

BOOK REVIEW

Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump, by David Neiwert.

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In a letter addressed “To the children of Satan” and mailed to more than twenty US mosques in the wake of Donald Trump’s 2016 election victory, an alt-right group calling itself Americans for a Better Way declared “[t]here’s a new sheriff in town—President Donald Trump. He’s going to cleanse America and make it shine again. And, he’s going to start with you Muslims. He’s going to do to you Muslims what Hitler did to the Jews” (qtd. in Neiwert 317). This hate-filled missive, which is included in David Neiwert’s magisterial *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*, supports Neiwert’s thesis that Trump’s presidency has both emboldened and legitimated the far-right movements that helped secure his election. For Neiwert, the rise of American populism cannot be attributed solely to the disenfranchisement caused by unemployment, wage stagnation, and outsourcing (as is argued, for instance, by George Packer’s

The Unwinding or, to some extent, J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*). Rather, the populist wave that helped elect Trump has been rising for decades, and has its political roots in the Tea Party movement that emerged when the libertarian Rand Paul (later exposed as a racist, anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist) brought that party into existence on the 234th anniversary of the Boston Tea Party. As Neiwert argues, in a nation where “[r]ight-wing extremism has always been woven into the American political and social landscape (292), only Trump “had the charisma to become a national-level coalescing figure for these many threads, and for the first time united them under one banner—his banner” (292). Trump, in other words, “was the gateway drug for the alt-right” (292), the political catalyst required to bring a movement that had been fomenting on various fringes for decades, into the mainstream of American politics.

For Neiwert, Trump’s election to the nation’s highest office is not particularly surprising given the decades-long gestation of *Alt-America*, which he defines as “an alternative universe that has a powerful resemblance to our own, except that it’s a completely different America, the nation its residents have concocted and reconfigured in their imaginations” (33). The bulk of Neiwert’s book is, therefore, devoted to piecing together how this imaginative reconfiguration of America took place. He traces its genesis from the conservative fringe and militia operations of the 1990s and early 2000s, through the Truther, Birther, and Tea Party movements of the post-9/11 and Obama eras. Each step of the way, he examines in detail the events (Ruby Ridge, Waco, the Bundy and Malheur standoffs, 9/11, and so on) that helped unify the alt-right and cement the conspiratorial thinking that has fueled its paranoid fears of a repressive Liberal New World Order.

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The book pays particular attention to how pundits such as Limbaugh, Coulter, and Beck; media outlets such as Fox News, Breitbart, 4Chan, and the Daily Stormer; and right-wing influencers such as Steve Bannon, Alex Jones, Andrew Anglin, and Richard Spencer, all helped direct a current of conservative discontent into a torrent of populist unrest driven by fear, paranoia, and hate. The strength of Neiwert's book lies in the vast amount of detail the author compiles in order to show how Alt-America emerged as a powerful and influential, political movement. Through an exhaustive analysis of the undercurrents that have been feeding the American right for decades, Neiwert makes it clear that populism is neither the result of stagnating Midwestern economies, nor a response to a presidential candidate who speaks for the disenfranchised. Rather, in Neiwert's narrative, Trump is the ideal presidential candidate because he is devoted to winning at all costs, even if that means adopting extremist views. Neiwert offers ample support for this narrative.

In a post from Richard Spencer's white nationalist Radix Journal, for instance, Gregory Hood acknowledges that "Trump is worth supporting . . . because we need a troll. . . . we need someone who can call out the press, the politicians, and the pseudo-intellectuals as the empty shells they are. The fact that Trump himself is part of this same farce is utterly irrelevant" (271). Spencer himself publicly claimed that with Trump "It's not so much about policy, it's more about the emotions he evokes" (288), while the "constitutionalist" sheriff David Clarke, in an unwittingly prescient remark, claimed "Trump understands that what can make our nation safe again is a recommitment to a system of government in which no government official . . . can claim privilege above the law" (288). Neiwert's book is replete with quotations such as these, drawn from key players in conservative movements, that demonstrate the extent to which the alt-right sees itself not as a voter base, but as a shaper of American policy. Indeed, by examining the immense influence of Limbaugh, Breitbart, Alex Jones, 4Chan, and other conservative pundits and outlets,

Neiwert shows how fringe, conspiracy, and insurrectionists movements have been shepherded into an amalgamated, if not entirely united, political lobby by an ever-louder polyphony of racist, Anti-semitic, misogynist, and paranoid voices. The journalistic detail Neiwert puts into examining the roots of the alt-right helps contain the often chaotic discourses of politics by demonstrating that Trump's divisive populism did not emerge from a vacuum; rather, it has its roots in the Oklahoma bombing, in the conservative standoffs of Ruby Ridge, Waco, and Malheur, in the rhetoric of the Patriots, Birchers, and Tea Party, and in the conspiracies of the post-9/11 era. By emphasizing the ability of right-wing leaders and media outlets to seize upon this deep-seated disenfranchisement, Neiwert is able to cast a net over the alt-right and demonstrate how disparate fringe and conspiracy groups have been mobilized into one of contemporary America's most powerful political forces.

If Neiwert's journalistic commitment to detail is one of the book's strengths, it is also at times one of its weaknesses. While piecing together the conditions that led to Trump's election demands consideration of myriad sources and contexts, including discussions of key fringe players such as Cliven and Ammon Bundy, or of eliminationist rhetoric on YouTube or in social media, the overarching narrative of the text can, at times, get a little lost in the details. At other times, it feels as though more rigorous analysis of the political, economic, and (in particular) ideological conditions that helped spawn fringe conservative movements, and in turn Alt-America, could supplant some of the book's reportage.

That said, Neiwert's analysis remains aware that "Alt-Americans are neither stupid nor unlettered; what they are instead is oddly gullible, eager to absorb any 'fact' if it supports their worldview, and insistent that people who believe official explanations or mainstream media narratives are the real gullible fools" (39). By giving shape to the disparate movements and attitudes of the conservative right, his book demonstrates how these Alt-Americans were a shaping force in bringing Trump to power, and why they will remain a force to be reckoned with for the foreseeable future.