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Bryant, Nick - *The Forever War: America's Unending Conflict with Itself*, Penguin Random House, 2024; (pp. 391). ISBN 978 1 76104 862 3

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'The past is never dead. It's not even past.' William Faulkner (1951). Requiem for a Nun

'History's what people are trying to hide from you, not what they're trying to show you. You search for it in the same way you sift through a landfill: for evidence of what people want to bury.' Hillary Mantel (2003). Giving up the ghost: A memoir

Watching the twist and turns of the unfolding 2024 US election from the relatively safe distance of Australia, politics nerds such as myself could be forgiven for thinking it is increasingly like the sequel to a long running Hollywood soap opera. Many Australians remain bemused as to how the twice impeached former president, a notoriously suspect businessman with convictions for falsifying business records and adjudicated sexual assault, indictments for misappropriation of classified security documents and for inciting the attack on the US Capitol in January 2021, has now been re-elected to the US's highest office. If Australians were able to vote, a recent survey has said, current vice president Kamala Harris would have been a lay down misère (Karvelas, 2024). While in 2016 Trump was a relative political unknown and somewhat of a novelty candidate who was not expected to win, in 2020, despite all the chaos and dysfunction of his administration, 74 million US voters (46.8 per cent of the vote) were prepared to vote for him again—the result in favour of Joe Biden was hardly a repudiation of Trump's style of politics or an acknowledgement of his mendacity. In 2024 as we nervously contemplate the implications of his election win, and in particular its potential impact on Australia, the question remains, how has it come to this?

According to former BBC foreign correspondent Nick Bryant, historical context is everything, and in this book, Bryant interrogates the present political situation by disassembling, critiquing and exploring the frailty and contradictions at the heart of US history. His thesis is that the current state of division, partisanship and paranoia are not new but have their roots in the fabric of America's origin story and in the unresolved issues at the heart of its political, social and cultural evolution over the last 250 years. The book's preface argues:

Little, if any, of the American story is safely in the past. Indeed, the present-day United States is confronting a problem of historical overload. It is buckling under the weight of problems from yesteryear which have never been resolved (14).

Bryant is a self-confessed "Yankophile" with a long fascination with the US — he has a PhD in American history from Cambridge University and has written two previous books on US politics (2006; 2021). His narrative interweaves analysis of the phenomena of Trumpism with well researched and argued historical precedents and analysis that explore the contradictions at the heart of many foundational American myths that the country continues to hold dear: a belief in the primacy of democracy as a form of government, the notion of the sanctity of individual liberty and the importance of equality before the law, to mention three. As an outsider looking from afar at "planet America", these insights offer a useful perspective on the conundrums at the heart of the current state of the US.

According to Bryant (2024b), 'division has always been the default setting' starting with the Declaration of Independence in 1776, through the Revolutionary War, the framing of the Constitution in 1789, the 1861-1865 Civil War and beyond. In contrast to the broadly held belief that the Founding Fathers were revolutionary in their desire for a broad-based democracy, Bryant argues that the framers were not supporters of mass democracy, and despite the current 'nostalgia narrative', designed a system of government 'to guard against the tyranny of the majority' (18). The result was a system which gave (and continues to give) unequal representation, and therefore influence, to the states via the composition of the Senate, the role of the filibuster and the impact of the Electoral College in determining the outcome of presidential elections. In 2000, for example, Republican George W. Bush received fewer votes than Democratic candidate and former vice president Al Gore and in 2016 Hillary Clinton, former New York senator, former first lady and Obama Secretary of State significantly outpolled Donald Trump — but both lost the Electoral College vote and hence the presidency.

Another interesting perspective is what Bryant argues is the historical appetite, from George Washington onwards, for an American strongman, and he traces Trump's predilection for authoritarianism to both the idiosyncrasies afforded by the electoral system and to historical precedents. He notes that the 'deification of American political figures was hardly unprecedented' (92) and ironically, 'part of the reason the framers were so resistant toward direct democracy was their fear of the emergence of a demagogic populist' (93). He notes that while much-revered former presidents such as Abraham Lincoln (1861-1865), Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) and Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945) were frequently accused of executive overreach as their administrations navigated major civil and world wars and economic depression, what sets them apart from Trump was that they:

... regarded the electoral process as sacrosanct and were motivated by something larger than ego and self-glory (136).

However, despite Trump's authoritarian tendencies being on full display, he received more votes in 2020 than in 2016 and:

... millions of voters supported Donald Trump, not despite of his authoritarianism, but rather because of it (140).

With respect to the invasion of the US Capitol building by Trump supporters on January 6th 2021, Bryant cites numerous examples of how many of the insurrectionists appropriated Jefferson's notion of 'noble rebellion' and perverted the violence inherent in the American origin story to give their actions a 'patina of legal respectability' (55) in the name of patriotism. From right-wing militia groups such as the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters, he notes that:

... a dangerous dualism is also at work which has contributed to the mutinous belief that political violence directed against the government is justifiable, historically legitimate and endorsed by the Founding Fathers. An origin story that, understandably, is rendered glorious is being used to validate violence (60).

This has built on the tendency for 'historical blindness', 'historical illiteracy', 'nationalistic nostalgia' and the 'Disneyfication' of US history that imbue the current political discourse. Having recovered from their initial shock at the violence, Trump was largely absolved by Republican leaders of blame for inciting the violence:

Rather than seeing January 6th for what it was, a day of infamy on par with the attack on Pearl Harbor and September 11th, GOP leaders minimised its historical import (56).

More recently, the event has been further sanitised: the rioters are being reframed as 'patriots' and 'peaceful people' and Trump has even called January 6th a 'beautiful day' in a town hall meeting in May. Similarly, the systematic racism and violent acts at the heart of slavery, the decimation of Native Americans during the colonisation of the continent and during the Civil War and its aftermath itself have been largely redacted from historical accounts as they have always:

... contradicted the grand American narrative that the United States is the most advanced democracy in the world, in which disputes are resolved in elections and legislative chambers, rather than with the noose, the guillotine or the gun. The result, then, has been collective memory loss and denialism (62-63).

Today, states like Florida among others have railed against the teaching of critical race theory or any other historical perspectives that undermine the 'nostalgia narrative' of so-called 'American exceptionalism'.

This is further evidenced by the ongoing impact and appeal of Trump's grievance fuelled politics, rhetoric and macho persona where he argued that he could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot someone and wouldn't lose any votes.

Between Trump and the MAGA diehards, it served as a bonding mechanism, a marker of cultural affinity. Machismo demonstrated his vitality and strength, accentuated how he was prepared to say the unsayable, and served as a rejoinder to the 'wokeism' of the Obama years (79).

It seems that this was born out by the results of the 2024 election where he gained traction among young male voters, in particular Blacks and Latinos (Sanders, 2024).

The various crises that erupted during Trump's first tenure, Bryant argues, exposed the potentially fatal flaw of the US democratic system that it 'is as much based on norms as it was on laws' (45). What sets Trump apart from his predecessors, is the failure of his party to rein him in — even Richard Nixon (1969-1974) who was almost certain to have been re-elected in 1974, was tapped on the shoulder after his part in the Watergate break-in was exposed. Bryant writes:

It is precisely this authoritarian strain within the modern-day GOP, and within the conservative movement more broadly, that makes Trump so dangerous and historically different. His Republican allies have facilitated and often encouraged his lawlessness, which makes a break from the past. ... [However], when it comes to authoritarianism in America, Trump walked through a half-open door. He did not create a constituency craving for an American strongman (138).

Even in aftermath of the Access Hollywood tape ('grab 'em by the pussy'), the Mueller Report into Russian interference in the 2016 election, the Ukraine scandal where he attempted to coerce Ukrainian president Zelensky to dig up dirt on Joe Biden in exchange for military aid (first impeachment), his failures during the COVID-19 pandemic (400,000 deaths), through to fomenting his supporters to invade the US Capitol on January 6th 2021 to prevent the certification of the election in Biden's favour (second impeachment), Trump has still managed to be given the imprimatur from the Republican Party as its 2024 presidential nominee. To make matters worse, in July 2024 the US Supreme Court granted presidents broad protections from criminal prosecution for 'official acts' they undertake while in office (Wolf, 2024). This ruling now places many of the multiple indictments against Trump for election interference on January 6th, for stealing official documents and for 'hush money' payments to adult film star Stormy Daniels ahead of the 2016 election, in jeopardy.

But what role does the much-hyped guardrails of the US constitution that in recent years has come to enjoy 'a near Biblical status' (21) still play in maintaining the integrity of US elections and the rule of law? Erwin Chemerinsky, dean of Berkeley Law in a new book on the role of the US constitution, argues that the system is broken and that major revisions are needed to this document if US democracy is to survive.

[The system] was created in 1787 by a small group of white men who hashed out a deal in their own interests, chief among them protecting smaller states and owners of enslaved people. Those framers made foundation stones of economic and racial inequality and also erected enduring barriers to political equality including an Electoral College that makes minority victory possible in presidential elections and two senators for each state regardless of population (Chemerinsky cited in Pengelly, 2024).

Women were not given the vote until 1920 — and state initiated voting suppression of non-white constituents and gerrymandering of electoral districts continues to this day in Republican-led state legislatures under the guise of reducing 'voter fraud' (see Anderson, 2018). Similarly, in the aftermath of the 2022 *Dodds* decision which overturned the decades-old *Roe versus Wade* national abortion rights ruling, abortion has now been banned totally in 14 states while four others have banned access beyond the sixth week of pregnancy (Sherman & Witherspoon, 2024). The power relegated to the individual states following this

ruling, has had the effect of not only politicising what many Americans consider to be basic principles of health care and individual rights, but is significantly out of touch with the views of most Americans (Durkee, 2024). It also points to impact of the power imbalance inherent in the system by virtue of the outsized influence afforded to the Supreme Court, the third pillar of government that has evolved way beyond the original intentions of the framers. According to Democratic senator Elizabeth Warren, the highly partisan nature of the current bench has 'turned the Supreme Court into an unelected third legislative chamber ... making a country with a democracy problem even less democratic' (273).

Finally, what role have media organisations and journalistic norms in particular played in promoting and normalising Trump? In a lecture to journalism students, Bryant (2024b) lays a significant level of blame at the feet of mainstream news organisations for their 'bothsidesism' and 'sane washing' of Trump's increasingly bizarre, incoherent and often racist and misogynistic ramblings. Struggling in face of the impacts of new media platforms, Trump's 'three ring circus' and click bait appeal continues to provide newsrooms with a constant stream of sensational headlines: 'no other candidate offered anything near the same journalistic dopamine hit' (Bryant, 2024b). This has exacerbated the existing schisms of racial and economic inequality that have long been noted by other Australian Trump observers (see Watson, 2016; 2024; Rundle, 2017; Daniel & Whalan, 2021), and which has evolved into a form of 'toxic exceptionalism' (276), mostly visible it seems to those looking on from afar with foreboding. He notes that:

... long before Trump ... many international observers had formed a view: that a country that liked to think of itself as a beacon of democracy was now a dumpster inferno (277).

So how should we interpret what is happening in America today? According to Bryant, the current state of America reflects a long-practised trend to gloss over the cracks of disunity with historically blind homily and exaggerated nationalism that obscures its internal dysfunction and historical contradictions. The question remains whether the US is a unified nation or one grappling with an uncertain identity. Is there hope on the horizon, or is the US hurtling towards an ever-darker future? This is a question not just for US voters, with major ramifications for allies and enemies abroad.

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About the reviewer

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