Book of essays deal with democracy in the age of Trump

BY DR. GLENN C. ALTICHLER, SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

In 1935, Sinclair Lewis responded to the Great Depression and the rise of fascists with a novel entitled "It Can't Happen Here." Lewis' cautionary tale featured Herbert "Buzz" Windrip, who ran for president of the United States against Franklin D. Roosevelt on a platform that promised to "$5,000 stipend for every citizen and the return of law, order, and traditional values.

Once in office, Windrip, like Adolf Hitler, imprisoned political opponents, journalists, and judges, and used Brownshirts to establish a totalitarian state.

Following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, sales of Lewis' novel surged.

Informative, provocative

"Can It Happen Here?" consists of 17 essays by distinguished scholars, most of whom are law professors, about the current prospects of democracy in the United States.

These days, the contributors note, democracy appears to be receding around the world, amid anti-immigrant and globalization, hatred of politicians, mistrust of experts, and the pervasiveness of cynicism, conspiracy theories, and social media outrage machines.

The book is informative, provocative, and, to put it mildly, timely.

Implications of 'moment'

Sophisticated, yet accessible, concerned but not alarmist, and contemptuous of Trump, the essays address the historical and political context, and the legal and constitutional implications of the current "moment."

Several contributors "game out" the implications for authoritarians of a series of small steps that weaken democratic institutions (by, for example, directly attacking or intimidating the press and/or reducing public support for judges and courts), and the deployment of "emergency powers" following, say, a massive terrorist attack.

Making their case

In "Paradoxes of the Deep State," Jack Goldsmith, a professor at Harvard Law School, Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, and Assistant Attorney General under President George W. Bush, concludes that leaks by government officials "constitute a subtle form of antidemocratic abuse" that should concern "even the most ardent critics of President Trump."

In "Hope D murdering Perish," Stephen Holmes, a professor at New York University School of Law, lists factors that increase the likelihood of "It" happening here: the volatile preferences of the majority; incentives for political parties to overpromise; the erosion of optimism about rising living standards; failing historical memories about the value of the welfare state; an obsession with the war on terror; the proliferation of partisan news outlets; low turnout in elections; voters who vote their passions rather than their interests; antipathy to political party establishments; the tarnishing of the idea of accountability; the suffocation of the concept of democracy itself; the growth of populism and xenophobic authoritarianism.

Eldeman's conclusion

Most important, the contributors present an array of examples of the "It" that has happened in the past — and that may or may not happen here. And they differ significantly on the likelihood of an authoritarian future for the United States.

That said, you get the sense that these lively and learned intellectuals agree with Noah Feldman, a professor at Harvard Law School.

Even if the subject of this book "has a "modesty paranoid edge to it," given the powerful ecosystem of the institutions of civil society in the United States, Feldman writes, a mild paranoia (along with vigilance, a commitment to preserve and nurture robust citizen engagement, and a willingness to resist, if necessary) may well be justified these days.

BOOK REVIEW

Review of "Can It Happen Here? Authoritarianism in America.
Edited by Cass R. Sunstein. William Morrow. 481 pages. $17.99

Not all practical

The contributors do not always agree with one another. They differ, for example, about whether economic distress or authoritarian predispositions (arrested by the perception of a "moral threat" and a loss of confidence in social consensus, leaders and institutions) was the prime mover for Trump voters.

Moreover, some of their prescriptions — such as requiring reauthorization of the emergency powers of the president, by ever-higher supermajorities, every two months — do not seem practical.

Feldman's conclusion

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Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.