Introduction to Faking the News
Ryan Skinnell

1. Demagoguery and the Donald’s Duplicitous Victimhood
   Michael J. Steudeman (Pennsylvania State University)

2. Rhetorics of Fear and Loathing:
   Donald Trump’s Populist Style
   Anna M. Young (Pacific Lutheran University)

3. Trump’s Not Just One Bad Apple:
   He’s the Product of a Spoiled Bunch
   Jennifer Wingard (University of Houston)

4. Who Owns Donald Trump’s Antisemitism?
   Ira J. Allen (Northern Arizona University)

5. What Passes for Truth in the Trump Era:
   Telling It Like It Isn’t
   Ryan Skinnell (San José State University)

6. Charisma Isn’t Leadership, and Other Lessons We Can
   Learn from Trump the Businessman
   Patricia Roberts-Miller (University of Texas at Austin)

7. Great Television: Trump and the Shadow Archetype
   Paul J. Achter (University of Richmond)
8. How #Trump Broke/red the Internet 122
   Collin Gifford Brooke (Syracuse University)

   Davis W. Houck (Florida State University)

10. Donald Trump’s Perverse Political Rhetoric 160
    Joshua Gunn (University of Texas at Austin)

Afterword: Trump as Anarchist and Sun King 174
   Jennifer R. Mercieca (Texas A&M University)

Contributors 180
Acknowledgments 184
Index 187
As the essays in this book demonstrate, Donald Trump’s 2016 election to the presidency of the United States was a political rupture—it represented a break with traditional presidential campaign rhetoric as well as a break with a traditional presidency. Yet, according to political science “fundamentals” Trump should have won the presidency. 2016 was supposed to be a change election because the presidency had been held by the same party for two terms, the economy wasn’t so great, and more Americans thought the nation was “on the wrong track” than thought that it was “on the right track.” 1 Being a change election, any Republican Party nominee should have defeated any Democratic Party nominee—no matter who the parties nominated. Based upon that analysis Trump’s election wasn’t disruptive at all, he even underperformed compared to what another Republican nominee might have done. So, why then did Trump’s election seem so disruptive?

Being a historian of American political rhetoric, I see current politics through the frame of history. We might note at the outset that embedded within Trump’s campaign rhetoric is a view of history—his campaign slogan “Make America Great Again” was inherently nostalgic (from the ancient Greek nostos algia, meaning “return home”). The most optimistic history of the Trump election would tell the story of how Trump’s campaign appealed to those Americans who had a longing for a “return home” to an America from a different time—a time when America was “winning,” when “political correctness”
did not trump free speech, and a time, perhaps, when things seemed simpler or safer. The less optimistic history of the Trump election would tell the story of how Trump appealed to Americans who held misogynist and racist opinions, of Americans who had a longing for a “return home” to a time in America when it was dominated by white male privilege.

Which of these stories of the Trump rupture will history remember? I suspect that both stories will eventually be told in an attempt to make sense of the Trump election. That Trump’s campaign theme was nostalgic is obvious, but what can we say about the implications of its view of history as a political program?

Historian Hayden White gives us a useful way to think about how the embedded views of history in public discourse reveal a political program related to change. He explains that within all historical narratives—including, I believe, the one embedded in Trump’s “Make America Great Again” campaign—we find “different conceptions of the desirability of maintaining or changing the social status quo” as well as “different time orientations (an orientation toward past, present, or future as the repository of a paradigm of society’s ‘ideal’ form).” According to White there are four orientations towards the possibility of achieving utopia through political change: anarchist, conservative, radical, and liberal. Very briefly, anarchists “are inclined to idealize a remote past of natural-human innocence from which men have fallen into the corrupt ‘social’ state in which they currently find themselves”; conservatives “are inclined to imagine historical evolution as a progressive elaboration of the institutional structure that currently prevails, which structure they regard as ‘utopia’”; radicals “are inclined to view the utopian condition as imminent, which inspires their concern with the provision of the revolutionary means to bring this utopia to pass now”; and, liberals “project this utopian condition into the remote future, in such a way as to discourage any effort in the present to realize it precipitately, by ‘radical’ means.” Locating utopia in different times and systems leads anarchists and radicals to
want to change the current political system, and leads conservatives and liberals to want to maintain it.

According to White’s typology Trump’s 2016 campaign was anarchy—it longed for a distant past outside of the current system. Trump argued repeatedly that the current American political system had to be destroyed because it had been corrupted by weak and ineffective politicians. He asked Americans to return to a simpler time when the federal government wasn’t so big, regulations weren’t so tough, and capitalists and capitalism were free. So doing, he promised, would restore American greatness. This represents a startling rupture in American political discourse. Since Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s presidency our public discourse has been largely liberal—that is, despite political party, we’ve seen politicians argue for the stability of the system and incremental changes within the system to bring about their desired programs and policies. For generations, the American economic system and the American political system have been believed to be the best guarantors of freedom, equality, and justice (for most) and so have been unquestioned and unquestionable by mainstream political candidates. Trump questioned the long dominant liberal view of history. Trump’s political campaign was illiberal; it was, in fact, anarchic. But, was Trump really an anarchist? If so, what long lost period of American history did Trump idealize and seek to recover?

The news coming out of Trump’s March 25, 2016 interview with the New York Times’ David Sanger and Maggie Haberman was that his foreign policy would be “America first.” But, perhaps we ought to have paid a little more attention to one of the questions Haberman posed to Trump on that day. She asked him when he thought that America was greatest? He answered that he thought that America was at its greatest during the Gilded Age at the turn of the twentieth century—before the Progressive Era reforms that would protect the people from the abuse of corrupt corporations and elected officials. Trump, as it turned out, idealized the period in American history right before the liberal view of history took
hold among American politicians. Trump didn’t say that he was in favor of corruption, of course, he said instead that he admired the Gilded Age because of its unrestrained economic growth—it was a “pretty wild time,” Trump thought.7

Why the Gilded Age? Trump isn’t a fan of restraints, particularly restraints on himself. Trump is a fan of gilding—of adding a thin layer of gold or gold colored stuff to things to make them appear to be more valuable than they are.8 Gold gilding is the signature design feature of Trump-branded properties and products worldwide.9 According to Trump’s decorator Angelo Donghia, his New York City apartment was designed as a gilded golden tribute to France’s Louis XIV—the Sun King who once (perhaps, but maybe not) declared to his Parliament “l’état, c’est moi”—I am the state—in defiance of its attempt to restrain him.10 Trump has lived his life as a Sun King of sorts—he has believed himself to be above the law, never permitting himself to be held accountable for his actions.11 In fact, Trump takes pride in his Sun King-like ability to decide what is and what is not. “The Golden Rule of Negotiating,” Trump once tweeted to his followers, is “he who has the gold makes the rules.”12

Trump’s gilded Sun King ethos isn’t just for negotiating, politics, or history. It belies his approach to rhetoric as well—instrumental, fake, unaccountable. Trump, believing he has the gold, made his own rules. His presidential campaign used rhetoric strategically—without regard to ethics—to help him to get what he wanted. He used rhetoric to intimidate, to overwhelm, to mock, to threaten, as well as to entertain. Trump weaponized rhetoric to disrupt the liberal consensus, which means that his rhetorical style was anarchic as well.

Of course, during normal presidential campaigns when the liberal view of history prevailed presidential candidates and presidents wanted to win and attempted to use rhetoric to set the nation’s agenda, argue for their preferred policies, constitute the people, establish the power of the Executive Branch and a whole host of other things, but they didn’t use rhetoric with impunity—they weren’t anarchists.13
Perhaps, Trump’s disruptive rhetoric, as Joshua Gunn argued, is truly “perverse” in the sense that it was “a deliberate and knowing deviation from assumed ‘norms’.” Despite the soundness of political science fundamentals, Trump’s election feels so disruptive because he weaponized rhetoric to pervert the liberal norms of American politics and American political discourse. Trump is America’s gilded anarchist, Sun King president and, since he believes that whoever has the gold makes the rules, he will be very difficult to control.

Notes


7 “No if you really look at it, it was the turn of the century, that’s when we were a great, when we were really starting to go robust. But if you look back, it really was, there was a period of time when we were developing at the turn of the century which was a pretty wild time for this country and pretty wild in terms of building that machine, that machine was really based on entrepreneurship, etc, etc.” “Transcript: Donald Trump Expounds on His Foreign Policy Views.”


13 For typical uses of presidential rhetoric see Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008).