Donald Trump’s Freshman Year

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At the end of Donald Trump’s first year in office, his job approval ratings are lower than those of any American president in modern history. The establishment mass media, on which he has declared war, provides credible evidence almost every day of an incoherent and incompetent administration, led by an ignorant, incurious, unstable, egotistical former reality TV star who may be guilty of sexual misconduct and under investigation for obstruction of justice.

David Cay Johnston is one of Trump’s more visible and vocal critics. An award-winning investigative journalist, Johnston is the author, among other books, of *The Making of Donald Trump*. He appears frequently as a talking head on CNN, MSNBC, and NPR.

Johnston faces challenges in attracting readers. Political junkies will be familiar with some of the information he presents, including Trump’s tax returns and his business practices. The book was completed before Johnston could apply his expertise on tax policy to Trump’s most significant legislative accomplishment. Moreover, Johnston’s programmatic and policy-oriented approach must compete with the headline-grabbing revelations of Michael Wolff’s *Fire and Fury*.

That said, *It’s Even Worse Than You Think* shines a light on actions by the White House and Trump-appointed federal officials on climate change, job creation, taxes, race, immigration, and foreign affairs, among other topics, that should concern – and alarm – all Americans.

A few less well-known examples. Since Trump took office, Johnston reveals, the net balance of trade between Mexico and the United States increased in Mexico’s favor by more than a third, while the president insisted that our neighbor to the south would pay for his wall. While Trump promised immediate and personal action to assist veterans of the armed services, Johnston indicates, his administration proposed ending disability benefits as soon as a vet became eligible.
for Social Security, an approach that would reduce annual income on average from $35,000 per person to less than $13,000. Trump’s appointees to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, Johnston demonstrates, will see to it that consumers pay billions of dollars more for electricity. And Johnston identifies specific ways in which Betsy DeVos’ Department of Education is in bed with for-profit colleges, the biggest abusers of student loans.

Johnston also demolishes Trump’s contention that Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio was “convicted for doing his job” and therefore deserved a pardon. Referring to one of his jails as “my concentration camp,” Johnston writes, Arpaio spent $1.15 per day to feed jail dogs and 90 or 95 cents for inmate food. On his watch, the death rate of prisoners was far higher than in other large jails, with 39 suicides by hanging, 37 dying in hospitals with no explanation offered, and 34 simply found dead in jail. Arpaio often denied medical treatment to individuals in custody; pregnant women were often shackled to beds.

Trump contested the legitimacy of the trial in which Arpaio was convicted of criminal contempt for ignoring a court order that he cease illegally rounding up Latinos (“I think we’re doing something good, if they’re leaving town,” the sheriff declared). He should have had a jury, the president said at a rally, when he knew or should have known that Arpaio chose to be tried by Judge Susan Bolton.

Acknowledging that Trump tapped into the economic malaise in the United States in 2016, Johnston provides chapter and verse about the president’s narcissism, lies, delusions, and attempts to create his own reality. Assuming, perhaps mistakenly, that his book will not simply preach to the choir, Johnston asks his ideal reader “to wipe from your mind the image Trump spent decades polishing” and the bluster about his wealth, genius, and deal-making prowess, and consider instead his “ignorance of basic issues of diplomacy, economics and geopolitics.” To acknowledge, at the very minimum, that his freshman year in office has not been one win after another. And to be open to the possibility that Trump is dividing us and undermining our democratic institutions.