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Review Essay 48

Rick Wilson. *Everything Trump Touches Dies: A Republican Strategist Gets Real About the Worst President Ever*. New York: Free Press, 2018. ISBN: 9781982103125 (hardcover, \$27.00); 9781982103149 (paperback, \$17.00).

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One of Donald Trump's superpowers is to dominate all spheres of American life, and the book industry is no exception. The nonfiction market is littered with best-sellers about life in the Age of Trump. The past two years have generated numerous genres of political tomes: the tell-alls by those who have served in his administration,¹ the hosannas to his political greatness,² and the journalistic accounts of his norm-defying 2016 campaign and chaotic first two years as president.³

Rick Wilson's *Everything Trump Touches Dies* belongs to the largest genre of the Trump literature: the books that discuss Trump's rise as a harbinger of America's fall. The academic books in this vein fret about the U.S. descending into illiberalism or autocracy.⁴ Wilson's book is far from academic. Like Max Boot's *Corrosion of Conservatism*, Wilson's book is the missive from a GOP apostate about how the party of Lincoln could have

¹ James Comey, *A Higher Loyalty* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2018); Omarosa Manigault-Newman, *Unhinged: An Insider's Account of the Trump White House* (New York: Gallery, 2018).

² Newt Gingrich, *Understanding Trump* (New York: Center Street, 2017); Corey Lewandowski and David Bossie, *Trump's Enemies: How the Deep State Is Undermining the Presidency* (New York: Center Street, 2018).

³ Joshua Green, *The Devil's Bargain* (New York: Penguin, 2017); Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

⁴ Madeleine Albright, *Fascism: A Warning*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2018); Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom* (New York: Random House, 2018); Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

produced a leader like Donald Trump.⁵ He acknowledges in the introduction that, “in 2015 I stood up and spoke out and found myself with a lot of new friends and a lot of new enemies (7).” Like all apostates, Wilson goes after his former ideological brethren with the zeal of a deprogrammed cult member.

I suspect that academics will feel a slight tinge of jealousy reading *Everything Trump Touches Dies*. By our very nature, we hedge and qualify our statements. We make sure to be on the firmest of footing when making a normative assessment in print. Wilson, a GOP political strategist who advised former CIA intelligence officer’s Evan McMullin’s quixotic, conservative, #NeverTrump 2016 bid for the presidency, has no such qualms. This is a book of pure, unadulterated rage, targeted less at Trump than at the elements of the GOP that enabled and coddled him: “it took an array of insiders from the GOP and the conservative movement to legitimize and normalize Trump for the Republican base voter beyond the howling edge of the Fox viewership. These men and women were Vichy Republicans (19).” Wilson never references *The Party Decides* in his book, but he clearly believes the central thesis of David Karol, Hans Noel, John Zaller, and Marty Cohen’s *The Party Decides*: party elites play a pivotal role in choosing the presidential nominee.⁶ According to Wilson, in 2016 GOP elites chose to appease Trump rather than thwart him.

Wilson provides evidentiary support for the book’s title. He argues that Trump kills all that he touches because, in the end, “he requires every man and woman in his orbit to destroy themselves to remain in his good graces (55).” Wilson offers up a long list of GOP supplicants who abased themselves to serve Trump and suffered for it. *Everything Trump Touches Dies* evokes obscure names like Sebastian Gorka and Milo Yiannopoulos, ‘Trumpkins’ whose fifteen minutes ended what feels like fifteen years ago. The book details how many Trump acolytes and supplicants have seen their public reputations dashed.

There are many flaws in *Everything Trump Touches Dies*, even for those readers who are eager to gulp down anti-Trump invective. Some of them are inherent to the exercise of writing a book about Trump. In his introduction, Wilson is upfront about how badly this book will age because every day brings a new Trump scandal, and he is not wrong. On multiple occasions he notes that he submitted the manuscript in May 2018 and therefore cannot be held accountable for events after that time. The result is that his portrayals of some prominent Trumpworld figures have been OBE—overtaken by events. Attorney Michael Avenatti is painted as “shrewd” in this book; by 2019, maybe not so much. Wilson depicts former Trump *consigliere* Michael Cohen as loyal to Trump, and while miracles can happen, that additional plot twist is unlikely. Most ominously, he writes that Secretary of Defense James Mattis “represents the most vital stabilizing force in the administration (156).” Oh dear.

There are other flaws that Wilson could have easily avoided. Obvious factual errors give *Everything Trump Touches Dies* a slapdash quality. He claims that Mike Pence had an “easy reelection” as Indiana governor in 2016 (32). In actuality, Pence dropped out after Trump selected him as vice presidential nominee, and by all

⁵ Max Boot, *The Corrosion of Conservatism* (New York: Liveright 2018).

⁶ David Karol, Hans Noel, John Zaller, and Marty Cohen, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

accounts he faced a difficult re-election bid.⁷ Wilson states that in 2012 Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney selected Paul Ryan to be his Vice Presidential running mate “after rising to Speaker of the House (24),” but Ryan was not elevated to that position until 2015. Wilson heaps scorn upon the trade protectionists surrounding Trump (113), but mistakenly includes National Economic Council chair Larry Kudlow in that group. Kudlow is many things, but a protectionist is not one of them. These are the kinds of elementary mistakes that either Wilson or a decent copy-editor should have caught.

There are more serious errors involving factors that would have been worth exploring further. Wilson is particularly scathing of the alliance of media mogul Rupert Murdoch and his Fox News with team Trump, suggesting that a more principled conservative media could have challenged and constrained him. He writes, “At any moment, Rupert or the sons could have told Roger Ailes, ‘Okay, that’s enough, Roger (202).’” This is a bizarre claim. There was a time during the 2016 GOP primary when Fox News did say enough was enough—when Trump went after Fox news anchor Megyn Kelly. When that dust-up ended, however, it was Fox News that blinked, not Trump. Wilson even remarks on this episode earlier in the book. This suggests that by 2016 even elites like Roger Ailes and Rupert Murdoch were more beholden to the conservative base than vice versa. Indeed, it is disappointing that Wilson failed to write more about this particular episode, which represents a clear challenge to “The Party Decides” hypothesis, as Fox followed viewer preferences rather than vice versa. Furthermore, Wilson clearly knows the conservative media ecosystem. The book’s strongest moments come when Wilson offers a clinical autopsy of the rise and fall of Breitbart News and its onetime CEO, Steve Bannon.

The basic problem with *Everything Trump Touches Dies* is that it mimics Trump in its cruelty. Regarding Trump’s base, Wilson writes, “if there’s a sharper critique of America’s failed education system than the breathless, mindless Trump voter, I can’t name it (101).” On the very next page, he acknowledges that this might sound elitist, but, “it’s almost a moral imperative to slap the stupid out of them.” That might be a tempting impulse, but in my experience that gambit never works. *Everything Trump Touches Dies* is about forty percent insults. Some of them are imaginative, but the repetition becomes tedious after a while. Wilson’s go-to insult is to accuse myriad Trump subordinates, like White House senior adviser and immigration hardliner Stephen Miller, of being an adult virgin. The jibe does not improve with repeated use.

Wilson provides the occasional personal anecdote in the book, but those asides are rare and are almost exclusively about his life as a #NeverTrumper. This is unfortunate. Wilson’s cynicism about key elements of the GOP platform is clear; less clear is any authorial discussion of when he realized this. As other reviews of the book have noted, Wilson could have written a more interesting book that chronicled what he saw in the GOP that made it so vulnerable to Trump’s brand of nihilism and populism. As *The Washington Post*’s Carlos Lozada (2018) notes, “beyond noting that he should have seen it coming... he spends nearly all 300-plus pages of his book blaming everyone else for the outcome of his experiment.”⁸

⁷ Matthew Nussbaum, “Trump Flirts with Unpopular Pence,” *Politico*, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/trump-mike-pence-vice-president-225387>, 12 July 2016.

⁸ Carlos Lozada, “Bomb Squad,” *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/book-party/wp/2018/12/14/feature/anti-trump-conservatives-want-to-reverse-the-gops-destruction-but-they-helped-light-the-fuse/>, 14 December 2018.

Everything Trump Touches Dies contains the occasional insight mixed in with a lot of adult virgin jokes. That seems as apt a metaphor for the Age of Trump as anything else.

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