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'A first class read': Lord Howell reviews 'Confidence Man: The Making of Donald Trump and the Breaking of America'

Maggie Haberman has produced a well-informed examination of how a great democracy was pushed to the brink – yet fundamental questions as to what made Donald Trump's rise to power possible are left unanswered

'A shadow continues to stretch out over the United States. Its name is Trump. And the question is: will he really return?'

This is not just a matter of domestic American politics. An unstable and divisive America means a still more unstable world even than now.

In this very well-informed volume, New York Times journalist Maggie Haberman puts the spotlight on the central character and how he has performed all along.

As a detailed account of the Donald Trump saga so far – with all its wild hirings and sackings, its unending leaks and counter-leaks – it is a first class read.

Perhaps it does not go quite deep enough into the “why”, the real fundamentals that made a phenomenon like Trump possible in such a giant, mature, great society. It does not, for instance, ask or answer how on earth this man – so determined to challenge and denounce not just the policies of the opposing party, but the whole structure of United States governance, root

and branch, and to do so often in the crudest manner – ever came to be in this position and ever came to be taken as a serious third time contender for the highest office.

Back in history there have always been such people rising to supreme power, for a while. But we are not in history. We are in the revolutionary new age of continuing and disorienting connectivity.

There has been nothing like it ever before. Trump-like figures are not new. But in a historical perspective the micro-circuit is. And that is where one has to look to understand the whole anarchic pattern of public debate on which Trump has ridden, with its barely filtered platforms, its cheapening and polarising of public debate, its fears and scares, fake and near-fake, being given super-new currency, and with the most careful editing and filtering of yore thrown to the winds.

This is not just a matter of domestic American politics

The empowered armies of resentment and grievance are truly on the march in America, equipped by more powerful electronic weaponry than ever before in history. Every identity cause, every minority (from which Trumpism, with its “anti” culture, derives considerable support) can, and does, join in.

The culmination of this turmoil – so far – was the 6 January Capitol invasion.

On that day the mask truly fell. Suddenly it was crystal clear that the Trump challenge was not just partisan – one rival for the throne against another, or one outdated ideology against another – but an assault against the Constitution itself, the basic binding material holding the United States together since its 1787 beginning (although of course with the bloody civil war interregnum along the way). In August at least three books came on my desk – all from highly reputable American academic sources – dwelling on civil wars; how they start and asking, incredibly, whether America could now have a second one.

This side of the Atlantic we have our Nigel Farages, products of the same forces in slightly milder form. They see themselves as political leaders but in the British context their role is more as safety valves, temporary outlets of indignation, frustration and outrage against society's unfairness, against "them", against the alleged establishment, invariably painted in hues of greed and corruption – always the favourite populist target.

The conundrum, still largely unsolved, is how to govern such a world and keep it broadly united and away from the spiral into anarchy, how to garner the respect and trust necessary to sustain and deploy authority.

It has to be recognised that the business of governance has changed radically.

The quintessential need becomes for a leader of deep wisdom, who can illuminate the world's complexities and yet demonstrate utter, utter humility – none of Donald Trump's most obvious traits!

All we need to know about the Trump saga so far is here in this book. The question that remains is whether the book of Trump is now closed.

Confidence Man: The Making of Donald Trump and the Breaking of America

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