

May 18, 2018 – LIKE NO OTHER

It was March 2016 when Pickerhead finally came to realize Donald Trump had a chance to become a good president. Here's what Pickings had to say then.

These pages have not been friendly to the Trump campaign. We started June 22, 2015, then again July 29th, Aug 18th, and for half the post of Sept. 15th. So, we have anti-Trump bona fides. But, a self-serving speech by the foolish Mitt Romney made it plain Pickings was wrong. Listening to Mitt, one wanted to ask, "Where was this passion four years ago?"

For decades Donald Trump has made himself into a caricature of our expectations. But long exposure makes plain there is substance to the man. First off, we have his children. If the private man was truly the bombastic creep we see so often, his children would be emotional basket cases. That they are squared away people gives us a view behind the curtain. And he has enough success in business to provide belief that out of the public's view the business operating Trump is rational and able to secure the loyalty of qualified competent senior and middle managers. If not, these people would not hang around.

It is not too much of a stretch to think a Trump presidency could perform with Trumanesque results. Certainly, he could not do worse than the folks with sterling résumés that are the empty suits in our present Cabinet. Compare them to the giants in the Truman Cabinet.

Now that Trump has been in office more than a year we can begin to take stock. Victor Davis Hanson starts us off with his review of Conrad Black's book Donald Trump: A President Like No Other.

Conrad Black's erudite biography of Donald J. Trump is different from the usual in mediis rebus accounts of first-year presidents. He avoids the Bob Woodward fly-on-the-wall unattributed anecdote, and "they say" gossip mongering. Nor is the book a rush-to-publish product from former insiders of the Trump campaign or administration. Instead, Black, a prolific and insightful historian, adopts the annalistic method in carefully tracing Trump's earliest years in business through his various commercial misadventures, financial recoveries, and sometimes wild antics. Black's aim is to illustrate how much of what Trump has done since announcing his presidential candidacy in summer 2015 is hardly mysterious. Instead, Trump's methods are fully explicable by what he has always done in the past—in the sometimes troubling, but more often reassuring, sense.

Black is neither a hagiographer nor an ankle-biter. He seeks to understand Trump within the three prominent landscapes in which Americans had come to know their new president: politics, the celebrity world, and the cannibalistic arena of high-stakes Manhattan real estate and finance. ...

... Black knows what it is like to be targeted by an overzealous prosecutor, and how the criminal justice system can be warped well before the advent of a formal trial. For Black, the yearlong and heretofore mostly empty pursuit of Trump the supposed colluder, then Trump the purported obstrucater, is in some sad sense the logical trajectory of the American criminal justice system that gives federal prosecutors unchecked power, especially when driven by political agendas amplified by the tabloid press. Few of us have ever had a Robert Mueller hounding us 24/7, with partisan lawyers, opportune leaks, and false news fueling his inquisition. ...

John Podhoretz has a brief look at the Middle East.

So it has happened. The American embassy in Israel is now in Jerusalem, moving from Tel Aviv 70 years to the day the Jewish state came into being and 22 years since U.S. law declared it would move.

Richard Haass, who runs the Council on Foreign Relations, this morning tweeted that the Embassy move was an iatrogenic mistake—iatrogenesis meaning a disease you catch from treating another. Well, that's fast. There's no evidence whatever there is any new disease. In fact, there is evidence of diseases healing all over the place.

Last week Arab states expressed support for Israel's bombing raids on Iranian positions in Syria. I doubt Haass expected to see such a thing before the creation of a Palestinian state. Instead, what we're seeing is Arab states apparently abandoning their insistence on a Palestinian state as the sine qua non for any relationship with Israel. ...

Even the insufferable **David Brooks** sends Trump a backhanded compliment in his latest column.

We're all educated by our peers, and, over the years, a good portion of Donald Trump's peers have been thugs. Operating in the New York construction world meant dealing with S&A Concrete, co-owned by "Fat Tony" Salerno of the Genovese crime family, and John Cody, the notorious head of Teamsters Local 282, who was convicted on racketeering and tax evasion charges.

Building casinos in Atlantic City brought Trump into similarly genteel circles. ...

... And yet I can't help but wonder if that kind of background has provided a decent education for dealing with the sort of hopped-up mobsters running parts of the world today. There is growing reason to believe that Donald Trump understands the thug mind a whole lot better than the people who attended our prestigious Foreign Service academies. ...

... The first piece of evidence is North Korea. When Trump was trading crude, back-alley swipes with "Little Rocket Man," Kim Jong-un, about whose nuclear button was bigger, it sounded as if we were heading for a nuclear holocaust led by a pair of overgrown prepubescents.

In fact, Trump's bellicosity seems to have worked. It's impossible to know how things will pan out, but the situation with North Korea today is a lot better than it was six months ago. ...

Brooks closes with assurances he has not gone over to the dark side.

... Please don't take this as an endorsement of the Trump foreign policy. I'd feel a lot better if Trump showed some awareness of the complexity of the systems he's disrupting, and the possibly cataclysmic unintended consequences. But there is some lizard wisdom here. The world is a lot more like the Atlantic City real estate market than the G.R.E.s.

Willie Brown, California Democrat grey beard, says if the Dems want to prevail in November, they better do more than bash the Trumpster.

It's time for the Democrats to stop bashing President Trump.

It's not going to be easy, given his policies and personality. It might even mean checking into a 12-step program. But setting a winning agenda is like maneuvering an aircraft carrier. It takes time to change course. And if they want to be on target for the November midterm elections, the Democrats need to start changing course now.

Like it or not, a significant number of Americans are actually happy these days. They are making money. They feel safe, and they agree with the president's protectionist trade policies, his call for more American jobs, even his immigration stance.

The jobs growth reports, the North Korea summit and the steady economy are beating out the Stormy Daniels scandal and the Robert Mueller investigation in Middle America, hands down. ...

American Greatness

[Why Trump Is a President Like No Other](#)

by Victor Davis Hanson

Conrad Black's erudite biography of Donald J. Trump is different from the usual in mediis rebus accounts of first-year presidents. He avoids the Bob Woodward fly-on-the-wall unattributed anecdote, and "they say" gossip mongering. Nor is the book a rush-to-publish product from former insiders of the Trump campaign or administration. Instead, Black, a prolific and insightful historian, adopts the annalistic method in carefully tracing Trump's earliest years in business through his various commercial misadventures, financial recoveries, and sometimes wild antics. Black's aim is to illustrate how much of what Trump has done since announcing his presidential candidacy in summer 2015 is hardly mysterious. Instead, Trump's methods are fully explicable by what he has always done in the past—in the sometimes troubling, but more often reassuring, sense.

Black is neither a hagiographer nor an ankle-biter. He seeks to understand Trump within the three prominent landscapes in which Americans had come to know their new president: politics, the celebrity world, and the cannibalistic arena of high-stakes Manhattan real estate and finance. Of the three, Black is most jaded about the anti-Trump hysteria within the first two, not because the real estate business is inherently a nobler profession, but because it more often lacks the moral preening and hypocrisies of both the beltway and tabloids. The result is an argument that the first president to have neither prior political nor military service nevertheless has his own demonstrable skill sets that are making his presidency far more dynamic than either his critics or supporters quite imagined. Black's unspoken assumption is that it is more difficult to build a skyscraper in Manhattan than to be a career politician or an evening news reader.

In Trump's rise and fall and rise as a billionaire, Black never whitewashes his ruthlessness, his fast and loose relationship with the truth (e.g., "He is not so much a cynic as a methodological agnostic, not a liar as much as a disbeliever in absolute secular truths"), and his occasionally tawdry P. T. Barnum hawking.

As he guides the reader through Trump's various land deals, casino crashes, name merchandising, risky hotel gambits, and golf course developments, Black offers unusual insight into how Trump, or for that matter anyone else, could survive such a rollercoaster of catastrophe and great fortune. While most of Trump's rivals share his same carnivorous ethos, very few succeeded as did Trump.

What made Trump different from his competitors? Likely, his cunning, his almost Thucydidean reading of human nature, and his sixth sense about timing and salesmanship. In Plutarchian fashion, Black focuses on Trump's physicality, especially his boundless energy and his impatience with nuance and self-doubt ("desperate cunning, unflagging determination, unshakeable self-confidence, ruthless Darwinian instincts of survival, and a sublime assurance that celebrity will heal all wounds"). Of course, the media and politicians were not ready for the naked applicability of these traits to the White House. But, as Black notes, the American people after decades of misgovernance were—as if to let loose Trump on their country as both avenger and deliverer.

How many times did critics recoil in shock at Trump's coarse epithets such as "little Marco," "low-energy Jeb," "lying Ted Cruz," and "crooked Hillary"—only to note that such appellations kept reverberating in their critics' heads, both appropriate and humorous if often cruelly so? Whose careerist agendas fared better after provoking the counter-punching Trump? For Black, Trump became president because he outworked and outthustled his competitors, because he saw that most seasoned politicians were split-the-difference 51 percent hedgers—and that the country by 2016 desperately wanted some sort of Samson to tear down the pillars of a complacent if not corrupt establishment, even if they and their deliverer might sometimes be injured in the rubble.

Black instinctively captures the essence of the Trump paradox: How did someone supposedly so crude, so mercantile, and so insensitive display a sensitivity to the forgotten people that was lost both on his Republican competitors and Hillary Clinton? Certainly, no one on stage at any of the debates worried much about 40 percent of the country written off as John McCain's "crazies," Hillary Clinton's "deplorables" and "irredeemables," and Barack Obama's "clingers," who were judged wanting for not capitalizing on the bicoastal dividends of American-led globalism.

Black notes the Trump-hinterland synergy. The country was looking for a third alternative to both free-market economics and neo-socialism, and yet again to both political correctness and the Republican often groveling surrender to it. Or as Black puts it, "Trump's rise was an expression of sub-revolutionary anger by a wide swath of dissatisfied and mainly not overly prosperous or influential people." But he adds that Trump was no third-party Ross Perot "charlatan" (or, for that matter, a Quixotic Ralph Nader), who came off quirky and without a workable agenda. Trump took a path that was far different from third-party would-be revolutionaries, in seeking to appropriate rather than to run against the apparatus of one of the two major political parties.

Most experts discounted Trump's "make American great again" visions as anachronistic in the age of Silicon Valley cool, "peak oil," the "knowledge-based" economy, and the "information age." Trump doubled down and became even louder about free but fair trade, legal, diverse, and meritocratic immigration, "drill, baby, drill" oil policy, lower taxes and smaller government, an end to identity politics and political correctness, and a Jacksonian deterrent foreign policy that avoided both optional nation-building and the "blame America first" apologetics of Barack Obama's "lead-from-behind" internationalism. Only half the country was ready for the Trump message (and perhaps less than that for the messenger)—but it was the more electorally important half in the key swing states of Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania,

and Wisconsin. Trump assumed that even in the age of high techies and billionaire financiers, one can still not build a tower without the muscular labor of welders, cement layers, and glass installers.

Black's final third of the book is magisterial, as he recites nascent Trump achievements—tax reform, deregulation, the end of the Affordable Care Act individual mandate, superb judicial appointments, curbs on illegal immigration, expanded oil and gas production, a restoration of deterrence aboard—against a backdrop of nonstop venom and vituperation from the so-called "Resistance." He is certainly unsparing of the Left's desperate resort to discard the Electoral College, sue under the emoluments clause, invoke the 25th Amendment, introduce articles of impeachment, and embrace a sick assassination chic of threats to Trump's person and family. Some element of such hysteria is due to Trump's ostensible Republican credentials (the Left had devoured even their once beloved John McCain, as well as the gentlemanly and judicious Mitt Romney), but more is due to Trump's far more conservative agenda and his take-no-prisoners style.

Trump's friends and critics assure us that his incessant twittering and carnival rally-barking are suicidal. Black is too insightful to settle for such a one-dimensional critique (while often lamenting that Trump's bluster and rhetorical excess are hurting full appreciation of his otherwise solid accomplishments). Instead, Black sees much of Trump's targeting as comeuppance and long overdue—given a sanctimonious, corrupt media, and a gatekeeping political class that weakened the country over the last two decades of fiscal, social, cultural, and military irresponsibility.

Three final themes make Black's book different. One, he writes at times from firsthand experience as one who has known—and liked—Trump as an acquaintance rather than as a partner or adversary. His citation of Trump's past displays of loyalty to friends and genuine concern for the middle- and working classes may be illustrated in Trump's most un-Republican use of the first-person plural possessive—as in "our" miners, "our" farmers, "our" vets, and "our" workers.

Second, Black knows what it is like to be targeted by an overzealous prosecutor, and how the criminal justice system can be warped well before the advent of a formal trial. For Black, the yearlong and heretofore mostly empty pursuit of Trump the supposed colluder, then Trump the purported obstructor, is in some sad sense the logical trajectory of the American criminal justice system that gives federal prosecutors unchecked power, especially when driven by political agendas amplified by the tabloid press. Few of us have ever had a Robert Mueller hounding us 24/7, with partisan lawyers, opportune leaks, and false news fueling his inquisition.

Finally, Black is a singular prose stylist of what in the ancient world would be called the Asiatic, or florid and decorative, style—multisyllabic and sometime near archaic vocabulary, ornate imagery, melodic prose rhythms, diverse syntax, and classical tropes of deliberate understatement, juxtapositions of Latinate and Anglo-Saxon words, and plentiful metaphors and similes. In the modern world, few in English write (or can write) any more like Edward Gibbon or Winston Churchill, but Black does so effortlessly and with precision. So it is often a treat to read an Isocrates or Cicero in modern English.

Most readers, like myself, have never met either Conrad Black nor Donald J. Trump. But after reading this engaging biography, those of any political persuasion would wish to do both.

Contentions

The Embassy Moves

by John Podhoretz

So it has happened. The American embassy in Israel is now in Jerusalem, moving from Tel Aviv 70 years to the day the Jewish state came into being and 22 years since U.S. law declared it would move.

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Last week Arab states expressed support for Israel's bombing raids on Iranian positions in Syria. I doubt Haass expected to see such a thing before the creation of a Palestinian state. Instead, what we're seeing is Arab states apparently abandoning their insistence on a Palestinian state as the sine qua non for any relationship with Israel.

Yes, there are staged riots in Gaza right now, but in what sense is that new? Gazans have launched wars with Israel thrice in the past decade. If Haass truly thinks this is about the embassy and not about deeper and longer trends, I have a bridge from Gaza to the West Bank to sell him. The Gazans are goading Israeli forces into firing on them, and Europeans and American Leftists are screaming murder. And, again, what else is new.

Well, what's new is that there is an American administration that isn't listening to them and doesn't care about their opinion. In fact, you might say the longtime diplomatic insistence on acting as though the Palestinians are an interlocutor for peace rather than an enemy of peace has been one of the more significant iatrogenic mistakes in the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River for going on many decades now.

NY Times

Donald Trump's Lizard Wisdom

by David Brooks

We're all educated by our peers, and, over the years, a good portion of Donald Trump's peers have been thugs. Operating in the New York construction world meant dealing with S&A Concrete, co-owned by "Fat Tony" Salerno of the Genovese crime family, and John Cody, the notorious head of Teamsters Local 282, who was convicted on racketeering and tax evasion charges.

Building casinos in Atlantic City brought Trump into similarly genteel circles. Trump's hero was Roy Cohn, who unfortunately was born too late to serve the emperor Caligula. To go to Trump parties in the 1980s was to be surrounded by C-list celebrities and shady business types voted Most Likely to be Arraigned in high school.

Trump's fixer Michael Cohen emerged from the same galaxy of gray-market hustlers. Early in his career Cohen worked for a lawyer who pleaded guilty to bribing insurance adjusters. His ex-

business partner in the taxi industry was convicted of assault in New York, arrested on battery in Miami and pleaded guilty to criminal mischief in New Jersey.

About 15 years ago Cohen set up businesses for two doctors, one of whom was later charged with insurance fraud and grand larceny, the other indicted on racketeering charges. As a personal injury lawyer, he frequently represented people accused of insurance fraud. An uncle provided medical services to the Lucchese crime family.

If not for the Trump and Cohen peer circle, white-collar prisons would be sitting empty. And this all happened before Trump and Cohen elevated their moral associations even higher by entangling with Russian oligarchs.

And yet I can't help but wonder if that kind of background has provided a decent education for dealing with the sort of hopped-up mobsters running parts of the world today. There is growing reason to believe that Donald Trump understands the thug mind a whole lot better than the people who attended our prestigious Foreign Service academies.

The first piece of evidence is North Korea. When Trump was trading crude, back-alley swipes with "Little Rocket Man," Kim Jong-un, about whose nuclear button was bigger, it sounded as if we were heading for a nuclear holocaust led by a pair of overgrown prepubescents.

In fact, Trump's bellicosity seems to have worked. It's impossible to know how things will pan out, but the situation with North Korea today is a lot better than it was six months ago. Hostages are being released, talks are being held. There seems to be a chance for progress unfelt in years.

Maybe Trump intuited something about the sorts of people who run the North Korean regime that others missed.

The second piece of evidence is our trade talks with China. Over the past few decades, the Western diplomatic community made a big bet: If we all behaved decently toward Chinese leaders, then they'd naturally come to embrace liberal economic and cultural values and we could all eventually share a pinot at the University Club.

The bet went wrong. Today's Chinese elites are polite and coolheaded, but their economic, political and military behavior remains pure thug. Beijing throws its economic weight around with abandon, punishing foreign firms like Mercedes-Benz that don't toe its line, cutting off Philippine trade over dubious geographic disputes, closing off its own economy to foreign investment and stealing hundreds of billions of dollars in American intellectual property each year.

The president has pushed back harder on the Chinese and has netted some results. After some Trump swagger, Xi Jinping promised to "significantly lower" Chinese tariffs on imported vehicles.

Again, it's hard to know how this will turn out, but as The Financial Times's Jamil Anderlini and my colleague Thomas Friedman have argued, Trump is picking the right fight at the right time.

The third piece of evidence is Iran. I have doubts about the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the nuke agreement. But I do know that the argument that many of the Obama people relied on as predicate for the deal is wrong. They argued that, deep down, the Iranian leaders are worldly sophisticates who, if we just gave them the welcome mat, would want to join our community of nations.

This is the vanity of the educated class going back for centuries. Since we're obviously so superior, everybody else secretly wants to be like us. It's wrong. Thugs gotta thug. Religious fanatics gotta fanaticize.

The Iranian regime has continued on its merry way, pouring troops into Syria, lobbing missiles at Israel, propping up extremist armies across the Middle East. Maybe Trump is right to intuit that the only right response to a monster is to enclose it. Maybe he's right that when you sense economic weakness in a potential threat, you hit it again.

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San Francisco Chronicle

Trump is more popular than Dems want to admit

by Willie Brown

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It's not going to be easy, given his policies and personality. It might even mean checking into a 12-step program. But setting a winning agenda is like maneuvering an aircraft carrier. It takes time to change course. And if they want to be on target for the November midterm elections, the Democrats need to start changing course now.

Like it or not, a significant number of Americans are actually happy these days. They are making money. They feel safe, and they agree with with the president's protectionist trade policies, his call for more American jobs, even his immigration stance.

The jobs growth reports, the North Korea summit and the steady economy are beating out the Stormy Daniels scandal and the Robert Mueller investigation in Middle America, hands down.

So you are not going to win back the House by making it all about him.

Rather than stoking the base by attacking Trump, Democrats need to come up with a platform that addresses the average voters' hopes and concerns. Not just the needs of underdogs or whatever cause happens to be the media flavor of the week.

Democrats need to look like the adults, not like another pack of screaming kids on the playground.

And they need to start now.

Besides, when it comes to bashing Trump, Donald is doing just fine on his own.







