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Thoughts on the Trump Divide

By DR. DAVID FRISK
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

A year into his presidency, American conservatives remain divided about Donald Trump. Their disagreement may shrink over time, as it has begun to. But it won't, and shouldn't, disappear. Uncompromising hostility toward him on the right is justified only if conservatives, contrary to common sense, think they have no stake in his success as president. Yet the fear for the right's future among Never Trumpers, which partly underlies their anger toward him, cannot be cured by Trump enthusiasts' fantasizing about a populist revolution for which there is little evidence. The undeniably negative perceptions of the right among the nation's elites, naturally exacerbated by Trump's nomination and election in 2016, are too important to be dismissed by claiming that only "the people" ultimately count in a democracy. For one thing, this claim is simply false. For another, the people elected Barack Obama twice, and more of them voted for Hillary Clinton than for Trump. Such facts don't prove the existence of a left-of-center majority. But they're enough to disprove a conservative or coherently populist one. And Trump's persistently low poll numbers are another massive inconvenience for those who think he is the answer to the right's accumulated shortcomings and weaknesses.

All of this calls for thought, not zealotry, across the intra-conservative Trump Divide. Abraham Lincoln once remarked that the challenges he faced as president were "too vast for malicious dealing." Without in any way comparing those troubles to today's, the same is true now. The

questions conservatives should weigh in deciding their attitude toward Trump, and in deciding their way forward politically, are too easily cheapened, morphing too readily into what amounts to egotism. (The apparent fall, in recent weeks, of former "counselor" and "strategist" Steve Bannon should be welcomed by

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all conservatives and Trump supporters.) For this purpose and, even more, for a good analysis of where things stand right now in our society, I recommend the writings of Yuval Levin, including his book *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism*.

Among the other good examples of a strong but thoughtful conservative voice is Neal Freeman, who (along with many other credentials) served on the board of *National Review* magazine for decades. He recently published a collection of his occasional opinion pieces, reminiscences, and public presentations under the simple title *Skirmishes*. Freeman, a Tea Party sympathizer, a sharp dissenter from *NR*'s support for the Iraq War in 2003, and a staunch economic—though not only economic—conservative who opposed Trump's nomination on various well-stated grounds, does not reprint any of his anti-Trump pieces in the book. But although its only substantial comments on him are from just after the election, they remain noteworthy. Trump, Freeman allows, "has a puncher's chance to break the grip of the iron triangle that controls our political culture: the one-party government bureaucracy; the pay-to-play rent seekers; the tax-

Fire and Fury: A Tragedy

By ALLISON ZUCKERMAN
STAFF WRITER

Immediately upon beginning Michael Wolff's political tell-all, *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*, I was reminded of the books Barnes & Noble once placed near the checkout line, the amusing books about courtly scandals and the ridiculous hijinx of prominent historical figures. Some of them had silly titles, like *Napoleon's Privates*. Some of them offered soap opera-worthy drama about royal family intrigue, exposing the private lives of long-dead nobility as entertainment for a 21st-century audience. No matter the book, no matter the subject, these revealing and sometimes ridiculing accounts always left the reader with the simple thought, *These people are idiots*.

Fire and Fury is no exception.

Despite its poor writing and confusing narration of events, Wolff's book has sold 1.7 million copies in three weeks, according to its publisher Henry Holt & Co. When *New York* magazine published a 7,000-word excerpt shortly before the book's release, it became the magazine's most popular article online.

Wolff's work reads like a freshman Creative Writing major's first

"Fire and Fury" is a spectacle. Unfortunately, so is Trump's presidency.

assignment. He writes confusing, comma-heavy sentences in an attempt to paint intimate portraits of figures like Melania Trump and Roger Ailes. One easily forgets, as Wolff tries to flesh out these characters, that the subjects of his book are not fictional characters but real people. His descriptions of the people in the White House feel immature and judgmental. Consider his description of Steve Bannon as "seemingly on the spectrum." A few pages later,

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exempt Left; and the symbiotic media class.” He cites two reasons for his carefully rationed optimism on this count: Trump is both “instinctively anti-bureaucratic” and “highly skilled in the recriminative arts” (good at accusation and counter-accusation).

Freeman says leaders and institutions on the right have two options in responding to Trump’s rise. “The first is to withdraw to the castle, pull up the drawbridge, and labor to defend market share in what has become a tax-privileged and well-upholstered Conservatism, Inc.” Or, alternatively, to “recognize that the game has changed.” Freeman urges, in effect, that his fellow prominent conservatives focus on Trump’s voters, not him: “He has identified and at least semi-organized a large constituency previously unreachable by Conservatism, Inc. ... pro-family, pro-enterprise, and pro-America—pretty much the kinds of people our movement has claimed to represent these many years ... It’s the kind of coalition-building opportunity that comes around once in a generation.”

The neglect of many frustrated, cynical, but often less ideological voters by “Conservatism, Inc.” or the conservative establishment over the years is actually related, I think, to what might wrongly be assumed is a completely separate problem: the frequent unwillingness, among both elite and non-elite conservatives, to

engage in-depth with people who are in any way to their left. *Skirmishes* includes an especially thought-provoking 2014 address to the Philadelphia Society, the annual conservative intellectual forum, in which Freeman lamented this: “Amid the several blessings of talk radio and internet bloggery, we have created for ourselves one very large rhetorical problem. We have learned to savor the many satisfactions of talking to ourselves, while forgetting how

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to talk to people who do not yet agree with us.” Terms like “limited government” and “free enterprise” have become “limp and lifeless ... by mindless repetition,” Freeman continued. “Hard as it may be to believe, we—the descendants of the Great Communicator [Reagan] himself—have been losing the rhetorical war. How could that possibly be? How have we managed to make sodden and tedious the most exciting story in recorded history, that of human freedom? Why in our public discourse have we substituted Beltway wonkery for the plain and powerful speech of Main Street—the power of the concrete over the abstract, the particular over the general? The power ... of the role model?”

Today these reflections, although delivered a year before Trump announced he would run for president, point both away from this strange man and toward him. In one sense, he does seem to talk only to himself and his fans, the tendency which Freeman regretted in recent conservative activists and leaders. But in another sense that isn’t entirely true, since many Trump skeptics among the electorate did “hear” him favorably in 2016. Similarly, Trump is no role model. As just one of the more benign examples of this, it’s quite fair for his opponents, on the right and elsewhere, to accuse him of indulging in seemingly “mindless repetition.” Yet any analysis of Trump will be badly flawed if it denies the potential value, not just to him but to the country and to conservatives as well, of his obvious knack for “the plain and powerful speech of Main Street ... the concrete over the abstract.” Observing the conservative—and the general political—scene in recent years, I have tried to follow, and urged others to follow, the principle of “credit where it’s due.” Analyses from any ideological quarter, whether of Trump or anything else in politics, that disregard this principle should themselves be discounted as contributions to serious discussion.

David Frisk, a Resident Fellow at the Alexander Hamilton Institute, is the author of the biography If Not Us, Who? William Rusher, National Review, and the Conservative Movement (ISI Books, 2012). He taught the Modern Conservative Politics class at Hamilton last semester.

FIRE AND FURY *cont.*

however, Bannon could have been a “romantic antihero” of days long passed.

Wolff intended to weave a dramatic, intrigue-filled story of Donald Trump’s first year as president from a collection of overheard conversations, deep background sources, and gossip. *Fire and Fury* is the reality TV version of the White House, where rumors are replicated as fact and every moment feels low-quality.

Clearly, then, this begs the question of how Wolff’s book could become such an instant hit. Even those members of the public who do not intend to read it know random details and anecdotes, as particularly outrageous quotes spread over the internet.

Fire and Fury is a spectacle. Unfortunately, so is Trump’s presidency.

Amidst furious tweeting, rapid-fire changes of personnel, and the Russia

investigation, this administration has offered a constant stream of headline-worthy activity. Readers are so quick to believe and propagate the contents of *Fire and Fury* because not many officials in the administration have given compelling arguments to discredit it. Donald Trump did try to claim that his inauguration crowd was the largest in history, which was incorrect. Who’s to say that he doesn’t also have an irrational fear of being poisoned, and that he didn’t say that one of life’s greatest pleasures was “getting your friends’ wives into bed”?

The sensationalist writing and excess of trivial descriptions demonstrate a significant problem with America’s current political culture. Politics, and the office of

the presidency, are now entertainment. Because the American public is distracted by the story that Ivanka Trump thought she would be the first female president, activity like the complete gutting of the Environmental Protection Agency under Scott Pruitt goes unnoticed. *Fire and Fury*

is the published form of our collective short attention spans and love of drama.

Simply put, Michael Wolff wrote a bad book.

Fortunately for him, however, he chose a popular source of entertainment — the White House. Like fans of WWE wrestling, one tolerates the ridiculous for the hope of catching a glimpse of something real. Unfortunately for America, our love of reality TV moments may distract us from serious dangers and may leave the office of the presidency forever damaged.

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