'Trumpocracy': A conservative takes aim at President Trump

March 30, 2018 6:00 PM

By Glenn C. Altschuler

David Frum begins “Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic” with a quotation from Montesquieu, the French philosopher who had a profound impact on America’s Founding Fathers. A free society, Montesquieu wrote, must guard not only against the crimes of leaders, but against “negligence, mistakes, a certain slackness in the love of the homeland, dangerous examples, the seeds of corruption, that which does not run counter to the laws but eludes them, that which does not destroy them but weakens them.”

A senior editor at “The Atlantic,” speechwriter and special assistant to President George W. Bush, Mr. Frum is a respected establishment Republican. He believes, for example, that President Barack Obama’s executive order deferring enforcement of immigration laws against DACA “Dreamers” was unconstitutional; while President Donald Trump’s travel ban was well within the powers of his office.

Mr. Frum’s conservative credentials add credibility to his withering assault on the damage done by Mr. Trump and those who support, enable and empower him.

David Frum’s enumeration of Mr. Trump’s behavior as a candidate and as president is well-documented and well-known. More important is his insightful analysis of the grave threat to our democracy posed by the current and deepening paralysis of government under President Trump; the subversion of norms; contempt for conflicts of interest; and the incitement of resentment, cynicism, and violence among members of the president’s base.

In “Trumpocracy,” Mr. Frum demonstrates that the president is a consummate “producer, writer, and star of the extravaganza performance of the theater of resentment.” Mr. Trump exploits the surge of Americans who, following the Great Recession of 2008, declared themselves “angry with government.” And the “we versus them” conviction of many working class white males, who want less change, security more than opportunity, and who believe that government mandated economic redistribution rewards...
“lazy” black and brown people.

Exploiting the growing contempt for “political correctness,” Mr. Frum writes, Mr. Trump offers instead “a culture of impunity.” He refuses to release his tax returns, makes self-evidently empty promises to divest from his businesses, and issues pro forma apologies for inappropriate advances to women. He changes his positions, lies without qualm or remorse, but never equivocates.

With a wink of his own, Mr. Frum suggests that “there is no hypocrisy about Donald Trump.” After all, at campaign rallies, Mr. Trump often recited a parable that concluded “You knew I was a snake when you took me in.”

A substantial number of young Americans, some of them still living in their parents’ basement as they searched for a job, Mr. Frum maintains, voted for a con man, an inconsistent, incompetent, embarrassing and ridiculous reality TV star who “blatantly asserts power over truth,” precisely because they saw these “weaknesses” as strengths. Less committed to democracy as an indispensable form of government, they identify with a loser who has won.

In a concluding chapter, David Frum tries to glimpse some “shafts of light in these dark days.” Donald Trump, he suggests, has exposed dangers in American society that have been ignored or unaddressed by political, economic and cultural elites. Mr. Trump has inadvertently underscored “the preciousness of truth,” and an independent mass media, amid real-time evidence that “to abandon facts is to abandon freedom.”

The president, Mr. Frum claims, is reminding Americans that bullies are cowards. He has taught liberals to appreciate national security and intelligence agencies. He has forced establishment Republicans to confront and revise outdated policy priorities. Best of all, Mr. Trump had “delivered a booster shot” to bolster the anti-authoritarian immunities and civic activism “of a younger generation apparently lacking in them.”

At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Mr. Frum notes, Gouverneur Morris defended the inclusion of a provision for impeachment. A republican government, Morris declared, should not expose itself “to the danger of seeing the First Magistrate in foreign pay without being able to guard against it without displacing him.”

Mr. Frum knows that talk of impeachment is premature and may be unwarranted. With a burst of faith, he chooses to believe that Donald Trump is already being displaced by his own “disavowal of responsibility” and countermeasures being taken against him by national security agencies and his own Justice Department. Perhaps, Mr. Frum indicates, “everything will all return to normal when and if Trump departs the scene.”
But then again, Mr. Frum forces himself to acknowledge, “perhaps it will not.”

*Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.*