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1

Introduction

THE MOST PREDICTABLE, UNCONVENTIONAL PRESIDENCY

Julian E. Zelizer

I knew this project would differ from the others in my series about the modern American presidency. President Donald J. Trump's four-year administration had been unlike anything else American democracy had experienced in recent decades, if ever. But I had not anticipated what would happen after the authors of this volume gathered for two days—on Zoom, given that we were still in the throes of a devastating global pandemic—to spend almost eight hours discussing early drafts of the chapters. The *New York Times* published a lengthy story by culture reporter Jennifer Schuessler about our conference.[1] When the piece appeared in print, I received an email from Jason Miller, who had been the chief spokesman for Trump's 2016 campaign and a senior adviser on his reelection campaign in 2020. Miller, whose White House career had been sidetracked by a sex scandal, was advising the former president as he decided what to do next.

Miller wrote to say that Trump had read the article and that the former president was very interested in speaking with all of us. He was

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happy to answer any questions we might have. According to Miller, Trump wanted to give us his side of the story. Miller sent, along with correspondence from Trump's assistant Molly Michael, several backgrounders highlighting the accomplishments of the administration. Trump desired, Miller explained, to help my colleagues "tighten up some of the research" we were conducting.[2]

Former presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama never contacted me. Though the *New York Times* had published an article about the conference I convened for the book on the Obama presidency,[3] we never heard from the former president or his staff. This time was different. Trump, with potential ambitions for seeking a second term, seemed eager to influence how historians saw the past. Given the enormous energy he expended during his presidency attempting to influence how Americans understood the events they were witnessing, this wasn't a total surprise. His term had even ended with his promoting a pointed narrative, an effort to sell to his supporters, and to some extent the history books, that he was not an unpopular one-term president like Herbert Hoover or Jimmy Carter whose record had been rejected by the public. Rather, Joe Biden won the election, Trump said, only because he had stolen it.

The authors' responses to the invitation were mixed, which was itself revealing of how different this presidency had been. Whereas some contributors were interested to listen to the president, though skeptical that he would be honest with us, others weren't sure about the value of hearing from a leader likely to repeat the talking points in the documents. More important, a number of people who are not contributors to the book, including some who had worked in Washington, urged us to proceed with caution because the former president, they said, had a record of misconstruing the nature of these conversations. If he ran for reelection, one person feared, we could suddenly be described as historical advisers.

I agreed to set up a Zoom meeting where the president could speak to us. Miller responded that he was excited and would set something up soon. Over the following weeks, the tumult continued. After my call with Miller, both he and the former president were involved in several explosive stories. Miller himself was in a widely publicized legal struggle, ordered by a federal judge to pay $42,000 in legal fees for a failed defamation suit. The former president's business was under a criminal

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investigation by the attorney general of New York. He was also deciding what his role should be in the 2022 midterm elections and how to reestablish his visibility in the media.

Although I wasn't sure that the meeting would really happen, the event took place on July 1. This was one of over twenty-two interviews, according to Axios, that Trump had given for books being written after his term ended.[4] The preparation for the Zoom event was more haphazard than I had imagined. Trump's team allowed me to set up the video link on my own—and to record the event—without any kind of preconditions or even much of a discussion about how it would be structured. His staff did ask me if the meeting would be in a grid or two-person format and whether I would moderate. Though it is impossible to imagine any former commander in chief handling almost any meeting in this loose of a fashion, it wasn't a total surprise for a president who took pride in doing so many things in broad daylight.

At 4:15 in the afternoon, I signed into Zoom so that his team could check the visuals on their end. I was sitting in the family living room, with a bookcase behind me, the same makeshift "studio" that I used for television, classes, and talks since the start of the pandemic. As his production team prepared to go live, I could see that Trump would be sitting at a wooden desk in his Bedminster Golf Club with an American flag on the side. It almost looked like a set from a bare-bones television show about the presidency. He would be positioned in between two windows, each with the blinds drawn down. At 4:20, the contributors gradually started to sign in, all remaining on mute as I had asked them to do. Trump's box went dark once his staff was ready to go, with the video and audio temporarily muted. The screen read "Donald J. Trump." With seconds to go, I took a deep breath, imagining what his debate opponents must have felt like before going on stage, though in this case my job was just to listen and to moderate.

Right at 4:30, Trump's Zoom screen turned on. There was the forty-fifth president of the United States. He was dressed in a standard black suit, wearing a blue tie. As our meeting got under way, the first thought that ran through my head was that this could only happen with this particular president and in the year 2021. Everything about it felt surreal. "Welcome Mr. President, how are you?" I said. "How are you, thank you Julian," he responded. I introduced the president and we began.[5]

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This meeting, which happened one day after C-SPAN released a poll of historians who ranked him as fortieth (beating out only Franklin Pierce, Andrew Johnson, and James Buchanan),[6] was an opportunity for him to tell us how he had strengthened the nation's standing. He spoke in a relatively calm voice, with a single piece of white paper in front of him on the desk, devoid of much of the explosive rhetoric that had become familiar to Americans. Not wanting to waste a second, Trump launched into a fervent defense of his record. He said that he had seen the *New York Times* article about our conference and wanted to make sure that we were accurate. "I read a piece . . . and I said that I'd like to see accuracy. I think that we had a great presidency. . . . We did things in foreign affairs that nobody thought even possible, the Abraham Accords, and other things. . . . It's an honor to be with you. . . . If you are doing a book, I would like you to be able to talk about the success of the Trump, the Trump administration. We've had some great people, we've had some people that weren't so great. That's understandable. That's true with, I guess, every administration. But overall, we had tremendous, tremendous success."

In the surreal modern communications format that resembles the old *Hollywood Squares* television show, on the same day that the Trump Organization was charged with a "scheme to defraud" the government, Trump reiterated a number of claims that he had been making about his term. The consummate showman, Trump knew his audience. Building on documents that Miller had shared with our group, which presented him as a rather conventional and moderate president with a long list of achievements, Trump focused primarily on what he believed to be the most important components of his record on the economy, foreign policy, trade, and the pandemic.

Before the pandemic, Trump said, the economy was breaking all records. And Trump deserved credit. "We got rid of NAFTA, the worst trade deal ever made," he stated as an example. Trump became especially animated when outlining his trade deal with China that had a "tremendous impact" for U.S. farmers, which he admitted to have spoken about very "braggadociously," before having to pull back as a result of COVID-19 ("the plague," he said, "or whatever you want to call it") since it "eviscerated everything we had to do with China." Most people said the COVID-19 vaccine would take a long time to make, if

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it ever came to fruition (three to five years), but Trump boasted to us that the United States finished work on the cure in less than a year. He wanted credit since his administration "made, maybe, one of the best bets in history" by buying billions and billions of dollars in vaccines "long prior to knowing" whether they would work. Though the Federal Drug Administration didn't like his style, Trump said, the pressure that he put on the agency proved successful: "They were very bureaucratic, they were very slow." He added that he also managed to contain costs for the vaccine and other relevant medicines, as well as for other pharmaceutical drugs before the pandemic started.

On foreign policy, Trump moved in rapid-fire fashion through a succession of issues, eager to squeeze in as much as he could before our time ended. When turning to Russia, he reiterated how tough he was with the country, despite getting along with Vladimir Putin. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) received a substantial amount of time as Trump wanted to explain to us his success in compelling member countries to pay higher dues. "It was a rollercoaster downward" while we were a "rocketship upward" he said of a twenty-year period during which the United States paid a disproportionate amount. Trump told us of a meeting with NATO leaders that didn't get "picked up by the press" in which he made demands to our allies to do better. He recounted a speech in which he said that the United States was protecting everyone from "Russia, was the Soviet Union, now Russia, very similar, as you understand, better than anybody." When one leader at the meeting had asked him directly if he would pull out of NATO should they not pay more, Trump said yes. If he had not done that, Trump argued to our group, the negotiations would not have worked. The "other presidents that you write about, in some cases glowingly, they would go to NATO, they wouldn't even mention it, they'd make a speech and say good luck." In contrast, Trump wanted us to understand that he delivered. At another point in his presentation, the former president went into considerable detail about a deal that he worked out with South Korea despite its leader's energetic protestation (the opposite of former Florida governor Jeb Bush, he noted in a side quip). He also vented about governors from blue states who would praise him in private strategy meetings about COVID but then go in front of a press conference one or two days later and "knock the hell

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out of me." It was "so unfair," he remarked. The previous "administrations," had been unprepared, he claimed. Trump made sure to take a few swipes at President Joe Biden before he was done, including offering us a Buzzfeed-style list of countries that were happy about the 2020 election: China, Iran, Russia, and South Korea.

Toward the end of his half-hour presentation, the president made sure to come back to the place where he started.

> I just thought that I would speak to you people, and I respect you. . . . And I thought if you are writing a book, it would really be nice if we had an accurate book. We've had some good ones, we've had some bad ones. We have books written that bear no relationship to the facts, but they want to write them because, you know, they just want to write them. . . . I've gone a little bit out of my way, Julian, to speak to people. They are going to write a book, it's history. Your book is a very important book. . . . I'm looking at the list, it's a tremendous group of people. And I think rather than being critical I'd love to have you hear me out, which is what we are doing now, and I appreciate it.

Trump concluded with an unexpected foray into the construction of the navy's $13 billion supercarrier, "the stupidest thing that I've ever seen," the USS *Gerald R. Ford*. The press had been reporting on the technical difficulties that the navy had been experiencing. Trump recalled his visit to the carrier during which he had allegedly warned "Mr. Architect," who was in charge of the technologically cutting-edge project, that they were making big mistakes. Trump remembered meeting with one of the "catapulters," who had been there for twenty-one years, who didn't understand why they put the tower in the back of the ship and used electric rather than steam. None of them agreed with what the higher-ups were doing with the design. All the new technology, the worker had told then president Trump, didn't make sense to anyone who had experience in aerial military operations and you had to be "Albert Einstein" to fix things that in older eras would have been easy to repair; steam was simpler than electric. Though the puzzled faces in the Zoom boxes of our contributors suggested to me they were not quite sure what Trump was trying to tell us, the point of the story seemed to be that he knew how

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to build things and that even the best and brightest—perhaps a not so subtle jab at all of us—without "common sense" often didn't know what they were doing in contrast to average, hardworking people who didn't get any respect.

Over the second half hour of our event, Trump took the questions in stride, repeatedly saying that everything was "fair" and answering every query in a relatively constrained tone. To be sure, there were moments of classic Trumpism, such as his criticism of James Comey as a "sick person" whom liberals had hated until he fired him or describing January 6 as a peaceful rally, with "way over" a million people, that was ruined by a small group, infiltrated by Antifa and Black Lives Matter activists, who were not contained as a result of poor decisions by Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the U.S. Capitol Police. He spoke about why the standard press releases that he had been using since being banned from Twitter were "far more elegant" forms of communication than 140-character missives, sounding almost as if he were the one to have discovered the format that presidents have been using for decades.

But Trump did not become confrontational. This was not the proper setting. When Jeffrey Engel asked if he could really have imagined not coming to the defense of a member of NATO should one of them have been attacked, he acknowledged the importance of alliances and that there was a "good thing" to unity and the organization, but returned to the point that he wanted every member to pay its fair share. Michael Kazin asked if he thought of himself as part of the conservative tradition or whether he had remade conservatism. Trump said that, though he was a conservative, he preferred to think of himself as a "common sense person," wherever that mentality led him—"I believe we have to have borders, I believe in good education, I believe in a strong military, I believe in law and order. . . . I think they are mostly conservative," and he believed in "fair" trade, devoid of the bad agreements that had been negotiated by "stupid people" on Capitol Hill. Trump pushed back on the perception that he was antiexpertise, instead coming back to the idea that he was motivated by common sense, listening to many voices for whom he had "tremendous respect," including Anthony Fauci (who, he explained, liked to say, "Call me Tony, sir"), but then using his own instincts to decide what was the best path forward for the nation.

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Trump had a few seemingly candid moments. He admitted, for instance, that he should have been more careful with whom he retweeted, since some of the individuals whose messages he blasted out "fairly quickly" were not "the best person to retweet." He suggested understanding why so many people were taken aback by the language he used in his infamous "rocket man" tweets about North Korea's Kim Jong-un but believed the bluster helped check the dangerous nation and prevent any sort of war. When Beverly Gage began her question by explaining that she was writing the chapter on Trump's relationship to the FBI and intelligence communities, he flashed a bit of humor by predicting that "it's going to be a beauty."

As we reached the end of our time, I brought the discussion to a close. After I thanked him, he thanked us as well for the opportunity and said, "I hope it's going to be a number one best seller!"

Then, as is the case in the world of Zoom, I clicked the red "leave meeting" button and the event ended. The meeting was over, the president and my contributors were gone. Within minutes I received a thank-you note from him, via one of his assistants, that said, "Julian, So interesting—thank you very much. Please feel free to call if I can be of further assistance. President Donald J. Trump."

Two days later, Trump was back on the campaign trail. Announcing that he had already made his decision about whether to run again in 2024, Trump delivered a blistering speech at a "Save America" rally in rainy Sarasota, Florida. Going after "prosecutorial misconduct" by the Manhattan District Attorney's office, a "rigged" election system, and the "fake media," he promised that "together we will take back the House and we will take back the Senate, and we will take back America." On July 9, as a final coda to the story, Trump announced to the press that doing so many interviews with authors writing books about him had been a "total waste of time." He added: "These writers are often bad people who write whatever comes to their mind or fits their agenda. It has nothing to do with facts or reality."[7]

The entire interaction immediately suggested the unique challenges that any historian faces when trying to write about the recent past. Whether dealing with a living subject as unpredictable as President Trump or tackling more staid questions, the challenge of contemporary

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history is formidable. This is a subject that historians have debated many times over the centuries.

In 1967, writing in *The Atlantic*, the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. took on the bias against historians (like himself) who sought to interpret the times in which they lived. Schlesinger, who had famously been an adviser to President John F. Kennedy, published one of the classic texts on the administration after being inside the closed doors of decision-making.[8] Contemporary history was not only legitimate, Schlesinger argued, but more vital than ever before. The accelerating pace of change in modern times, he claimed, meant that "the 'present' becomes the 'past' more swiftly than ever before." Schlesinger offered a robust defense of this kind of writing, claiming that it was no longer "a personal whim or passing fashion. It is now a necessity—a psychic necessity to counter the pressures of life in a high velocity age and a technical necessity to rescue and preserve evidence for future historians."[9]

The premise of my series with Princeton University Press has always been that the first draft of history matters. Though incomplete and part of an ongoing conversation, it is an important first step. My exploration of presidents when they finish their term attempts to offer a template for undertaking this kind of work. Knowing that interpretations of any presidency will continue to evolve in perpetuity, and that historians who are themselves part of an era have a firsthand feel for the political atmosphere and key actors who shaped a moment, the initial historiography can offer important interventions. Too often, however, it is not done in the most useful fashion. Indeed, I launched this project in response to fielding questions from journalists who believe that the major contribution we can offer them is to rank different presidencies or to state with certainty what their "legacy" will be. Because I felt that neither question was especially pertinent or even answerable, my goal has always been to let professional historians do what they do best: contextualize a political leader within the long-term institutional, organizational, social, and cultural forces shaping the nation.

With each volume in this series, I have hoped to offer a foundation for thinking about what happened within a four- to eight-year period by turning to historians with expertise in relevant issues. I have searched

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for scholars whose work sits outside the cluster of "presidential historians" frequently seen and quoted in the press (though some of those presidential-centered scholars, whose writing retains a firm footing in the academy, have been included as well). Rather than exploring how a president "did" relative to his predecessors on some illusory scale, we seek to understand how the commander in chief operated in relation to what he inherited upon stepping into the Oval Office.

Although this series has dealt with divisive presidents before, never has the challenge felt as complicated as with President Donald Trump. Trump is one of the most unconventional presidents in American history. For any historian, the question instantly emerges: How does one write the history of a tumultuous period such as this? How does a scholar capture the events of this era with words that are direct and accurate but that will inevitably suggest normative assessments? What kind of language should one use? How does one write about a president who uttered words appealing to white nationalists in 2020 and incited a violent insurrection against the U.S. Congress, but do so in the analytical language that one might use to describe tax policy? Is that even the correct way to evaluate the period? How can we write about continuities and familiar political dynamics without "normalizing" behavior that must be understood to be a massive departure from political tradition?

The authors of this book, who are among the best historians in the country, have taken up the challenge with gusto. Unlike the work of journalists and writers whose focus has been on telling the behind-the-scenes, day-to-day events that consume any White House—the "fire and fury" of the moment, as the journalist Michael Wolff called it[10]—these essays are all about putting events into a long-term perspective. They use the knowledge and data currently available, and vast bodies of scholarly literature about the relevant pillars of the past leading to this moment, to examine what parts of this epoch can be understood as continuity—and thus a reflection of the troubled state of democracy toward the end of the 2010s—and what elements constituted sharp breaks, revealing how this administration pushed the country in new directions. They look beyond narratives of Trump as an out-of-control lone ranger maneuvering, as different advisors either tried to support or subvert him, to instead offer readers a bigger canvas to understand the moment.[11]

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Whereas first-rate journalistic accounts of President Trump's immigration policies start their narrative with a cadre of America First hardliners, such as Stephen Miller and Stephen Bannon,[12] who discovered in Trump someone who could champion their vision for a winning candidate in 2016, the historians in this book begin back in the 1990s with the broader shift away from the 1965 immigration paradigm as a result of changes in political economy and partisan alignment. Reporters highlight Trump's personal fury at China to explain his willingness to break with the free-trade axioms of his party; this book looks at the gradual, multidecade breakdown of the accord that Richard Nixon reached with China in 1972 as part of his foreign policy of détente. The debate over racism and policing exploded, the pundits would write, after horrendous acts of violence against African Americans were captured on smartphones. The historian goes back to the urban rebellions of the 1960s,[13] at a minimum, to trace the ongoing struggle against institutional racism in our criminal justice system.

———

At the center of each chapter is Donald John Trump, a man who came to Washington from the world of New York real estate and reality television. Born on June 14, 1946, in Queens, New York, Trump was one of five children (the second youngest) of a real estate developer from the Bronx named Fred Trump and his wife, Mary Anne MacLeod Trump. The family raised the kids in Queens. Donald attended the Kew-Forest School until seventh grade and then, because of misbehavior, went to the New York Military Academy at age thirteen. He studied for two years as an undergraduate at Fordham University before transferring to the University of Pennsylvania, where he earned a degree from the Wharton School of Business in May 1968. Though Trump finished college while the United States was fighting in Vietnam, he avoided service five times, first through student draft deferments and then through medical exemptions.

Trump worked for his father's real estate company, Trump Management, starting when he was in college. His father had amassed more than twenty-seven thousand pieces of real estate in the outer boroughs of New York. The company bought rental properties around the city.

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When Donald's older brother died from alcoholism at age forty-two, Fred decided that Donald would be the heir to his business. Just three years after graduating from college, Donald moved into the position of president and grew the operation into the Trump Organization. His father provided him with the money he needed to make investments. He had been receiving hundreds of thousands a year from his father since he was a child. Transfers of money and shell corporations amounting to more than $413 million in his lifetime revolved around elaborate schemes by which his family could avoid taxes.[14] Trump made a name for himself in the city by purchasing the beat-up Commodore Hotel and transforming it into the Grand Hyatt, which officially opened in Midtown in 1980. He developed Trump Tower and purchased the Plaza Hotel in 1988. Meanwhile, Trump started to invest in other properties. In Palm Beach, Florida, he purchased the Mar-a-Lago estate. In Atlantic City, New Jersey, he opened the Harrah's at Trump Plaza in 1984 and the Trump Taj Mahal in 1990.

Besides procuring real estate, Trump focused much of his attention on branding. He licensed his name for clothing, food, and buildings that his company did not run. He bought the New York Generals in 1983, a football team in the upstart United States Football League, and sponsored boxing matches. In 1988, Trump acquired Eastern Air Lines Shuttle and turned it into the Trump Shuttle. Like most of his ventures, this business lasted for just four years, failing to produce any profit. Within two years, the company wasn't earning enough to cover the mortgage payment for the $245 million loan he used to buy the planes. He depended on family partnerships to bail himself out of these ventures.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Trump emerged as a well-known figure in the New York media, a constant presence on the gossipy Page Six of the *New York Post*. One reporter wrote in 1984, "Donald J. Trump is the man of the hour. Turn on the television or open the newspaper almost any day of the week and there he is, snatching some star from the National Football League, announcing some preposterously lavish project he wants to build."[15] Always focusing his attention on the brand name, Trump relished his reputation as a brash, straight-talking real estate mogul who took part in the city's colorful nightlife. "Trump seemed an ideal subject for us," one reporter from the *Post* recalled, "as

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apt a symbol of the gaudy 1980s as the Christian Lacroix pouf skirt—and just as shiny and inflated."[16] Though he never found acceptance within New York's elite social circles, with many of the city's prominent figures seeing him as too brash—more Long Island than Upper East Side—and untrustworthy, the media soaked him up. He reveled in the image of being a tough, say-it-like-it-is guy, a man of the people who had done well. His father's wealth and money didn't make it into the narrative. Never hesitant to provide provocative statements to reporters, Trump emerged as a go-to guest on radio and television shows. "He is tall, lean and blond, with dazzling white teeth," noted an early *New York Times* profile, "and he looks ever so much like Robert Redford. He rides around town in a chauffeured silver Cadillac with his initials, DJT, on the plates. He dates slinky fashion models, belongs to the most elegant clubs and, at only 30 years of age, estimates that he is worth 'more than $200 million.'"[17] His love life continued to fascinate, first his 1977 marriage to the Czech model Ivana Zelníčková (with whom he had Donald Jr., Ivanka, and Eric), and then his affair with Marla Maples, whom he married in 1993 after divorcing Ivana (they had a daughter, Tiffany). He and Marla divorced in 1999, and Trump married Melania Knauss, a Slovenian model, in 2005 (they had a son named Baron). As of this writing, twenty-six women have accused Trump of sexual misconduct, including rape, since the 1970s. The allegations didn't stifle his growing presence. In 1987, his best-selling book *The Art of the Deal*, ghostwritten by Tony Schwartz, burnished his image as a master deal maker unrivaled in negotiations. The public started to perceive him as a brilliant entrepreneur. "Mr. Trump makes one believe for a moment in the American dream again. It's like a fairy tale," one reviewer noted.[18] Trump's appearances on professional wrestling and the *Howard Stern Show* made him a known voice. *Trump: The Game* came out two years after the book. Milton Bradley sold just eight hundred thousand of the two million game units produced.

On numerous occasions, he dipped his toes into the political waters. When five Black and Latino teenage men were (wrongly) arrested in 1989 for raping a woman jogging in Central Park, Trump purchased an advertisement in the city newspapers, including the *New York Times*, demanding the death penalty. "I want to hate these murderers and I always will," Trump stated in the ad. "I am not looking to

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psychoanalyze or understand them, I am looking to punish them . . . BRING BACK THE DEATH PENALTY AND BRING BACK OUR POLICE!" In a different light, he published an advertisement calling for peace in Central America and for President Ronald Reagan to pursue arms negotiations with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Trump frequently switched party affiliations. He registered as a Republican in 1987, with the Independence Party in 1999, as a Democrat in 2001, as a Republican in 2009, with no party in 2011, and then again with the GOP in 2012.

Notwithstanding the image of himself that he promoted, Trump's business career was always problematic. Starting in 1973, when he hired former senator Joseph McCarthy's chief counsel, Roy Cohn, to advise him, the U.S. Department of Justice sued the Trump Management Corporation for racially discriminatory practices, violating the Fair Housing Act of 1968 in thirty-nine properties. Cohn, who would remain a close adviser for many years, helped Trump Management countersue the government for $100 million for making the charges. The company's discriminatory practices were well known. The folk singer Woody Guthrie, who had lived in one of Trump's properties, penned lyrics for a song called "Old Man Trump" about the elder: "Old Man Trump knows just how much racial hate he stirred up in that bloodpot of human hearts when he drawed that color line here at his Beach Haven family project." The Department of Justice found that the company refused to rent property to African Americans and lied about availability. The government and the Trumps reached a settlement in June 1975. Trump's company was required to provide the New York Urban League with a list of available apartments every week, and, in turn, the league could share the list with potential applicants. Besides race relations and labor practices, his business track record also caused deep concerns in the financial community. After the 1980s, most banks refused to do business with him because he had defaulted on hundreds of millions of dollars in loans; only Deutsche Bank was willing to lend him funds. During the 1990s and early 2000s, his organization filed for bankruptcy six times. He used the bankruptcies and other techniques to avoid paying income taxes for almost eighteen years.

His road into presidential politics happened gradually. Trump had run in some primaries as the Reform Party candidate in 1999 (he

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attacked his opponent, Patrick Buchanan, as a "Hitler Lover"). He roared back into the political spotlight in 2011 when he spoke to the Conservative Political Action Committee conference. Standing at the podium, Trump spoke for fourteen minutes, warning that the United States was becoming the "laughingstock" and "whipping post" for the world because its leaders were "weak and ineffective." He argued that China was a grave threat to the nation and dismissed Republicans like Ron Paul. "I like Ron Paul," Trump said as Paul's supporters started calling out his name. "I think he's a good guy—but honestly, he has just zero chance of getting elected."[19] That year, and in 2012, Trump emerged as a major figure in the birther movement, a campaign that stemmed from fringe right-wing organizations claiming that Barack Obama had not been born in Hawaii. Because of his public standing, he brought the effort to challenge the legitimacy of the first African American president to a bigger stage. "I'm starting to think he was not born here," he told the *Today* show. With newfound notoriety, he used the social media platform Twitter, while it was still relatively unknown, to continue blasting the president and to keep attention on himself. "How amazing," he wrote in one tweet in 2013, "the State Health Director who verified copies of Obama's 'birth certificate' died in plane crash today. All others lived." In another tweet, he called on hackers, who were "hacking everything else," to obtain Obama's college records and determine his place of birth.

Reality television, however, constituted his main path to political power. The producer Mark Burnett, a successful Briton who had pioneered this art form with the show *Survivor*, decided to launch a series about business. The premise of the show, which premiered on January 8, 2004, was that a successful tycoon would judge contestants who were competing in different tasks, from advertising to selling goods. Burnett thought that Trump would be the perfect person for the job. His brash, larger-than-life personality was the exact character he was searching for. And the formula worked. *The Apprentice* was a smash hit for fifteen seasons, attracting millions of viewers per episode; there was also a spin-off, *Celebrity Apprentice*, that featured B-level entertainers competing for Trump's affection. With the tagline "You're Fired!" the shows promoted Trump's reputation as the tough-as-nails, brutally honest business mogul who was the only person willing to tell it like it

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is. New Yorkers were more than familiar with him, but *The Apprentice* brought Trump to massive audiences around the country. As Frank Rich wrote, "The ritualistic weekly firing on 'The Apprentice' is an instant TV classic—right up there with Rod Serling beckoning us into the Twilight Zone."[20] Many came to perceive him as one of the savviest and most skillful entrepreneurs around—even as his actual business dealings were suffering. "For millions of Americans," one profile explained, "this became their image of Trump: in the boardroom, in control, firing people who didn't measure up to his standards. Trump lived in grand style, flew in a Trump-emblazoned jet or helicopter, and traveled from Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue to Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach, Florida."[21] At the 2016 Emmy Awards, seven weeks before the election, the comedian Jimmy Kimmel looked at Burnett, who was sitting in the audience, and said, "Television brings people together, but television can also tear us apart. I mean, if it wasn't for television, would Donald Trump be running for President? . . . Thanks to Mark Burnett, we don't have to watch reality shows anymore, because we're living in one."[22]

When he officially decided to run for president, Trump was forced by NBC to step down from the show. Some speculated that he had toyed with running for the presidency in order to negotiate a better contract. But by the time his role on the show ended, Trump had the name recognition and image he wanted. On June 16, 2015, Trump came down the escalator of the glitzy Trump Tower in New York City—where *The Apprentice* had been filmed and where he lived—to announce before a hallway packed with reporters that he would "make America great again," warning of the undocumented Mexicans and Chinese officials who, he said, were threatening the United States. "Our country is in serious trouble," he said. "We don't have victories anymore."[23]

During the 2016 Republican primaries, Trump squared off against a number of formidable opponents, including Florida governor Jeb Bush, Florida senator Marco Rubio, Texas senator Ted Cruz, New Jersey governor Chris Christie, Ohio governor John Kasich, and many others in a crowded field. He turned his rallies into a central promotional instrument. Drawing passionate crowds, Trump stoked division and rage by railing against the multiple threats he claimed were undermining

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the country. After violence erupted at these events, such as when an African American protester was physically punched and kicked, he appeared to egg it on from the stage. The campaign used the events to collect data about supporters, while endless national media coverage of these spectacles provided the kind of free airtime that was impossible for other candidates to obtain. As a product and fan of television, Trump understood the medium. He knew that making provocative statements on air, as well as on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, would generate greater attention for what he was trying to do. At the same time, he capitalized on the fact that the press seemed to bend over backward to demonstrate that they were being "fair and balanced" in covering him, inviting surrogates from the campaign to appear on air as "political analysts."

Politics, as Finley Peter Dunne's character Mr. Dooley proclaimed, was never "beanbag." But Trump took things to an entirely different level. In early January 2016, he attacked Republican senator John McCain, a well-respected Vietnam War veteran, by saying that he preferred war heroes "who weren't captured." He mocked other Republicans in the primaries, giving them nicknames like "Lyin' Ted" Cruz and "Liddle Marco." At one point, Trump compared Ben Carson's "pathological temper" to "child molesting" and insulted the physical appearance of the businesswoman Carly Fiorina.[24] Coming in just behind Cruz in Iowa, Trump went on to win the primaries in New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Nevada. He relished being the underdog, pitting himself against the political establishment and using each victory to show that the conventional analysts had no idea what they were talking about. He took seven out of eleven states on Super Tuesday. In May, he secured the nomination. To shore up support with evangelical Republicans, Trump promised to appoint conservative-leaning judges drawn from lists crafted by the Right through the Federalist Society. To be sure, there were Republicans who opposed the nomination. President George W. Bush and his father refused to attend the Republican Convention. Former Republican nominee Mitt Romney delivered a blistering speech calling Trump a "phony and fraud," mocking failed ventures such as Trump Steaks, and imploring the party to reject him before it was too late. Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska announced that he

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would not attend his own party's convention, explaining that he would rather take his kids to "watch some dumpster fires across the state, all of which enjoy more popularity than the current frontrunner."[25]

Despite her impressive résumé, the Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton struggled as much of the media focused on Trump. Nor could she contain the endless email scandal stories that dogged her campaign. During the spring of 2016, Russian hackers infiltrated the emails of John Podesta, the head of the Democratic National Committee, and leaked them onto the internet through WikiLeaks in July. The data dump offered some embarrassing, though routine, private exchanges that stoked divisions among Democrats, particularly the lingering tensions between supporters of Senator Bernie Sanders, who had done better than expected in the primaries, and Clinton. The press discovered that when Clinton had been secretary of state, she had maintained a private email server, which was sometimes used for official business. Alleging that this had posed a national security threat, Republicans claimed that the emails were at the center of what was her worst criminal activity. The story triggered an FBI investigation. "Hillary's emails" turned into a major talking point for the GOP. There were also stories coming from the press that her decisions as secretary of state had been influenced by donors to the Clinton Foundation. The attacks constantly raised suspicions that somehow Clinton was corrupt while diverting attention from the major policy issues that the candidate wanted to discuss. Even when FBI director James Comey announced on July 5 that "no reasonable prosecutor" would bring a case against Clinton, recommending that no charges be made, the Republican attacks against Clinton on this issue continued.

The 2016 Republican Convention in Cleveland didn't disappoint. It was as if the world of professional wrestling, on whose shows Trump had appeared, choreographed the proceedings. Ignoring critics within his party, Trump and fellow Republicans put on a blistering show where every speaker threw red meat to the crowd. In the Quicken Arena, the speakers offered a gloomy assessment of the nation. They went after Clinton—former First Lady, U.S. senator, and secretary of state—by portraying her as a criminal. One night of the celebration showcased mothers who were in mourning after their kids had been killed by undocumented Latinos. "A vote for Hillary," one mother said,

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"is putting all of our children's lives at risk." New Jersey governor Chris Christie, as "former federal prosecutor" (he told the delegates), made a case against Clinton. General Michael Flynn stole the show when he galvanized the delegates with the chant "Lock her up! Lock her up!" In his acceptance speech, Trump said, "The attacks on our police, and the terrorism in our cities, threaten our very way of life." Trump promised that he alone "can fix it."

Clinton and the Democrats still felt good about their chances. It was hard for many Democrats to believe that Trump wouldn't cause many Republicans to defect from the party ticket—some made predictions of a landslide akin to 1964, when reaction against the extremist senator Barry Goldwater's nomination caused a massive victory for President Lyndon Johnson—and that Democrats wouldn't flock to the polls. It was also difficult for many in the press to see how a majority of Americans could cast their ballots for such a divisive figure as Trump, who lacked any experience in government and made a mockery of the election process. When data in October showed a close race in key states, analysts tended to assume that those competitions would inevitably end up in Clinton's favor.

The general election didn't get any prettier. Trump replaced his manager, the seasoned campaign operative Paul Manafort, with a team that included Roger Ailes, the creator of Fox News, who had been fired because of sexual harassment charges; the chairman of Breitbart News, Stephen Bannon; and a small group of other close advisers who pushed Trump to embrace his America First, conservative populist, antiestablishment message. The connection with the Far Right troubled some Republicans, but not enough for them to announce their support for Clinton. Trump played to core themes of white resentment, attacking China for robbing American workers of their jobs and continuing to paint immigration as a dire threat to the nation. There were frequent retweets of antisemitic, Islamophobic, and xenophobic messages. When CNN's Jake Tapper questioned Trump about the fact that Ku Klux Klan grand wizard David Duke had endorsed him, the Republican nominee refused to disavow the endorsement and would not acknowledge that he knew who Duke was or even what Tapper meant by "white nationalism." "I don't know anything about David Duke. I don't know what you're even talking about with white

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supremacy and white supremacist," he said.[26] When these kinds of statements led Clinton to state at a fund-raiser, "You know, just to be grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables, right? The racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it. And he has lifted them up," Trump supporters lit into the Democrats and embraced the term as their own. "DEPLORABLE LIVES MATTER," one banner said.

Trump dodged scandal after scandal. Moments that would have brought down many other campaigns didn't seem to affect him. He made Teflon seem sticky. In early October, the media reported on an audio recording from 2005 during an interview with the entertainment program *Access Hollywood*. While speaking off-camera, without knowing that he was on tape, Trump recounted his sexual conquests to the host Billy Bush and boasted of having sexually assaulted women. "I'm automatically attracted to beautiful women—I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. When you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything." When Bush said, "Whatever you want," Trump replied, "Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything." Some Republicans feared that this would be the end of the campaign. The head of the Republican National Committee, Reince Priebus, urged the candidate to drop out to save the party. But Trump would have none of it. And he was right. The tape wasn't a turning point. It barely dented his support. And he survived. Dismissing the recorded conversation as "locker room talk," Trump and his supporters used this scandal as another example of "politically correct" Democrats coming after him and "real" American men. The *Access Hollywood* story drowned out coverage of a major public announcement by the U.S. intelligence community that Russia was meddling in the election to help bolster Trump.

The televised debates were a spectacle. While Clinton attempted to offer substantive answers to the questions about policy and leadership, while warning the nation of the dangers that would come from her opponent winning, Trump conducted these events like a reality show. He blasted insults at his opponent and physically lurked behind her as she spoke. He repeatedly uttered false statements and did little to engage the questions asked. At one encounter, he brought into the audience three women who had accused Bill Clinton of sexual assault; two hours before the debate, he appeared with them at a press conference.

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Clinton was jolted one last time when FBI director James Comey, who in the summer had announced that the investigation into Clinton's emails was closed, told the press on October 28 that it was being revived in light of new evidence. With eleven days left until the election, Comey's announcement swung the coverage back to the Clinton scandals in the final days of the campaign, chipping away at her narrow lead. A few days later, Comey would tell reporters that the investigation was closed again and that there was nothing there. It was too late. The damage had been done. At the same time, the Clinton campaign failed to pay sufficient attention to what was going on in states like Michigan or Pennsylvania, where they were convinced that victory was at hand.[27] The events on the ground were inadequate, as was the daily polling, to turn out voters to support her.

On Election Day, the seventy-year-old Trump was victorious. Clinton won the popular vote with three million more than Trump, but she lost the Electoral College by 227 to 304. While Clinton did well in blue states, Trump retained Republican support in the red states and even did better than Romney had in 2012 in three key battleground states—Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania—where Trump won by razor-thin margins. During his inauguration speech, Trump promised a nation still stunned by the outcome, "This American carnage stops right here and right now."

Trump's opponents had greatly underestimated how much desire there was among voters for a businessman and celebrity to win the highest office in the land. They could have observed how celebrities had successfully transitioned into politics, such as the former professional wrestler Jesse Ventura (governor of Minnesota) and the former bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger (governor of California). Ross Perot, a Texas businessman, didn't win but did run two successful third-party candidacies for the presidency. The nation's celebrity culture had elevated the stature of figures who succeeded in the world of entertainment and business, sometimes granting them greater standing than experienced career politicians who knew the ropes of Capitol Hill and the federal bureaucracy. Since the 1970s, the "anti-politician" had also gained strength in presidential campaigns. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, a number of politicians (with more political experience than Trump) won office by positioning

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themselves as emanating from outside of Washington. In 1976, former Georgia governor Jimmy Carter made his lack of experience in Washington a virtue as he promised voters that they could trust him. Ronald Reagan never shied away from making the federal government—and everyone who worked in it—the foil of his attacks.[28] He was not part of the city, and that, he said, is what would make him a great leader. Except for George H. W. Bush, career officials like Lyndon Johnson were increasingly rare; successful candidates ran against the nation's capital rather than based on their experience of working within it. Trump was perfectly situated to take on this persona.

Nor had his opponents come to terms with how much the deep partisan polarization of the nation gave room for a candidate who played to the most extreme elements of the electorate. Many politicians still adhered to the conventional wisdom that presidential candidates needed to play to the center if they wanted to win. Trump had absorbed the fact that America had become a deeply polarized nation. Centrists were no longer a major presence in the electorate and almost nonexistent within the GOP. Whereas other presidential candidates, such as George W. Bush and Obama, pushed back against partisan division, Trump relished it. There was a red America and a blue America; he would put all his attention on the red. And the strategy worked. Trump likewise had a keen feel for how the Republican Party had moved far to the right over the previous decade, with a formidable media infrastructure to broadcast right-wing messaging. Politics was polarized; Republicans were radicalized. From attacking Mexican immigrants to railing against a corrupt, biased media, Trump played directly into this modern reality. The real key to Trump's Electoral College victory against Hillary Clinton was that in the final weeks of the campaign Trump whipped up Republican energy behind the ticket. The red states did not turn blue. This was essential, or his seventy-eight-thousand-vote margin in swing states would not have mattered. Faced with a choice between Trump and Clinton on Election Day, Republicans came home.

Whether or not Trump was self-conscious about his sensibility of the national political culture, he understood the illiberal traditions deeply embedded in the fabric of America. His version of conservative populism played into the nativism, racism, sexism, insular xenophobic nationalism, and white rage that all had deep histories in this country.

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Not only were these uglier values part of the American political tradition, but in varying degrees they had served as a foundation of the strategies used by politicians who championed white working- and middle-class Americans. Trump just took it to another level and did so without any sense of hesitation or shame.[29]

Once Trump had political power, he shook this country to the core. Very few Americans remained indifferent to his words or deeds. For his opponents, Trump was doing nothing less than threatening the very foundations of the nation's democratic institutions—some argued planting the seeds of authoritarianism—and leaving everyone in the United States in a permanently weakened condition. For supporters, he was virtually a messiah, fighting against elements of the country that were gradually undermining what they saw as our traditions and our social fabric. By the time his four years were over, an ending that Trump never accepted and insisted to his supporters was a fraudulent outcome, the United States was torn apart.

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The following pages take a deep dive into the four turbulent years between 2017 and 2021. Most historians in this collection simultaneously understand Trump to be a product of the era, not the cause but someone who had the capacity to break with our politics in fundamental ways. The authors all seek to explain the Trump presidency by grounding these years in much longer time frames, a product of developments reshaping democratic politics since the 1960s, some dating back all the way to our founding. Their chapters reveal a president who could sometimes generate immense heat while failing to actually redirect policy, and at other times push through deep changes to the substance of the administrative state.

Several themes loom over these chapters as they move into the heart of this presidency. How healthy are U.S. democratic institutions in the twenty-first century? Often, we hear that despite all the division and tumult, citizens can have confidence that the democracy still works. The nation's constitutional system of checks and balances, as well as the separation of powers, is enduring enough to survive the most tumultuous periods in our nation's history. This was the refrain

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sometimes uttered after Richard Nixon's disgraceful fall from power. Yet during the Trump presidency, some observers wondered whether this was really the case. More than any recent president, Trump tested the constraints on power, willing to do things in broad daylight that most presidents would have avoided or done secretly, thereby exposing massive vulnerabilities and broken elements of our political processes. Partisanship protected him twice from being convicted in the Senate after the House voted to impeach him. The following chapters consider what the different elements of the Trump presidency reveal about the condition of our polity.

The authors also reconsider the nature of political polarization since the 1970s. After many years when historians and political scientists focused on the growing division between Democrats and Republicans, more recently attention has shifted to the different ways each party has developed. Polarization has not been equal. Republicans have moved further to the extremes than Democrats. The Trump presidency offers a path to understand the state of the modern Republican Party in terms of its issue agenda, its political tactics and organization, and its relationship to governance. Some of the contributors see in his presidency a notable drift toward authoritarianism. Others characterize his regime as the culmination of a radicalized party that champions policies that are far off center and embraces a form of smashmouth partisan warfare where there are no guardrails.

This asymmetric history of partisanship connects to the state of the conservative movement in the 2010s. Historians, including myself, have examined the long history of this movement, starting from the decades when it took form in the 1960s and 1970s, to its entrance into the halls of power between Reagan's and George W. Bush's presidencies. Although frequently described as a lone wolf, Trump instead must be seen to be at the center of conservatism in the current era. His policy agenda and his strategies—from immigration restrictionism to conservative court appointees to tax cuts to deployment of the right-wing media—are grounded in this stage of modern conservative politics. While there were important variations within conservativism, he drew on strands of the movement that were there from the start.

Under Trump, this style of Republican partisanship converged with the vast expanse of presidential power that had occurred in the

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twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The power, staff, and regulatory authority accorded to the president vastly increased. In the age of the Cold War and then the war on terror, the growth of the national security apparatus handed the inhabitant of the Oval Office unprecedented resources to act without congressional oversight. Even the elevation of the bully pulpit meant that the president, through his words, could affect the public agenda in dramatic fashion. As I argued in my volume about George W. Bush, conservatives came to love presidential power as much as liberals, creating a bipartisan consensus around a muscular executive branch.[30] Even after the fallout from Vietnam and Watergate in the 1970s, which included a burst of reforms that strengthened the legislative branch, presidential power remained robust. Trump used this authority in aggressive fashion to pursue his goals with or without the consent of Congress. His presidency twice tested the capacity of a polarized Congress to execute the impeachment process when legislators believed that power had been abused.

All of this also points our attention to the state of what one group of historians called the "New Deal Order."[31] The systematic attack on the policies, ideas, and interests that coalesced during the decades between the 1930s and the 1970s has been at the center of the conservative movement. The decades since Reagan ended his presidency have witnessed a fierce and ongoing battle over key elements of that older order that have endured, ranging from social safety-net programs like Social Security and voting rights, to defining ideals such as pluralism, racial justice, and liberal internationalism, to institutions such as unions, the administrative state, and the United Nations. Even after the Cold War ended in the early 1990s, much of this order survived. Through his efforts to dismantle the legacies of twentieth-century politics, Trump allows us to gain insight into their condition as we approach the middle part of the twenty-first century. In certain cases, Trump deployed executive power and his rhetoric to make deep cuts into policies and guiding principles. In other cases, the persistence and expansion of liberalism was far more robust than he or other Republicans had imagined.[32]

The historians in this book agree that these were the most serious of times. They don't tend to concur with what might be called the "aberration school of thought." The presidency was not some one-off that will automatically result in a course correction, but a period of deep-seated

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conflict that profoundly wounded our polity. Some of the chapters focus on the institutional and coalitional foundations upon which the Trump presidency was built (Zelizer, Hemmer, Burgin, Belew, Cadava, Zarnow). Others explore the roots and impact of President Trump's domestic policies (Ngai, Smith, Demuth, Taylor, O'Mara) and foreign policies (Engel, Mann, Kurtzer). Finally, the rest of the authors look at the political and policy forces that checked and weakened the presidency of Donald Trump and ultimately brought it to an end (Gage, Chowkwanyun, Kazin, Downs).

When his term was done, the Trump presidency cemented some of the biggest fault lines in the nation. We exited the Trump years in a different place than we started. In many respects, no one could see the presidency, or the country, in the same light as they did when the Trump presidency began.

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