



Book review:

AMERICAN NIGHTMARE: DONALD TRUMP, MEDIA SPECTACLE, AND AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM

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In *American Nightmare: Donald Trump, Media Spectacle, and Authoritarian Populism*, Douglas Kellner's presents an unabashed bashing of a special phenomena in politics: the rise of the true outsider, President Donald Trump. Through analysis of the authoritarian populist actions of the Trump camp, Kellner narrates the wins, losses, and tragic ironies that befall the campaign in the early days of the administration. Kellner's frustration with the President is clear, as he often levels statements so aggressive and so polarizing that he rivals the eccentricity of the very same president he so thoroughly despises. Throughout the text, Kellner's message is clear: The campaign team behind this comedy of errors is stacked with historic liars telling grandiose lies, all while remaining obtuse enough to publicly admit to tactics that violate various U.S. laws. Kellner's book is a temporary requiem sung for Democracy in America, a message of hope to those who kept a close eye on the Presidency, and a warning for those who did not.

Regardless of the bent political charge of Kellner's critiques, there are issues present in Kellner's perspective that should be attended immediately. While critiquing Trump's actions in an American media landscape, Kellner perhaps misses an important credibility checkpoint by far too aggressively critiquing the public Trump personality, failing to discern the World Wrestling Federation inspired, seemingly bumbling public spectacle Donald Trump from the tactically-tweeting social strategist. Kellner's distaste peeks through in an array of relatively savage ad-hominem attacks, and with enough name-calling to impact Kellner's credibility with a centrist audience. To exemplify the hyper-emotional tone peppered throughout the text, a



simple public disagreement between Donald Trump and Fox news personality Megyn Kelly is written as a disagreement between a man with a “sick, extreme obsession”, who levels vitriolic attacks in a “barrage of crude assaults”. He further elevates the readers’ perceptions of Kelly using equally colourful pigment and paints the oft-contentious Kelly as a respected woman at the top of her profession, and choosing a foul subtext of a sick, crude, and obsessed madman. This grand irony is lost on Kellner as he further criticizes the Trump media spectacle for their various abuses of language to invoke emotional audience responses, using the parlance of Fox news to criticize Fox news.

Kellner’s central claim is that the Trump phenomenon witnessed in 2016 reveals the threat of authoritarian populism in America, along with a healthy mix of novel and tired perspectives of President Trump and his men that are difficult to deny. Kellner is indeed cold and calculated, and his hyperbole rivals that of his rival. However, to accept this text at its end-of-days interpretation sets the reader up to miss a host of powerful and effective techniques at play in the Trump Spectacle, and resigns the reader to retreat to an equally faulty and inversely distanced ideological extreme. Kellner keeps this polar theme constant as he produces an accurate, yet sometimes fanciful assessment of Trump based on the history of actions committed by what some consider a strategically moulded public persona.

It is easy to agree with Kellner’s overall characterization of Trump under the provided examples and statistics, there is no doubt that Trump is a religiously backed populist with a penchant for Manhattan real estate style tactics. Yet there remains a critical element missing from Kellner’s vision. There is an absence of the Donald Trump outside of his media spectacle persona, the Donald Trump many rural American voters feel that they know from the World Wrestling Federation. Donald Trump is one of the flagbearers when it comes to embodying a public brand. In the same fashion that we see the Kardashians utilize social media and television today, Trump also presents a life-like brand under guise of a publicly observable “reality”. There exists a sharply cunning public relations perspective that utilizes every moment of circulation to forward business ventures under the associated brand. This is one of the critical flaws in Kellner's painting of Trump: his perspective embodies the left-wing-worst-case scenario of Trump, an immature man born of wealth who speaks the language and walks the walk of a cutthroat 1990s New York real-estate mafioso. Whether or not this personality holds true should be for the reader to decide, without having to push through Kellner’s vitriolic descriptions of vitriol.

In terms of practical content, there are powerfully redeeming qualities to this book. Kellner documents a dangerous campaign that has only gotten wiser and stands poised for a comeback. He recognizes that Trumps rhetoric is reminiscent of respected presidents of the past, and that Trump also uses historic class fears, a long-recognized and arguably effective technique. One of the more fascinating aspects of the book lies in its descriptions of the key players in the campaign, considering the outcome of the Special Counsel investigation and recent litigation. The descriptions of Paul Manafort and Roger Stone are particularly apt, more so in light of the recent criminal cases. This book does provide an accurate insight into the pre-trial perspective of a larger GOP scandal that we surely hear from again.

I would recommend this book for either under-graduate or graduate courses interested in political communication, Public Relations, and Communications Law. It is significant in its scope and detail, bringing informative value to students who are already not yet fully literate in the public relations nightmare of the Trump campaign. Knowledgeable students would find this book to be sufficiently critical, although it would read as a worst-case scenario for Public



Relations practitioners, lacking the necessary critical value of supportive communication theory to make a case for an applied approach to managing the Public Relations fiasco herein presented. However, if you are also a professor who consults on the side, this book would be of significant value to you in terms of educating your clients to the necessity of pre-emptive client education. The narrative style used to write this book is very approachable to people who are practitioners in the communication craft, and who need to understand that a new gang of communicators have infected the political discourse over the past 4 to 5 years — that simply requires a threshold of political literacy in order to effectively and efficiently conduct oneself in the new political millennium.



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