‘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
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.
This new series encompasses academic studies within the broad fields of “extremism” and “democracy”. These topics have traditionally been considered largely in isolation by academics. A key focus of the series, therefore, is the (inter-)relation between extremism and democracy. Works will seek to answer questions such as to what extent “extremist” groups pose a major threat to democratic parties, or how democracy can respond to extremism without undermining its own democratic credentials.

The books encompass two strands:

*Routledge Studies in Extremism and Democracy* includes books with an introductory and broad focus which are aimed at students and teachers. These books will be available in hardback and paperback. Titles include:

40. *When Does Terrorism Work?*
*Diego Muro*

41. *Trumping the Mainstream*
The Conquest of Mainstream Democratic Politics by the Populist Radical Right
*Edited by Lise Esther Herman and James Muldoon*

42. *The Ideational Approach to Populism*
Concept, Theory and Analysis
*Edited by Kirk Hawkins, Ryan E. Carlin, Levente Littvay and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser*

43. *Fascism, Populism and American Democracy*
*Leonard Weinberg*

44. *Militant Democracy*
The Limits of Democratic Tolerance
*Bastiaan R. Rijpkema*
FASCISM, POPULISM AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Leonard Weinberg
To my son David and my friend Elizabeth.
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INTRODUCTION

Never has American democracy felt so challenged

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:
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.¹

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.² 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.³ In either case America’s democratic institutions appeared to be in some jeopardy. How seriously should we take this threat?⁴

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.⁵

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.⁶ 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 19th 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 ascendency, 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.7

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.8

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.9 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 20th century’s worst tyrants, as if such a warning was really
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.”

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. 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.

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. 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 25th 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. 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 playboy, 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

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.
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establish their own websites (e.g. Don Black’s Stormfront) to draw the attention of potential followers and recruits. Among other things, these sites provided opportunities for users to depict Obama as a Muslim who was born in Kenya who was planning terrorist operations in this country.

In this chapter we have sought to describe how American politics underwent a transformation from Left to Right over the course of several decades. Some might argue this shift simply reflects a natural process. As a country’s population grows wealthier and older, it seems to follow it will become more risk averse and less susceptible to liberal or Left solutions to its problems. Popular wisdom suggests this process is a natural outcome of the human life-cycle. This type of explanation hardly accounts for the changes that have been at work in American politics.

If anything, the reverse has been the case. Both in regard to the new right and the Radical Right, their rise has occurred against a background of sharpening conflict. From a period characterized by consensus building and compromise, the US is now described as “polarized.” In Chapter 3 we intend to discuss the causes for this sharpening of the country’s cleavages and divisions.

**Notes**

8. This was the origin of the president’s council of economic advisers.
19. The Nobel-Prize winning free-market economist Milton Friedman, and his Austrian predecessor Frederick Hayek, enjoyed support among young conservatives.
25 Southern Poverty Law Center, Intelligence Report, Spring 2009.
Observations

In many ways America appears to be an increasingly polarized society. But traditional understandings of these poles do not seem to apply. The poor are not rising up to rebel against the rich. Far from it! Nor do the poor in the United States seem to exhibit the kind of deference to their ruling classes that characterized British society in past centuries. If not deference then what? Physical repression? The answer appears to be neither.

As Alan Wolfe and a long list of other social scientists call to our attention:

We all know we live in a democracy. And we all know that in our democracy, inequality is rampant. So the question naturally arises: How do wealthy and powerful people protect their privileges against all those who have the right to vote and might … reject what the wealthy and powerful want?  

Wolfe’s answers refer largely to voter suppression, anti-labor union legislation at the state level, and the pursuit of cultural domination. It is true that various state legislatures in North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin have enacted laws that make it harder to vote than was the case earlier and that the southern states especially have made joining a union and engaging in collective bargaining more difficult. Further, many wealthy individuals have subsidized long-term efforts to make academia and cultural institutions in general more supportive of right-wing views.

But these explanations simply take the story back a step. We need to take the country’s political system into consideration, at least the way it functions today. This is the analysis we undertake in the next chapter.

Notes

7 Southern Poverty Law Center, Intelligence Report (Spring 2009).
9 Pew Research Center, http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/chapter-1-population-estimates/  


Putnam reports his measures of “civic engagement” varied from state to state. Nevada along with the states of the old Confederacy, the deep South in particular, ranked lowest on this measure. Except for Nevada, these southern states belonged to a region of the country that Donald Trump carried handily in the 2016 presidential election.


In 1987 the Federal Communications Commission reversed a rule requiring radio stations broadcast fair coverage for all points of view in discussing political subjects.


Author’s conversation with Dr. Hans Sipple and his team at the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, July 1999.


Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*.


during the 2016 presidential campaign Alex Jones, a widely known conspiracy theoretcian with his own talk radio show and website, developed a conspiratorial account that alleged the Hillary Clinton campaign was using a pizza restaurant in Northern Virginia as a secret venue for holding kidnapped children until they could be sold into white slavery.\(^{29}\) Other than an announcement that visitors from outer-space had arrived at the same pizzeria, it is hard to imagine a more fantastic tale. Yet at least one young man, armed with a weapon, broke into the restaurant and sought to free its imaginary captives.

Instead of C. Wright Mills’ “power elite” interpretation of Washington politics, we now have the “Swamp.”\(^{30}\) The latter refers not to a small circle of powerful individuals whose party affiliations are largely interchangeable, but to complex networks of foundations with competing policy goals, law firms, high paid lobbyists with offices on K Street offering their clients “access” and influence, former elected politicians anxious to catch the gravy train, and the aforementioned “beltway bandits.” In at least some instances some of those involved are almost literally bandits. Take the case of Jack Abramoff. After the GOP’s 1994 electoral victory, Abramoff acting as a lobbyist linked to the influential Texas congressman Tom DeLay, emphasized his ability to influence Congress and began to offer his services to any group willing to pay him. Leaders of several Native-American tribes paid large amounts of money to Abramoff in order for him to help them avoid paying taxes on their gambling casinos. Abramoff failed to deliver on his bogus promises, after which he was convicted of attempted bribery and fraud and sent to prison. This was among the most widely publicized and egregious examples of lobbyists conning the unsuspecting. Nor are these efforts to influence congressional and executive decision-making confined to American actors. Representatives of Saudi, Israeli, Turkish, Russian, and Ukrainian interests seek to achieve clients’ objectives by working through American lobbying firms. The thought that there may be some public interest involved fails to cross anyone’s mind, except to the extent it can be rationalized in defense of whatever interest they hope to advance.

Little of all this self-seeking morass was especially secret. The media have thrived by uncovering one self-seeking or rent-seeking operation after another. As a consequence, public trust in government was exceptionally low as the country entered the 2016 presidential campaign season. One highly vocal Republican candidate for the presidency, Donald Trump, a businessman, promised to “drain the swamp” and return the control of government into the hands of “The People.” In Chapter 5 we examine the rise of Trump and explain the right-wing forces that promoted his ascent to national leadership.

Notes
4 Fukuyama, p. 463.
5 Fukuyama, p. 468.
8 Juan Linz and Arturo Valenzuela (eds.), The Failure of Presidential Democracy (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).
11 “Judge Judy” is a retired magistrate who appears on an afternoon television show in which she adjudicates petty civil complaints.
15 In their Politics of Unreason (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), Lipset and Raab apply the term “monism” to this type of commentary.
18 Sykes, pp. 68–69.
23 “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System,” Committee on Political Parties, American Political Science Association (1950).
25 Trump also claimed he had sent “agents” to Honolulu to uncover the fraud Obama had perpetrated.
28 Mann and Ornstein, p. 101.
29 For background information on Alex Jones see, Alexander Zaitchik, “Meet Alex Jones,” Rolling Stone (March 17, 2011).
30 Washington DC was built originally on a real swamp. So, the contemporary metaphor is literally true.
in the country. Since the Charlottesville episode the largely tacit relationship between Trump and the white nationalists of the “Alt-Right” seems to have waned as the President has become involved with other matters.

The question remains though, is Trump really a fascist? And if so, what does that portend for the American future?

Notes
3 For an extensive biography see Michael Kranish and Marc Fisher, Trump Revealed (New York: Scribner, 2016).
4 Kranish and Fisher, p. 38.
6 Kranish and Fisher, p. 277.
7 Kranish and Fisher, p. 218.
9 Kranick and Fisher, p. 311.
10 Manafort was later indicted by a federal grand jury for these “murky” foreign financial relationships. Joshua Green, Devil’s Bargain (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), pp. 3–4.
11 Green, p. 4.
13 Trump’s victory gave rise to a vast amount of soul-searching by leading Democrats. For example, the entire March 2017 issue of The New Republic was given over to comments by those seeking sensible explanations for the loss.
14 These accounts were taken from David Neiwert, Alt-America (Brooklyn NY: Verso, 2017), pp. 318–319.
15 Neiwert, p. 327.
16 https://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural-address
19 General Dwight Eisenhower, a former president and commander of Allied forces in Northwest Europe during World War II offered his own non-professional opinion following Goldwater’s opposition to the 1964 civil rights act. He observed “I finally decided it’s not that he’s stubborn. He’s just plain dumb.”
23 Malkin, pp. 57–58.
25 Neiwert, p. 236.

The website takes its name from the Nazi German newspaper *Der Sturmer* edited by Julius Streicher, later convicted as a war criminal at the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal (1946) and hanged.


See, for example, “Hate in America,” *Time* (August 28, 2017), pp. 26–35.

Trump hardly left voters with the impression, unlike Huey Long or George Wallace for example, that he was one of them.

A second peculiar feature of Trump’s roles as candidate and president is the prominence of Jews. American populism has often been tinged with anti-Semitism. And even in Trump’s case, white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups, both online and in the streets, have expressed support for his public views. Trump’s support for the Unite the Right march in Charlottesville, Virginia certainly won him favorable comments among its leaders.

Despite this evident affinity, the Trump administration includes Michael Cohn as its principal economic advisor, Treasury Secretary, Steven Mnuchin, plus Stephen Miller and Jared Kushner, major White House advisors. Kushner also happens to be Trump’s son-in-law. His daughter, Ivanka, became a Jewish convert when she married Kushner. Michael D. Cohen is one of Trump’s private attorneys and the former executive vice-president of the Trump organization. Based on these Trump appointees it would be hard to label Trump an anti-Semite. He may hold undocumented immigrants in disdain and express a host of other ethnic and religious prejudices, but dislike of American Jews does not appear to be one of them.

Perhaps only in America could Andrew Anglin’s Daily Stormer, taking both its name and political outlook from the Nazi German original, heap praise on a president who has surrounded himself with so many Jewish friends and advisors. This may be a marriage of convenience, but a marriage nonetheless. Trump’s Philo-Semitism appears to be the likely result of the fact much of his business career was conducted in New York and its surroundings. In the normal course of conducting his business he would have interacted with Jewish businessmen and lawyers, given the ethnic composition of the city’s business community.

In tone and substance Trump campaigned as an American-style populist, someone angry with the current state of the nation and someone able to voice the resentments of the many. He vowed to keep “undesirable” groups out of the country and to expel those who were already here. This proved to be a winning formula despite his personal wealth and the people with whom he conducted his various business enterprises.

In the concluding chapter of this book we seek to place the Trump phenomenon within a broader context. We also consider the extent to which he poses a threat to American democracy and more broadly to other regions of the world.

Notes


2 Robert Paxton, “American Duce,” Harper’s (May 2017), p. 38. In a CNN interview (money.cnn.com/2018/04/05), Lawrence Summers, a former treasury secretary in the Obama administration and ex-president of Harvard, also sees parallels between Trump and Mussolini based on the former’s attempts to bully various private businesses, Amazon and its CEO Jeff Bezos in particular.
5 Sternhell, p. 334.
9 Although they obviously had much in common, Italian Fascism’s organizing principle was the state while Nazi Germany’s was race.
23 Kazin, p. 28.
24 Quoted in Judis, p. 25.
26 Kazin, p. 35.
29 Lipset and Raab, p. 194.
30 Lipset and Raab, p. 169.


Bowman, p. 504.

Judis, p. 77.

It is worth noting that Andrew Breitbart, founder of Breitbart News, the publication that brought Steve Bannon to national attention, was also Jewish.
3. Toleration or encouragement of violence
4. Readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media.

During the course of his campaign for the presidency in 2016 and first year in office, Trump has certainly displayed these four attitudes, though in varying degrees. He has attacked his political opponents with a bellicosity rarely seen from someone occupying his position. He continued to accuse Hillary Clinton of criminality and led chants of “lock her up” at rallies both before and after the election. He accused his predecessor, Barack Obama, of not being a Christian but a secret Muslim and of being born outside the United States, and, consequently ineligible to serve as president. Trump has also encouraged the use of violence in a number of ways. As we have seen, he encouraged the use of violence by his supporters at campaign rallies. He has encouraged the police to rough-up suspects during arrests. He has expressed support for the “enhanced interrogation” (i.e. torture) of terrorism suspects. And, on a far wider scale, he has threatened to annihilate North Korea if it refuses to abandon its nuclear weapons.

The question of Trump’s readiness to curtail civil liberties seems questionable. It is true he uses his public appearances and Twitter to attack the mass media, often accusing them of disseminating “fake news.” But he has done little so far to stifle freedom of expression. He has developed an antagonistic relationship with federal intelligence and law enforcement agencies, the FBI in particular. We should remember that it was not all that long ago that the FBI and CIA were accused by civil libertarians (e.g. the American Civil Liberties Union) of violating citizens’ rights to privacy and other legal protections. It is no doubt for tactical advantage, but Trump, caught up in the Russian scandal, has criticized these agencies for about the same reasons as many of his opponents on the left.

It is certainly true that Trump challenged the legitimacy of the electoral process, suspecting the voting was being rigged against him, suggesting that millions of illegal immigrants were being brought to the polls by his Democratic opponents. But he has certainly paid lip service at least to the normal democratic rules of the game. He has not challenged the legitimacy of court decisions or interfered with the legislative process.

The record does not end here however. By attempting to stifle inquiries into the role of the Russians in the 2016 election campaign and by denying links between Russian operatives and members of his staff, Trump has violated his oath of office. In taking that oath on January 20, 2017, Trump swore to “defend the country against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” His conduct in office since then constitutes a serious violation of this commitment.

Notes
Final observations: sound the alarm?

4 Freedom in the World 2018, p. 3.
6 Following the March 12, 2018 national elections, it appears as if Italy’s Five Star movement is a likely participant in a coalition government.
8 Sean Wilentz, “They were Bad, He may be Worse,” The New York Times Sunday Review (January 21, 2018), p. 3.
11 Michael Wolff’s Fire and Fury (New York: Henry Holt, 2018) depicts a White House filled with advisors with little experience in government and who regard the president to be of limited ability to run a coherent administration.
12 Other American presidents have been satirized with some frequency. Grover Cleveland, Franklin Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, and both Bushes, senior and junior come to mind. But none of them were experiencing such low job performance ratings in the polls as Trump. The fact that he routinely “tweets” back at his comedic opponents seems to make things worse.