

---

## Volume 16 Issue 1 2022

---

**Daniel, Zoe & Whalan, Roscoe - *Greetings from Trumpland: How an unprecedented presidency changed everything*, Sydney: ABC Books, 2021; (pp 361) ISBN978 0 7333 4151 9**

Reviewed by Myra Gurney - Western Sydney University

---

The Trump administration ended as it began: in norm shattering fashion. In just four years, Donald Trump has turned American politics on its head ... Unrelenting, the administration exhausted America, its people, its reporters and its institutions. ... While Trump's presidency may be over, the impact of his administration runs deep (ix-xi).

How's the serenity?

While the impact of COVID-19 reverberated globally, the media temperature surrounding US politics over the past two years has definitely lowered. Since Joe Biden's inauguration as 46<sup>th</sup> US president and the retreat of #45 to his Florida bunker Mar-a-Lago, muzzled by his ex-communication from Twitter and Facebook for stoking conspiracy theories and mistruths about the coronavirus and the election outcome, the daily media soap opera of the Trump administration, finally appeared to end ... or has it?

Just when we thought it was safe to open a news site again, it would seem that HE'S BACK. Despite a mounting list of legal problems emanating from his alleged part in the insurrection of January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, his company's tax issues, and the Department of Justice's investigation into the mishandling of top-secret government documents, in November 2022 Trump announced his intention to run as a presidential candidate in 2024. For these reasons, Australian journalists Zoe Daniel's and Roscoe Whalan's (2021) journey through 'Trumpland' is worth revisiting to remind ourselves of this extraordinary period of US history. Reporting from the frontline for the ABC Washington Bureau between 2016-2020, Daniel and her producer Whalan, had the task of unravelling and

translating the '*sturm und drang*' of US politics Trump-style for the audience 'down under'. *Greetings from Trumpland*, as the title suggests, is a foreign journalists' account of their journey.

The book's timeline begins with the 2016 campaign and Trump's nomination as Republican candidate. Initially perceived as a 'novelty candidate,' early reporting in publications such as *The Huffington Post* posted updates in the 'Entertainment' section, declaring his campaign 'a sideshow' (2). The narrative continues through Trump's surprise victory over Hillary Clinton and the pivotal events of his Administration including the Russia probe, Trump's first and second impeachment and mishandling of the pandemic, ultimately culminating in #45's ignominious, unedifying, and inglorious exit in January 2021.

Looking back through the prism of four tumultuous and exhausting years, Daniel and Whalan reflect on their own journalistic journey and the way Trump upended the conventions of both political campaigning and governing. In particular, the retrospective highlights Trump's intuitive ability to harness his celebrity via social media to enthuse a significant base of supporters – the so-called 'basket of deplorables' as labelled by Hillary Clinton – many of whom were first-time voters who hitched their electoral hopes to a man whose background and life experiences were so disconnected from their own. But what was the MAGA attraction? The authors note that:

In a social media-driven world, the likes of Trump forge connections via an image built on TV, online and consolidated at big rock star rallies. Like the Kardashians and a host of social media 'influencers', Trump frames himself as who his supporters want him to be, rather than who he actually is (40).

And who did Trump supporters want him to be? Why did so many turn away from traditional politicians, lose faith in long-standing institutions, become distrustful of political discourse and mesmerised by an alternative, populist manifestation? Post-2016 election analysis showed that while Trump did *not* win in a landslide despite his claims (Clinton won more votes), a large chunk of traditional white working- and middle-class voters in key swing states – the so-called 'rust belt' of the US – turned away from the Democrats in sufficient numbers to sway the Electoral College, which ultimately determines the presidency, in Trump's favour.

With respect to US politics, Don Watson (2016), Australian academic, Paul Keating's speechwriter, and long-time Uncle Sam watcher, observed that Trump did not come out of nowhere. The cherished notion of 'American exceptionalism,' he argues, has long been a convenient shroud for an economic, cultural and political system which has perpetuated and entrenched racial and economic inequality while espousing a myth of the virtues and utility of rugged individualism and personal freedoms above all else, often making change difficult. On a similar note, Daniel and Whalan note that:

Central to his trademark slogan to 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) is the intention to inspire working class middle Americans ... In making this pledge, Trump acknowledged what many Americans felt; that the country was in decline. ... Trump's appeal as a politician was his willingness to blow up the established world order (197-198).

While much of the mainstream reporting during the era focused on the minutiae of the daily cut and thrust of West Wing politics usually radiating from incendiary Trump tweets, this book is also a pacey, fly-on-the-wall account of life as a foreign correspondent. One particular aspect of the authors' reporting that I found most interesting was their regular, deliberate connection with Trump supporters in regional towns and rallies to record their stories. The view from MAGA heartland, they observe, was 'less extreme than first appeared in cable TV coverage' (xv) while 'it's the Trump supporters across the country who have opened the doors and homes to us' (7), eager, it would seem, to have their story told. As Roscoe Whalan has written elsewhere, it is a tale of two Americas:

It was hard to believe 'Trumpland' existed in big liberal cities like New York or Washington – but head 50km out of DC and Trump yard signs and MAGA hats were everywhere. ... To shrug off them as racists, sexists or stupid is to ignore the complexity of Trump's base. It ignores the fact that he carried the flag of a political revolution: a rejection of establishment politics that appealed to many (Whalan, 2021).

As the narrative unfolds towards its ultimate denouement – the invasion of the US Capitol building on 6 January 2021 – it plots the trajectory of the Trump Administration's unconventional style in both domestic and international arenas. In particular, it observes the connection between Trump's political psyche and individual pivotal events including his oft-described 'love affairs' on the international stage with political hardmen such as Russia's Vladimir Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong-un.

Covering this period, the authors also reflect on the evolution and normalisation of a more incendiary and divisive political discourse, where good old-fashioned rivalries and robust debate have been replaced by toxic discourse, and where acknowledgement of 'facts' became dependant on your political allegiances. They observe that:

Over time, 'fake news' morphs into a catch-all for inconvenient truths and negative, uncomfortable coverage. For politicians particularly, it becomes a way of redirecting scrutiny and undermining trust in the press (89-90).

As with numerous examples of what formerly would have been considered untouchable political norms, Trump's approach to everything from immigration, race and gender politics, to trade and diplomatic relations with staunch allies, is to pander to the MAGA base. The effect has been to:

... light the flame of intolerance that already exists ... and open the door to those on the extreme margins of American society who see his policies and rhetoric as cover for their xenophobic beliefs (127).

In light of the current post-Trump 2023 state of US politics where the once traditional, if conservative GOP now holding a slim majority in the House of Representatives, has been infiltrated by right-wing conspiracy theorists such as Marjorie Taylor Greene and others determined to disrupt rather than govern, Trump has a lot to answer for. Writing in 2021, Daniels and Whalan observed that Trump 'has built an alternate reality in America that has eaten away at its robust institutions of government' (304). The seeds were sown, and post-Trump, they have started to take root.

If nothing else, the Trump circus was a boon to mainstream media and the publishing industry broadly, and even from the relatively safe distance of Australia, Trump managed to fill daily, weekly and at times, hourly space in our media diet. Publications dissecting and pontificating on almost every possible angle of Trump's tumultuous presidency continue to sell like proverbial hotcakes. From famous media pundits such as *The Washington Post's* Bob Woodward of 'Watergate' fame – 'Fear' (2018), 'Rage' (2020) and 'Peril' (2021 with Robert Costa) – to genuine insiders such as Trump's former National Security Advisor, John Bolton – 'The Room Where it Happened' (2020) – down to personal reflections on the president's pathology and psychology by disaffected family members such as niece, Mary Trump – 'Too Much and Never Enough: How my family created the world's most dangerous man' – much has been written about this extraordinary period in US history. *Greetings from Trumpland* is a worthy companion to this collection, in particular for its both its Australian perspective as well as the view from the journalistic frontline. As such, it is a must read for aspiring political and foreign correspondents. It is also a timely lesson on the need for journalists to not merely regurgitate the perceived political wisdom often generated by a form of media 'groupthink' on an issue or a politician but to explore more deeply the perspectives of those at the coalface.

As a footnote, since returning to Australia, Zoe Daniel has herself become a politician, elected as a 'teal' independent candidate for the once safe Liberal Party seat of Goldstein in Melbourne in the 2022 Australian Federal election: a result generated similarly by disillusionment with the perceived inertia of the political status quo. As veteran politics junkies would attest, Trump was as much a symptom of a disrupted political system as its agent provocateur. The next cycle of US and Australian politics will be fascinating to watch.

## About the reviewer

**Dr Myra Gurney** is a Lecturer in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at Western Sydney University and teaches into the key program of the Bachelor of Communication. As a foundation member of the editorial committee of *Global Media Journal/Australian Edition*, she has edited several past editions of the journal in addition to writing a range of journal articles and book reviews. Her research interests relate to politics broadly and in particular how language and discourse work to shape, influence and reflect political and media narratives. As a self-confessed news junkie, with *GMJ-AU* editorial colleagues Professor Hart Cohen and Dr Antonio Castillo, she co-authored a book chapter in *Global Media Perceptions of the United States: The Trump Effect* (Kamalipour, 2021) overviewing Australian media coverage of Donald Trump.

## Works cited

Bolton, J. (2020). *The room where it happened: A White House memoir*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Rundle, G. (2016, November 12-18). How the progressives got it wrong. *The Saturday Paper*.  
<https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/opinion/topic/2016/11/12/how-the-progressives-got-it-wrong/14788692003969>

Trump, M. L. (2020). *Too much and never enough: How my family created the world's most dangerous man*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Watson, D. (2016). Enemy within: American politics in the time of Trump. *Quarterly Essay*, 63, 1-73.

Whalan, R. (2021, March 24). Lessons from Trumpland: Why his supporters shouldn't be ignored. *In Review*. <https://indaily.com.au/inreview/inreview-commentary/2021/03/24/lessons-from-trumpland-why-his-supporters-shouldnt-be-ignored/>

Woodward, B. (2018). *Fear: Trump in the White House*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Woodward, B. (2020). *Rage*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Woodward, B. & Costa, R. (2021). *Peril*: New York: Simon and Schuster.