

A Man for This Season

by Conrad Black



Disclosure requires at the outset that I mention Victor Davis Hanson wrote a very generous foreword to [my book](#) on President Trump, though from a somewhat different angle. I would have declined this assignment if it required, in all honesty, to write a less than favorable review. That is not a problem. This is, and as any Hanson reader would expect, an excellent book. The title is in some respects misleading, as the author does not make the case for Trump as an advocate; he neutrally presents the reasons why an adequate number of Americans, conveniently distributed electorally, chose him as president.

A review of [The Case for Trump](#) by Victor Davis Hanson (Basic Books, 400 pages, \$30)

Trump pulled off an extraordinarily perceptive analysis of the areas of discontent—identified both intuitively and by polling carefully. Trump recognized that the post-Reagan presidency and Congress had alienated a large and ever-growing section of public opinion stretching, with rare dissident patches, from upstate New York and Pennsylvania to the Rocky Mountains, and apart from Minnesota and Illinois, from Canada to the border and Gulf of Mexico. This has become the great Republican torso of America, and Hanson limns in always interesting insights about the steadily increasing disaffection of traditional, white, working and middle-class Americans at what they consider the desertion of their interests by the Democratic Party and the disparagement of them and of their opinions by the leadership of the Democratic Party.

Tens of millions of Americans, not necessarily immensely politically sophisticated, but well aware of what they liked and disliked, were steadily more offended by President George H.W. Bush's frivolous renunciation of his infamous Clint Eastwood-imitative promise: "Read my lips—no new taxes," and by his, as they perceived it, post-Gulf War foreign policy that was overly deferential to America's enemies and to free-loading allies. Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein had been removed from Kuwait yet crowed that he had survived, was developing nuclear weapons and was the tip of the spear of militant, secular Islam. Bush's support for continued Ukrainian and other ethnic republics' adherence to the Soviet Union, and praise for the "confederation" of Yugoslavia, vaguely annoyed many Americans, especially when his son led us back into Iraq a decade later. The senior President Bush's answer to a recession at home was just to spend more, even if it was borrowed, and even if doing so did nothing for the dwindling manufacturing sector of America.

In time, the people that Bill Clinton assured "I feel your pain," evolved, in considerable measure, into the people that Barack Obama would asperse as "clinging to guns and religion."

They too were irritated. This was hard to take from a man who sat contentedly for twenty years in the pews of racist and anti-American pastor Jeremiah Wright, who dispensed his violent religion in fiery terms to the Obama family. The same loyal Democrats going back to the Roosevelt and Truman and Kennedy and Johnson years were singularly unimpressed by 2016 candidate Hillary Clinton's consignment of them to the "basket of deplorables," racists male chauvinists, rednecks, reactionaries, and bigots.

All politically informed people generally knew about this, but Hanson meticulously cites the Democratic leaders and describes Donald Trump's cunning and well-thought-out pitch to what Richard Nixon called in a different context: "The silent majority." Despite unprecedented media derision, Trump—once he got going as a candidate—exploited the rather muted proposals for tinkering with the decaying status quo of his talented group of Republican opponents, successful governors and former governors (Jeb Bush, Chris Christie, Mike Huckabee John Kasich, Rick Perry, Scott Walker), and prominent senators (Rand Paul, Marco Rubio, and Ted Cruz). They were a capable and previously respected group.

But as the debates opened, Trump—though gratuitously abused by a vast echelon of the media—apparently was in the lead. In the early days, prominently placed among the contenders, only he dissented from the group-think of the other candidates of both parties. Only he wanted the NATO allies to pay more for their defense that the United States was providing, though it was distant from the possible source of danger, Russia. Only Trump called for the end to unequal trade deals, to a policy of truckling to China which enjoyed a \$365 billion trade surplus with the United States and yet extracted exorbitant concessions from American companies to do business in China, and from disadvantageous trade agreements with Mexico, Japan, and Western Europe. Only Trump debunked the Palestinians as a serious interlocutor for peace.

Only Trump, among Republicans and Democrats, despite socialist senator Bernie Sanders' supposed championing of the American working class, attacked globalism with its implications of supposed allies enticing American companies into their countries from which they would export unemployment back to the United States. All the other candidates in both parties were generally silent on these points, but Americans noticed, and as the primaries rolled by, the conventional wisdom that Trump was just brand-building and creating a great infomercial, gave way to hysterical attempts to "Stop Trump" on the Republican side, and then distance the party and its candidates at other levels from him.

Finally, in effect, they joined Hillary Clinton in protecting the United States from the "great ogre," the unimaginable prospect of Donald Trump, blow-hard and checkered billionaire, sexist, racist, know-nothing, crook, tax-cheat, and ultimately Manchurian candidate-stooge of the Kremlin, being elected to the presidency. Most noteworthy, only Trump of all the candidates on both sides appeared to be serious about stopping the flow of millions of illiterate peasants across the southern border, contributing to a deadly influx of lethal narcotics. All the other candidates of both parties just repeated the tired platitude of "comprehensive immigration reform," which everyone understood to mean, naturalizing millions of illegal arrivals and making purposeful (and inconsequential) noises about stopping the future flow of them.

Hanson makes the point very rigorously that Hillary Clinton was the one prominent Democrat who had a more dubious career than Trump's, despite his less salutary business ventures, such as the unutterable hucksterism of Trump University. It was a fiercely nasty campaign, with both sides regularly charging the other with crimes. If there had been a Democratic nominee apart from the tainted Clinton and socialist Sanders, perhaps even the frequent blunderbuss Vice President Joe

Biden, he might have won.

Hanson describes vividly the resonance of Trump's key campaign arguments: "We don't win anymore." No one, he implied, was defending the national interest, and the middle and working classes had been put over the side and were overtly despised by the Democratic leaders over whose backs they had climbed to power, and they were selling America out to foreigners. How was the national interest served by allowing American allies to poach factories from the United States, export back into the country, creating more unemployment, and inducing the profit-making American corporations not to remit profits back to our shores, while Mexico in particular, made the arrangements even more one-sided by exporting illegally into the United States millions of impoverished and unskilled people, who then shipped back \$30 billion to Mexico? Trump's enemies replied that he was a racist, that providing in this way for the welfare of the underdeveloped world built international security and progress, and that it was in America's interest and was its moral duty also. Only Trump realized that enough of the country was no longer buying into this to win an election with it.

Trump was running against the fading echoes of the Cold War, more than 25 years after the Cold War ended. Hanson, uniquely, makes the case that only Trump of the Republican candidates, could have made these points, (though Rand Paul approached some of them), and that only Hillary Clinton was more vulnerable than Trump was to the imputation of low ethics. When there is added to this the energy and careful targeting and tactics of the Trump campaign, his astonishing victory, the greatest upset in American presidential history, seems more comprehensible. He knew he had no chance in the states where the demographics militate against his positions, especially California and New York, most of New England, and Obama's home state of Illinois. He focused relentlessly and ingeniously and with all the skills of populist communication

he had learned in pulling more than 25 million viewers every week to his reality television production, on susceptible audiences with his very focused message.

Hanson recounts Trump's generally successful record as president for two years, the astounding economic strength of the country, and his initial successes in facing down trade rivals and the North Korean regime. And he inserts the results of the midterm elections, where, in effect, NeverTrump pretend-Republicans were replaced by Democrats in the House, and the Republicans gained a seat in the Senate and replaced three Republicans hostile to the president with supporters. This enabled his supporters, who now thoroughly control the congressional Republican Party which was skeptical and uncooperative at first, to respond in the Senate to the much-heralded House Democratic investigations into every aspect of Trump's life. The Mueller report's benign conclusions for the president came after the book was finished, but only confirm the author's views.

As only Hanson can, he muses on the possible destiny of this president as a tragic hero like Ajax or Oedipus, whose achievements could be made possible, but also limited, by his excesses. An interesting diversion follows, mentioning a number of literary and film figures.

But Trump could also be a successful president who is not a hero. Not every elevation to high office is a tragedy or a triumph of a hero. I think the betting must now be that Trump will be quite successful and will leave office relatively well regarded by most people. Appalling though it still is, the hatred of him is much less vituperative and self-confident than at the start of his term. And the changes he is seeking to the alliance system and the nature of international power alignments could be substantially realized, and be a stabilizing adjustment to post-Cold War conditions. Mideast peace, NATO, relations with China, all needed reassessment. And freed of the *dirigisme* and excessive taxation Obama had

placed on it, the American economy is flourishing in a way that Trump's predecessor said could only be achieved with a "magic wand."

This is an exemplary, fair, and even-sided account of this president, his success as a candidate, and his prospects. It makes no pretense to being a biography and conveys almost nothing about Trump's life until his emergence as a serious claimant on the presidency. But it is a much-needed and balanced perspective on the Trump phenomenon almost four years after he announced his candidacy to immense hilarity and ridicule.

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