik Professor in Israel and Diaspora Studies,  
The University of Texas at Austin*

'Leonard Weinberg proves again that he is one of the most lucid and intriguing voices among scholars of political extremism, as he provides an innovative and comprehensive analysis of the factors shaping the rise of far-right populism in the United States. A must read for anyone striving to comprehend the impact of far-right ideology on the contemporary American political landscape.'

**Arie Perliger**, *Professor, School of Criminology and Justice Studies,  
University of Massachusetts Lowell*

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# FASCISM, POPULISM AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Hard right-wing politics is growing in popularity in America, marked by Donald Trump's success in the 2016 election, and it is worth questioning what this means for the American democratic system. This book seeks to explain the vulnerability of democracies to the appeal of right-wing politics through a contemporary case study of the US, and how democracies are possibly under threat from a conflict between popular attitudes and institutional paralysis. Various forms of American right-wing extremism are examined here, such as the alt-right, the radical right and the Religious right, but their perceived relevance to Trump's victory is questioned. Even still, this book asks the question: can the far-right prevail under the American way?

**Leonard Weinberg** is Foundation Professor Emeritus at the University of Nevada. Over the course of his career he has served as a visiting professor at King's College, University of London, the University of Haifa and as a visiting scholar at the University of Florence, and UCLA. He has also been the recipient of both Fulbright and Guggenheim research awards. Weinberg has been the author or editor of some twenty books, the most recent one being *The Role of Terrorism in Twenty-First Warfare* (2016) co-authored with Susanne Martin.

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# FASCISM, POPULISM AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

*Leonard Weinberg*

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**To my son David and my friend Elizabeth.**



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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

Never has American democracy felt so challenged

*Margaret Atwood quoted in Rebecca Mead, "The Prophet of Dystopia", The New Yorker  
(April 17, 2017)*

Making privilege palatable to the masses is a permanent project of conservatism; but each generation must tailor that project to fit the contour of its times

*Corey Robin, The Reactionary Mind*

The unexpected election of New York-based real estate developer and television personality Donald Trump to the US presidency in November 2016 caused widespread consternation among members of America's progressive and liberal intelligentsia. Among other things, they complained Trump lacked any experience in public office. They doubted if the newly elected president had actually read the US Constitution. Certainly, he was quick to point out its short-comings. Among other things, he complained bitterly that the press was at war with the American people. On matters of public policy Trump expressed opposition to environmental protections and hoped to revive the coal industry. He expressed his intention to build a two thousand mile wall along the Mexican border to keep out illegal immigrants and wanted to bar all Muslims from entry to the country. Trump also said he wanted to treat women who had chosen to have abortions as criminals. Over the course of the campaign, he had expressed thinly veiled feelings of white race consciousness and received the endorsement of David Duke, a former KKK leader. In other words, Trump's views, often expressed with bumper-sticker-like subtlety, caused liberals and progressives to sound the alarm following his election to the presidency. Daniel Rodgers captures the sentiment of many Trump voters:

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Those alienated voters saw themselves as the bone and sinew of the nation: white men who did not have college educations but who made things and were loyal to the nation, who thought they had acted out the American dream only to find themselves shunted aside by an African-American whom they had come to loathe, by women who are more successful than they are, by non-white and immigrant competitors for jobs and public favor, by global capitalists, distant public officials, and cosmopolitan intellectuals who scorned them, and by the poor who lived on their tax dollars.<sup>1</sup>

For some, Trump's success reflected a trend towards a fascist America, while for others it was symptomatic of a nationalist populist backlash against globalization, both economic and social.<sup>2</sup> This backlash was reflected in Britain's decision to leave the European Union (BREXIT) and by the electoral successes of various anti-immigrant populist parties on the European Continent, France's National Front, the Federal Republic's Alternative for Germany (AfD), Austria's Freedom Party, Poland's Law and Justice Party, Hungary's Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary), and Greece's violently anti-immigrant Golden Dawn most obviously.<sup>3</sup> In either case America's democratic institutions appeared to be in some jeopardy. How seriously should we take this threat?<sup>4</sup>

Harvard political scientist Yascha Mounk takes the threat as potentially mortal. He issues a warning about the current situation:

Then there are those short years in which everything changes all at once. Political newcomers storm the stage. Voters clamor for policies that were unthinkable until yesterday. Social tensions that had long simmered under the surface erupt into terrifying explosions. A system of government that had seemed immutable looks as though it might come apart. This is the kind of moment in which we find ourselves.<sup>5</sup>

My purpose in writing this book is to provide an answer to this highly troubling question about the democratic prospect. Before attempting to offer an answer though, we need to establish a context, a milieu, in which to examine the problem.

First, among writers, editors, publishers, theatrical producers and others there has been a renewal of interest in dystopian fiction. Works long out of print or rarely produced have achieved new attention. Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), George Orwell's *1984*, and Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale* (1986) are undergoing revivals in one form or another. Atwood's work has been transformed into a cable television series. A theatrical version of Orwell's novel is appearing on the Broadway stage. And *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), a novel dating from the 1930s about the coming of fascism, was brought back into print after a long hiatus. Philip Roth's *The Plot against America* (2005) employs a cast of characters from the 1930s including Charles Lindbergh, Walter Winchell, and Senator Karl Mundt to imagine America's transition to fascism following the 1936 presidential balloting. Other dystopian works are evidently in preparation.<sup>6</sup> It is worth pointing out

though that none of the four imagined dystopian societies actually came about. Like their utopian opposite numbers, e.g. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* and other productions of 19<sup>th</sup> century utopian socialists, the dystopian writers appear to have gotten it wrong. They may provide useful insights here and there, but overall, they are hardly representative of realities.

Second, when we turn our attention from these leaps of literary imagination to the realities of the Trump ascendancy, what do we find? Frequently the estimates have bordered on the apocalyptic. Writing in the otherwise sober-minded *The Atlantic* David Frum (a former Bush Administration speech writer) observed:

Donald Trump ... represents something much more radical. A president who plausibly owes his office at least in part to a clandestine intervention by a hostile foreign intelligence service? Who uses his bully pulpit to target individual critics? Who creates blind trusts that are not blind, invites his children to commingle private and public business, and somehow gets the unhappy of his own political party either to endorse his own choices or shrug them off? If this were happening in Honduras, we'd know what to call it. It's happening here instead, and so we are baffled.<sup>7</sup>

The journal *Democracy* devoted most of its Winter 2017 issue to a symposium, titled "The Abyss," to the recently elected president. Ed Miliband, the former Labour Party leader commented,

Oh, my God. Your reaction and ours in the UK in the early hours of November 9 as the words President Trump moved beyond a headline in *The Onion*. All the solutions to the world's problems looked much further away – from climate change to the Middle East. And risky new dangers stalk the globe.<sup>8</sup>

The rejection of climate change, global warming and the benefits of various modern medical practices, e.g. childhood immunizations, is part of a broad trend towards opposition to scientific inquiry in general. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) are currently under threat if their investigators' findings and recommendations are at odds with various private firms or if these judgments conflict with large-scale corporate interests.<sup>9</sup> The jobs of scientists and engineers who work for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA), National Science Foundation (NSF), along with the EPA and CDC have been placed in serious jeopardy by the new anti-scientific perspective. And Trump administration budget makers are recommending the elimination of public support for the National Council of the Arts, the National Council of the Humanities, and Public Television (PBS).

In some instances, the fears of a Trump administration have become so fraught various observers have issued warnings about the critics' going off the deep end. For example, writing in *The New Republic* Jeet Heer warned readers against comparing Trump to the 20<sup>th</sup> century's worst tyrants, as if such a warning was really

## 4 Introduction

necessary. And the eminent scholar of fascism Robert Paxton writes about the widespread temptation to compare the New York businessman to Mussolini: “It is powerfully tempting to call the new president of the United States a fascist. Donald Trump’s bullying tone, his scowl, and his jutting jaw recall Benito Mussolini’s absurd theatrics.”<sup>10</sup>

These warnings appear necessary because the liberal public to which they are addressed already believe the United States is well on its way to fascist or far right populist rule.

There is also the matter of Trump himself. Since Barry Goldwater’s run for president in 1964, when large numbers of psychologists and psychiatrists declared the Arizona senator emotionally unfit for the office, the rules governing their conduct were changed to prohibit such psychological appraisals without personal contact with the subject.<sup>11</sup> In the case of Trump however, various “mental health” professionals have been willing to violate these rules. One letter to the editor in the *New York Times* signed by two psychiatrists emphasized the dangers to the American people posed by the Trump presidency. This communication was co-signed by more than a dozen other psychiatrists.<sup>12</sup>

The major traits they identify with Trump’s persona include a high level of impulsivity, a short attention span, narcissism, a sense of grandiosity, and an aggressive outlook on the world. This combination of characteristics, assuming they are accurate, place the country in significant danger of war; hence the psychiatrists’ willingness to violate the professional rules and warn the public.

Foreign policy specialists have often echoed this concern.<sup>13</sup> These assertions are not entirely far-fetched since at different points during the 2016 campaign Trump said he actually “liked” war (though he never fought in one himself). And after taking the oath of office he proposed a major increase in US military spending over the next decade and has appointed retired high-ranking military officers to important posts in his administration.

Such a linear interpretation of Trump’s foreign policy objectives must take into consideration a dizzying assortment of contradictory expressions. At different points he has declared the NATO alliance outdated. But on other occasions he has referred to NATO as indispensable in the fight against ISIS, al Qaeda, and other terrorist networks.

Trump’s attitude towards the Russian Federation and its leader Vladimir Putin has also undergone considerable oscillation. Initially Trump called for a new equilibrium. Russian and American interests were sufficiently complementary to permit closer ties over, for example, the threat posed by militant Islam. Trump praised Putin as a leader in glowing terms. With the intense publicity surrounding alleged Russian interference in the 2016 American elections and the possible involvement of some of Trump’s advisors in this work, Trump’s assessment of Putin has undergone a turn towards the extremely negative.

After a brief time in office constitutional lawyers and civil libertarians began considering the best means of removing Trump from office before the expiration of his four-year term. While the President himself is apparently contemplating

running for a second term (he recently appointed a campaign manager for the 2020 election), the critics are considering the most effective way of getting rid of him. The two most obvious ways are impeachment followed by conviction of the Senate, and the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Over the course of more than two centuries only two presidents, Samuel Johnson and Bill Clinton have been impeached though both were acquitted in their trials before the US Senate. In 1974 Richard Nixon resigned before he would have been removed from office.

In short, the impeachment process is rare and cumbersome. The twenty-fifth Amendment provides for a president's removal from office based on his/her incapacity to perform his/her duties. This constitutional provision permits the vice-president and a majority of cabinet officers or a committee of medical experts appointed by Congress to reach a similar conclusion of incapacity.<sup>14</sup>

This may be a consummation devoutly to be wished by the progressive elements in the American population. But how realistic are these options under current circumstances? And let's not forget these current circumstances include the likely covert Russian involvement in the 2016 American election campaign.

## **The framework for this inquiry**

The chapters that follow this introduction provide a context, a background, to help us understand the rise of Trump and his election to the American presidency. In Chapter 2, I trace the decline of New Deal liberalism in American politics from a position of political dominance in the years following World War II to its current marginality. In this inquiry I also seek to review the rise of American conservatism and right-wing politics from a minor theme to its place at the center of American political life.

In Chapter 3, I make an effort to determine why the United States has fallen under right-wing rule, why conservatism, variously defined, has achieved something approaching dominance in popular discourse. The discussion focuses on the shifting social and economic conditions that have contributed to these new circumstances, e.g. declining social mobility, income inequality, the increasing polarization of the electorate. In the succeeding Chapter 4, I address the issue of "political decay," a term I borrow from the work of Francis Fukuyama and then use to investigate the failures presently embedded in America's key political institutions. Not all that long ago the American political system seemed to be a model for other countries seeking to create stable democratic institutions. Today, this is far from the case. What happened to erode the American way of conducting political life and arranging its government institutions?

I devote Chapter 5 to an examination to the emergence of Donald Trump as a presidential candidate and the appearance of the "Alt-Right" on the new social media and, in some instances on the streets as well. We are especially interested in Trump's transformation from a wealthy real estate developer, social climber, flamboyant play-boy, and television personality into a successful presidential candidate. And, related to the latter, how did his former adviser Steve Bannon help shape his political views?



In Chapter 6 I consider the relevance of “fascism” and “populism” to the Trump phenomenon. In this regard, I trace the origins and manifestations of both terms to the American political experience. To what extent, if any, do they apply to the Trump candidacy and subsequent role as president?

In the “Final Observations” (Chapter 7) I conclude by expressing skepticism about how dangerous the Trump presidency is going to prove. The picture of the Trump White House that has now emerged from the president’s first year in office is not one of a smooth-running organization whose leader is bent on restricting the civil liberties of Americans so much as one of incompetence and incoherence, despite widely held views to the contrary.

## Notes

- 1 Daniel Rodgers, “Liberalism,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* 43 (winter 2017), p. 7.
- 2 See for example, Henry Scott Wallace, “American Fascism, in 1944 and Today,” *The New York Times* (May 12, 2017), p. 27.
- 3 See, for example, Timothy Garton Ash, “Germany’s Alt-Right,” *The New York Review of Books* (December 7, 2017), pp. 4–10.
- 4 For a concise summary see Robert Mickey, Steven Levitsky, and Lucan Way, “Is America Safe for Democracy?” *Foreign Affairs* 96:3 (2017), pp. 20–29.
- 5 Yascha Mounk, *The People Vs. Democracy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 1.
- 6 See for example, Adam Gopnik, “Orwell’s 1984 and Trump’s America,” *The New Yorker* (January 27, 2017).
- 7 David Frum, “How to Build an Autocracy,” *The Atlantic* (March 2017), p. 52.
- 8 Ed Miliband, “The World,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* (winter 2017), p. 40.
- 9 See for example Thomas Nichols, “How America Lost Faith in Expertise,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2017), pp. 60–73; see also, “President Trump’s War on Science,” *The New York Times* (September 10, 2017), p. 10.
- 10 Jeet Heer, “Horrible Histories,” *New Republic* (April 2017), pp. 52–55; Robert Paxton, “American Duce,” *Harper’s* (May 2017), p. 38.
- 11 See for example Michael Tomsky, “Trump: The Scramble,” *The New York Review of Books* (April 6, 2017), pp. 12–13.
- 12 Psychiatrists and psychologists are hardly alone in questioning Trump’s mental stability. General Barry McCaffery (ret.) was quoted in the *Washington Post* (March 5, 2018) as remarking “I think the President is starting to wobble in his emotional stability and this is not going to end well.” McCaffery, US ground commander during the 1991 Gulf War, expressed this judgment after the first year of Trump’s term in office.
- 13 See for example Philip Gordon, “A Vision of Trump at War,” *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2017), pp. 10–19.
- 14 See for example, Evan Osnos, “Endgames,” *The New Yorker* (May 8, 2017), pp. 34–45.