HOW TRUMP RECAPTURED AMERICA

ALL OR NOTHING

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For Victoria

Author's Note

This is my fourth book about Donald Trump's political journey. It is a story about character, a singular one. I have used the firsthand observations of people who have been in personal, often daily, contact with him to create as much as possible an intimate portrait of Donald Trump at significant and revealing moments during his third run for the presidency. Here are the moment-by-moment gyrations of his whims, needs, furies, survival instincts, and, arguably, bursts of genius. To tell the story of a man who sees himself as having a special status and destiny—who is, indubitably, not like you or me—requires, ideally, the confidence of his butler; in Trump's case, his many butlers. I have offered anonymity to anyone who can help me see into his private chambers. Such protections become ever more important in what I fear is a new climate of retribution, with more power than ever before in the hands of loyalty enforcers (and more paranoia among them, too). My hope is that the insights so many people have provided me, out of both personal alarm and because the story is too extraordinary not to tell, into the real-time temper of the star and his entourage of enablers offers a different sort of window from the daily news coverage into Donald Trump's character and the upended politics of our time.

Prologue

Mar-a-Lago

When Donald Trump returned to Mar-a-Lago on Inauguration Day, January 20, 2021, a dwindling band seeing him off from Andrews Air Force Base, it was at best a loser's fantasy that he could run for president again. In the orbits around him (family, White House aides, Republican leaders, donors), there certainly weren't many cogent voices encouraging him in this fantasy. If you were close to him, you tended to be at best circumspect, if not mortified, on his behalf—defeat; crazy, *Keystone Cops* efforts to deny his loss; January 6; exile.

Most immediately, he faced another impeachment trial in the Senate and could hardly even marshal a competent legal team to put up his defense—a ragtag band of small-time practitioners was assembled only after a wide casting call. He was saved—and his ability to hold office again preserved—only by Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell's pity and desire to wash his hands of him. Through conventional eyes, this trial was just one more coffin nail. (Still, an advantage perhaps evident only to him, it did keep him in the news.)

His finances were in disarray. His sons, with their own livelihoods at issue, were counting on a level of calm and distance, with him necessarily out of the news, to help re-establish the brand, with hope that in a year or two or three, "Trump," would be *old* news. There were several open outbursts at Mar-a-Lago between them and him, with the sons emphasizing the seriousness of the situation and the discipline that would be required.

Their suggestion that he could be most valuable as an ambassador to the family's foreign properties—Donald Trump on a permanent golfing tour—hardly sat well with him.

There were rumblings about legal threats he might face. All the more reason to keep his head down and not provoke the new sheriff in town.

The state of his mental health was a whispered concern. He really did not seem to appreciate, or grasp, the reality of what had occurred.

His chief adviser in the White House, the aide with real authority and influence, the conduit of normalcy to the extent that any existed, was his son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Trump expected Kushner to continue in Mar-a-Lago as his right hand. But Kushner's own clear and immediate post–White House plan was to put distance between himself and his father-in-law. Asked about his father-in-law's future by a friend, Kushner replied, "What was Nixon's future?" Kushner and his wife, Ivanka, for social and tax reasons, were themselves moving to Florida—but to Miami instead of Palm Beach, using new schools for their children as an explanation. Replacing himself, Kushner staffed up his father-in-law's new exile office. But it wasn't much of a staff: Susie Wiles, a local Florida political operative at retirement age (in a young person's profession), took on the job more out of duty than ambition; Nick Luna, a young man married to one of Kushner's assistants, would commute several days a week to Palm Beach from Miami; Jason Miller, a comms person in the campaign, would be on call for a few months in Washington; and Molly Michael, another of his look-alike assistants, would step in as the designated young woman attending to him (notably, Hope Hicks, his favorite young woman retainer, had fled during his effort to overthrow the election).

His wife, Melania, was straightforward about how she saw her husband's future—or the future she did not see. She had not enjoyed a single day in the White House. To the extent that they had had a marriage (even on a negotiated footing), it was further disrupted by her husband's mood swings and constant sense of offense and injury while in the White House. It had all been bad, in her view, for their son, Barron, and had only increased tensions between her and the rest of the Trump family. So, good

riddance. She was young, her husband was old, and she had her own life to make—she felt nothing but relief that he was finished with politics (or it was finished with him).

Trump, however, simply did not acknowledge his defeat and exile. There was not the slightest indication, not the smallest opening of self-awareness, that he even sensed the enormity and finality of what had occurred since Election Day, November 3. He showed no inclination to look for meaning in the events, or to sift the experience. Nor was anyone aware of a friend or confidant with whom he might be considering the recent past and unknown future. He was not, as many defeated politicians have described themselves, consumed by a period of self-doubt and reflection. Rather, he was still, for all intents and purposes, and never breaking character, the president.

You might believe such an ongoing fantasy of, say, a despot of some minor country exiled to the South of France, surrounded by a retinue of sycophantic loyalists, seeing himself in a displaced but unchanged world. Perhaps this was similar. Most of the people around the former president in Mar-a-Lago—family, his political and Mar-a-Lago staff, the Mar-a-Lago members—were certainly humoring him. But, really, this was transparent stuff, politesse—at least in the beginning.

The central facet of his exile—alarming pretty much to all and prompting a necessary lack of eye contact among the people around him—was his continuing and obsessive focus on the stolen election. He would bring it up no matter the topic at hand. There was virtually no conversation in which he did not return to the victory that he maintained, full of outrage and certainty, had been corruptly taken from him.

Yes, the arc of history may seem since then to have bent to his delusion, but in the spring of 2021, and perhaps for most of the year after, there were very few, if any, reasonable, professional, establishment (whatever you might want to call people who live in the empirical world) voices of any political stripe who did not entirely appreciate that Donald Trump had lost the election. From his staff to his lawyers, to his family, to his cabinet, to the entirety of the Republican leadership in Washington, even to Tucker

Carlson and Steve Bannon—there was no way *not* to accept the facts of his defeat. Even extending the benefit of the doubt and granting instances of possible dispute, virtually everyone but the former president and his small support group of nutters understood that the result would not meaningfully have been changed. It was simple math.

Trump, though, was in a loop of numbers—the individual numbers in his rendition often changing, supplemented by weird "fact" sheets that he'd had his staff assemble and by articles from the right-wing press that he kept at hand, which he would spin out in conversations—a monologue, really, one that might end only when whomever he was talking to made polite and desperate excuses or from which Trump was dragged away. You could not listen to him and believe he had any understanding of even the most basic facts. Or, alternatively, you might reasonably conclude he was purposely and, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, stubbornly trying to disguise the basic facts in layers of nonsense.

He believed it, or he convinced himself he believed it, or it was a bravura performance, with no possibility that he would ever let on that he was in fact performing: There had been a conspiracy that subverted the true result, and therefore, he was still president. "A group of people within the Democrat Party working along with Big Tech and the media" had stolen it from him, he explained to a Mar-a-Lago visitor. It was "a coordinated effort." He promised: "Names are going to be revealed." Of course, they never were.

For a while, there was pathos here. There is hardly anyone, at least not with something better to do, who did not recognize the quixotic nature of this. But certainty has power. Unwavering certainty. Psychotic certainty, even. Perhaps disgrace, too, has special power—if you refuse to accept your disgrace, it becomes righteousness. And perhaps delusion has power. And the larger the delusion is, the more power it may have.

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Given that he had not changed, that, in his mind, he was still the president, there was never a natural progression to refer to him as the former president, nor even a segue to understanding "president" as just a polite honorific—the correct title for a former president is "Mr."—and never back to his first name. He remained what he was. Hence, he may not ever have considered *not* running again. He may not have looked at it as a decision to make. Rather, simply, 2020 had never ended.

But did he really want to go on being president? Weren't there other things in life for an older man?

His wife lived at a curated distance, his growing son with her. His older children more employees than family. There was no domestic life to return to. (Indeed, he lived in a country club.) He wasn't going to write a book, or organize a presidential library, or raise money for a foundation, or do good works to burnish his reputation, or return with any cheer to his real estate business, such as it was. Nothing but golf tempted him.

Arguably, there were just no alternatives to running again. What would he do? Who would he be? To be Donald Trump, he had to be president; otherwise, he was into the existential abyss.

Given his great baggage—an unpopular president with a dubious record who had staged a failed coup—it, of course, made no sense that he should run. That would have been the assessment of most political professionals in both parties. Who, *reasonably,* would have thought this was a good idea?

All potential presidential candidates have a yearslong discussion about should they or shouldn't they. This is a way to build allies: "Yes, you should run"—okay, that's an increment of support. "Well, yes, interesting, but these are the impediments"—okay, less than support. Or, "Let's look at this realistically"—a wet blanket. Trump never once had such a discussion. Nobody came to Mar-a-Lago and outlined the hard realities of his dismal popularity, his lack of support among the party leadership, his legal problems, or the difficulties of facing an incumbent president.

Nobody was logically triangulating the known world for him.

Mar-a-Lago is not truly in the Cartesian universe.

Even beyond its deferential membership, inclined to treat their host as something like a beloved but aged rock-and-roll act (Elvis, in so many ways), Mar-a-Lago became the setting for a particularly extreme cast of bootlickers, opportunists, and grifters. In the months after his defeat: the actor Jon Voight, fetishistic in his patriotic ardor for Trump, on one day; Mike Lindell, the My Pillow CEO, who would sacrifice his business and fortune for Trump, on another; Sean Hannity, whose Trump-led television ratings had transformed him into one of the most powerful political figures in the nation; Kurt Olson, part of Trump's legal retinue and a deep-state conspiracy theorist. Yes, Kevin McCarthy, the House Speaker, appeared at Mar-a-Lago, but only in a kiss-the-ring effort to head off plotters on his right flank. A trail of people of no standing or purpose, save access to him, made their way to Mar-a-Lago, offering flattery and get-rich-quick schemes —among them a set of no-account would-be entrepreneurs whom no other former president would have entertained, who proposed he front a media company start-up (which, as preposterous as Trump's own return, would one day be worth ten billion dollars).

Mar-a-Lago, as one Trump intimate put it, was less Camelot than Jonestown.

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The feet-on-the-ground, putting-two-and-two-together, cause-and-effect world is where American politics, in its historic accomplishment, has always lived. Politics, the art of the possible, is an enforced rationality. It exists in a narrow space of fixed rules and reactions. The system—that nexus of guardrail process and bureaucracy, institutional weight, reputational standing, and legal lines and tangles—deals with irrational actors who try to break it. And no one really has.

It was hard to see Mar-a-Lago and its prince as anything other than an unnatural exception to that.

Trump, beyond reason and practicality, in the months and years after his defeat, continued to see himself as the rightful and deserving president. His

steadfastness in this role was so implacable and logic defying that, certainly as performance, it became convincing to many. Meanwhile, no one truly rose to replace him or challenge him, not least of all because others logically shrank from a man who seemed unfettered by ordinary gain-and-loss calculations, who, in that sense, was a crazy man.

Politics is also the art of losing—democracy is premised on it. Even winners lose, so you must always hedge your bets. Have your retreat prepared. Your good face ready. Even—indeed, necessarily—if you plan to try again. (In America, helping to maintain an ultimate equanimity, there are the spoils of both victory and defeat.) The logic of the system fails, though, if you don't acknowledge or accept your loss, if you don't allow for it. That is a vastly different kind of politics—the man on the tightrope without a net. Who can take their eyes off him? As Trump's third presidential campaign came to life—or, unaccountably, did not die—and as the stakes for him became crystal clear, his proposition as a candidate playing both hero and martyr became utterly straightforward: Elect me or destroy me.