

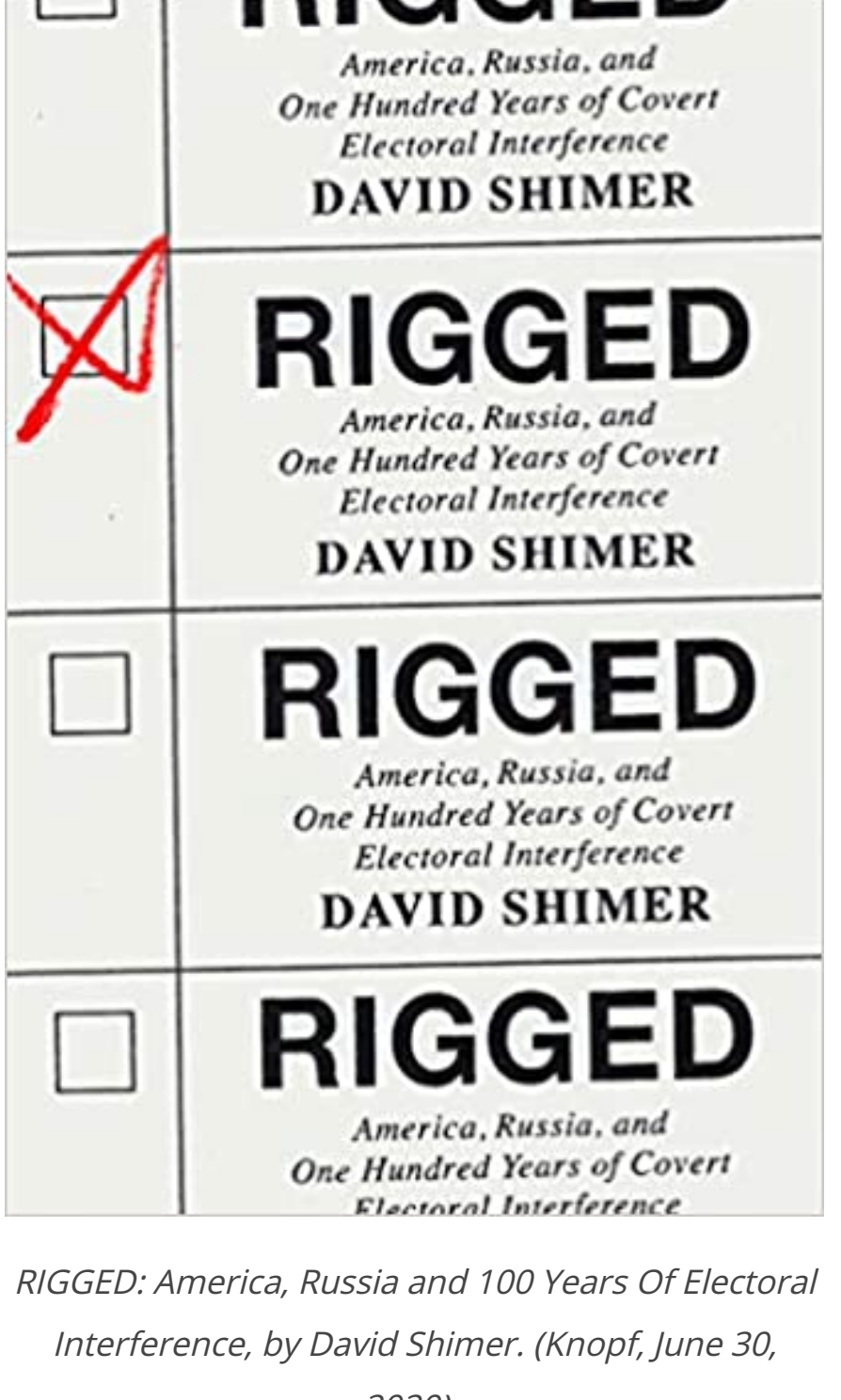
Four More Books About Donald Trump

Why not 40? Or 400?

June 30, 2020 Michael Giltz

Four more books about Donald Trump? Try, of course four more books about Trump. Or at least four more books out of the dozens of books about Donald Trump published this week alone. Rigged is the one with the best historical perspective, Surviving Autocracy is the most intellectually thoughtful, The Room Where It Happened is the most headline-grabbing, and Trumpocalypse has the best title. On the other hand, Rigged won't surprise anyone who's read up on the CIA; Surviving Autocracy takes too much comfort in the belief that rigorously defining something will help end it; The Room Where It Happened is a glorified and boring if damning collection of meeting notes; and Trumpocalypse is the most annoying. Still...Trumpocalypse. TRUMPOCALYPSE!!

It's all Rigged



RIGGED: America, Russia and 100 Years Of Electoral Interference, by David Shimer. (Knopf, June 30, 2020).

Rigged is by David Shimer, who's still in school, for Pete's sake. To be fair, he's pursuing a doctorate in international relations at the University of Oxford as a Marshall Scholar. (I guess if he said he was "reading" international relations, it would be too precious?) And he's already written for The New York Times, New Yorker and Foreign Affairs. So there's that.

His first book breaks down into two sections. Most of it looks at how the U.S. and the USSR, previously and currently known as Russia, futzed with elections around the world for the past 100 years. Few will be shocked to hear the U.S. depose rulers, funnels money to candidates it favors and spreads propaganda against those it opposes. Shenanigans and disastrous actions in Chile, Iran, Italy and others are well documented.

Shimer proves more illuminating when he compares and contrasts the tools of the U.S. versus the tools of the Soviet Union and now Vladimir Putin's kleptocracy, or whatever we're calling the oppressive rulers of Russia these days. Amusingly, Shimer points out that the U.S. is good at helping their favored candidates work on messaging, getting out the vote, campaigning and so on. You know, the basics of a free and democratic election. The commies? Not so much. Being in a country where free and fair elections are scarce, its spy agency has zero experience in how elections work. So their skill set amounts to the three Bs: blackmailing, bribing and ballot-stuffing. See: East Germany.

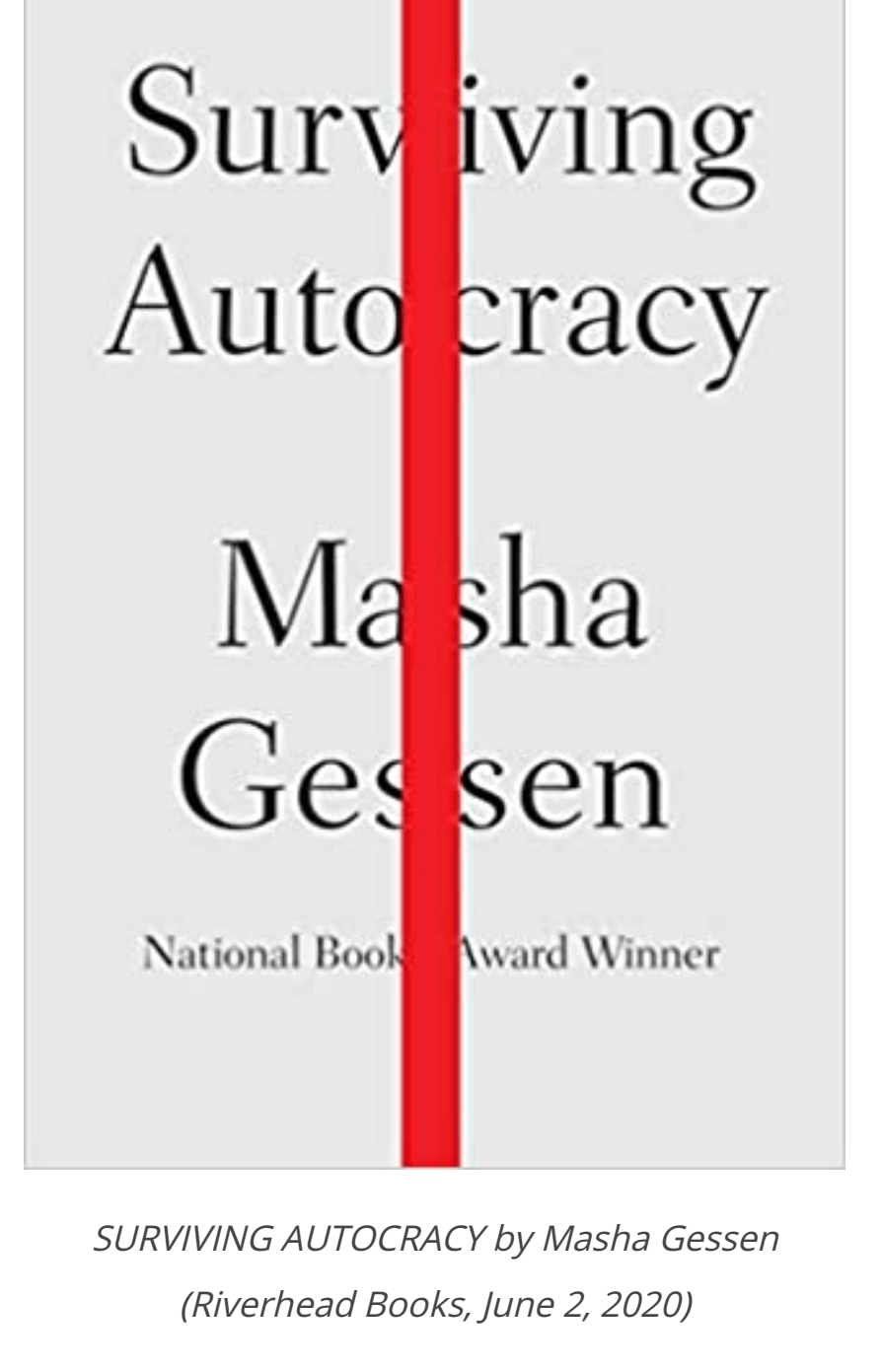


David Shimer (photo credit: Max Lukian)

Towards the end of this section, Shimer convincingly suggests the U.S. is done with secretly rigging elections and helping candidates. The hypocrisy of meddling in even a nascent democracy isn't worth the cost. Nowadays we simply work in the open to support a free and fair process. Who could object? Well, Russia and other dictatorial rulers, actually. They see it as their right to hold rigged, fake elections. When the U.S. encourages international observers to step in and hold them accountable, they see that as just as dastardly as we would ballot stuffing.

The last third of Rigged is devoted to Russia's remarkable interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections. Social media platforms have weaponized Russia's disinformation campaigns, making their desire to sow chaos cheaper and more effective than ever. Shimer speaks to everyone from top U.S. officials to retired Russian agents and gives a good blow-by-blow account. It makes you a little more sympathetic to the terrible choices facing President Obama, but I doubt this part will hold long-term interest. So the first two-thirds are unsurprising and the last third is too narrow in scope. But Shimer definitely does some good reporting.

Pretty much just a collection of Masha Gessen columns



SURVIVING AUTOCRACY by Masha Gessen (Riverhead Books, June 2, 2020)

Masha Gessen's work at The New Yorker is an oasis in the desert of hysterical coverage surrounding Trump's every tweet. Gessen has the historical perspective of living through a collapsing democracy as well as dealing with the petty tyranny of Vladimir Putin. The insights are genuine and absorbing, with Gessen often taking an unexpected and helpful perspective without seeming desperate to be contrary.

I read Gessen faithfully but Surviving Autocracy is the first book by the acclaimed writer I've read, though they've published about ten. Here at least Gessen hasn't turned these musings on Trump into a satisfying book with a sense of purpose. It circles in and around and over and under Trump and Putin and what it all means in meandering style.

However, nary a chapter goes by without a useful thought. Gessen even has black-humored fun with the endless debate over what to call Trump's actions. Is it fascism? The Republican Party taken to extremes...or to its logical conclusion? Gessen titles a string of chapters thus: We Could Call It A Kakistocracy, We Could Call It Corruption, We Could Call It Aspirational Autocracy (that's my favorite) and We Could Pretend He Is An Alien, or Call It The Government Of Destruction.

It's funny and makes salient points, and then Gessen circles back and around again; the book spins its wheels but never really gains traction. I wouldn't miss a column of Gessen's in The New Yorker. This book feels more like a collection of columns with all the negatives that implies. Accept that and you'll appreciate it more.

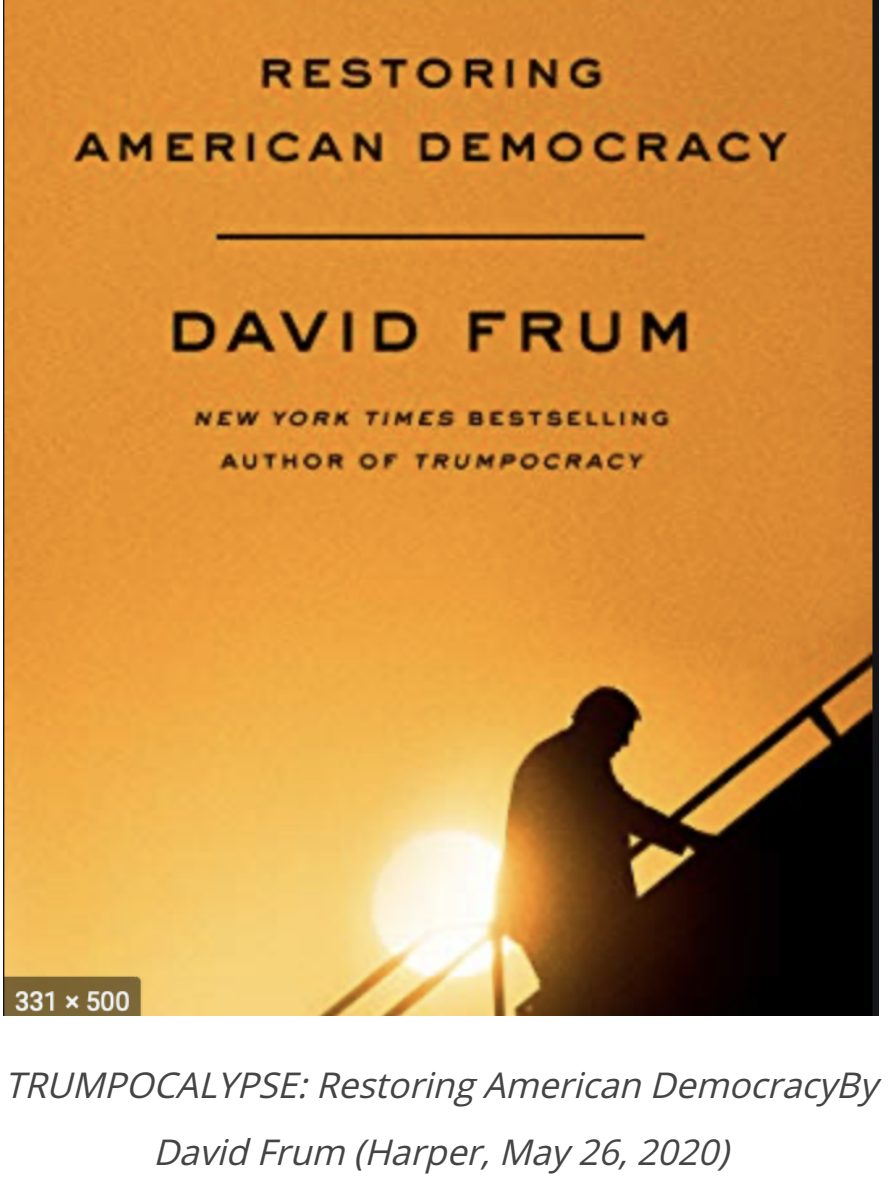
John Bolton didn't get his war

Little needs to be accepted by former National Security Adviser John Bolton, who never saw a sabre he wouldn't rattle or a war he couldn't love. Bolton dishes the dirt on Trump in The Room Where It Happened. The book contains shocking and headline-making revelations such as the fact that Trump is utterly ignorant about world affairs and even less interested in doing anything about it. Trump is in this accidental Presidency for himself, loves dictators and pleads with foreign powers to interfere with U.S. elections.

Worst of all, when Bolton thought he'd finally get to instigate some actual boots on the ground conflict, Trump wipped out at the last minute, deciding that killing hundreds of Iranians perhaps wasn't such a good response to their downing of a military drone. Almost all of this is on the news even as I type and should be shocking... except Trump has publicly done the very same things in public for the past three years.

So Bolton is a far-right stalwart who didn't get his war and left in a huff, taking his copious notes with him. Hence this book. It's revelations should surprise no one. Yet Bolton is as conservative as it gets and no one has ever called him a liar. So he'll be hard to dismiss. Bolton may be a fool, but if you believe as he does that Trump poses an existential threat to democracy, then for the moment he's a useful fool for anyone who shares that opinion.

David Frum strangely still believes his way is possible



TRUMPOCALYPSE: Restoring American Democracy By David Frum (Harper, May 26, 2020)

I want to appreciate David Frum's Trumpocalypse. He's a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush and the coiner of the phrase "axis of evil." More happily, he's a Republican and a Never Trumper. Like many, Frum is fuming over Trump's trashing of our country's norms, keeping a catalog of the President's numerous outrages and like a dozen other books I've read or scanned, he lists them all.

Each one IS an outrage. And it's a credit to Trump, I suppose, that everyone doesn't repeat the same outrages. Their fiery denunciations often include Trump's greatest hits: who can forget "kids in cages" for example? It's got a nice beat and you can weep to it. But writers invariably include some particular, half-forgotten Constitution-shredding measure that really got under their skin, ones not always mentioned by others simply because there are so damn many of them.

These outrages were indeed outrageous and made headlines at the time and seemed The End of Trump but were soon eclipsed by some fresh horror. Oh right, you think, Trump and the Republicans also did that obscene thing as well. If nothing else, it's helpful to be reminded. Frum does his best to prod our memory.

I want to applaud Frum for rejecting Trump and recognizing that Republicans must be soundly and repeatedly defeated in elections if they ever hope to reform. But like so many Republicans patting themselves on the back for voting against Trump in 2016, Frum is eager to make clear that people like him will put Dems over the top and thus, they are in charge. No crazy "liberalism," thank you very much. And progressives better squash any hope of being progressive. If Dems win, they damn well better start behaving like...Republicans.

Frum's way is still the best way, says Frum. When not slipping in some very modest rehabilitation of Bush 43 (undeserved, to say the least), Frum's grand plan to Restore American Democracy is to nibble around the edges. He offers a spoonful of water when we need a fire break to control the raging flames of the Trumpocalypse. Frum wants more financial transparency for candidates for President and boldly suggests they disclose their tax returns...say, for the prior three years. Three! Bold, he isn't. At least Frum supports ending the filibuster in the Senate and, OK, D.C. can become a state.

It gets worse. Frum's idea of useful election reform is insisting everyone get a tamper-proof form of identification from the government, free of charge. In other words, let's spend billions of dollars providing something wholly unnecessary to combat the Republican lie that hordes of strangers are going to voting booths and pretending to be someone they're not so they can swing an election.

Even sillier, he proposes Democrats come up with two maps for the states they control come the next round of redistricting—one fair and equitable; the other perversely gerrymandered in their favor. They should threaten Republicans with a grossly gerrymandered map of, say, South Carolina. If Republicans try to gerrymander Texas in an unfair way, why the Dems will do the same in South Carolina. If you play dirty, we will too! Besides being untenable, it's absurd to adopt the very ugly and undemocratic behavior you've denounced all along. That's not fighting fire with fire; that's abandoning your principles.

To garner support for the Affordable Care Act, Frum insists the Democrats need to loudly make clear this will never include illegal immigrants. That should go over well. Demonize "illegals" and tell...which was a great idea about 30 years ago.

Finally, Frum predicts doom if the Democrats embrace really crazy liberal ideas like taxing the wealthy, universal health care, and gun control. That agenda, he thinks, will drive away moderate Republicans and allow really bad Republicans like Trump back into power.

Never mind that taxing the wealthy, the immigration reform that Dems have pushed for decades, universal health care, improving ObamaCare and gun control all poll at high rates of approval. Maybe Frum doesn't have his finger on the pulse of the young people coming into power, a group that's more progressive and less white than he can apparently imagine.

So the best thing we can do is accept Frum's support, give him a nice seat in the back of the room, and hope he'll stop talking and listen for a while. We won't find the future of America with grudgingly supportive Republicans. Just don't tell them that until after the election.

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Tags: David Frum, David Shimer, Donald Trump, John Bolton, Masha Gessen, Rigged, Trumpocalypse

← Bye Bye Blackvoice Carl Reiner, RIP →

Michael Giltz
 Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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