

Who's to Blame?

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Three new books argue that disappearing jobs and widening inequality helped make possible Trump's politics of resentment.



Mykal McEldowney/USA Today Network

Union representative Beth Dubree supporting Indianapolis-based employees of Rexnord, a ball-bearing manufacturer, at a protest against the company's decision to move three hundred jobs to Mexico, November 2016

Reviewed:

Wildland: The Making of America's Fury

by Evan Osnos

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 465 pp., \$30.00

Reign of Terror: How the 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump

by Spencer Ackerman

Viking, 428 pp., \$30.00

American Made: What Happens to People When Work Disappears

by Farah Stockman

Random House, 418 pp., \$28.00

Like so many of us these days, all three of these journalists are ultimately searching for the sources of the pickle we're in. How could this country elect, and almost reelect, a semifascist showman who flaunts his contempt for facts, laws, honest elections, and people with dark skin? Yes, we know the simple answer: the Electoral College. But we still need to fully probe the sources of Donald Trump's enormous appeal. After all, his margins of loss in the popular vote were not

great, and over 11 million more people voted for him in 2020 than in 2016. He is working fiercely to get his supporters into office in this fall's election, and his shadow looms over the one coming up in 2024.

Evan Osnos was a *New Yorker* correspondent in China for some years before returning to the United States in 2013. In *Wildland* he looks at his country since then, including events that he covered as a reporter: the last two presidential campaigns and the January 6, 2021, invasion of the Capitol. His portrait is interwoven with visits to several places where he lived before going to China, including Greenwich, Connecticut—his childhood home—and Clarksburg, West Virginia, where he started his journalism career.

He finds a “cloven nation,” scarred by both a political divide and an increasingly vast economic one. In Greenwich, a center for hedge funds and their managers, one mogul has built a house larger than the Taj Mahal and another a twenty-five-car garage. At home-construction sites nearby there are “yellow bulldozers carving holes for underground movie theaters, squash courts, and wine cellars.”

In West Virginia, by contrast, people have been ravaged by the opioid epidemic, mountaintops have been sliced off by coal mining companies, and drinking water has been poisoned by a gigantic chemical spill. Everyone takes pollution so much for granted that a local team competes “in Roller Derby events with a logo of a woman in fishnet stockings and a gas mask.” Life expectancy has plummeted, and even “the state’s indigent burial fund, which helps poor families pay for funerals, was bankrupt.”

Meanwhile Peabody Energy, the world’s largest coal company, cleverly spun off into a separate corporation ten unionized mines in the state and in neighboring Kentucky. The new company held 40 percent of Peabody’s health care obligations to retired miners, but only 13 percent of its coal reserves. It soon filed for bankruptcy, abandoning the former miners and their families. Connecting two of his chosen corners of this cloven country, Osnos finds an investor who had profited from this cruel—but technically legal—deal in a twenty-seven-room Georgian manor with two swimming pools in Greenwich.

Osnos has a nice eye for detail, and his book reads smoothly, almost a little too smoothly, as if it were a long, somewhat rambling “Letter from America” in *The New Yorker*, where some of the material originally appeared. It suggests, but doesn’t really address, some basic questions, such as: Why are people in West Virginia not more resentful of those in Greenwich? Why is their anger flowing elsewhere? And how could Trump so skillfully harness it?

Spencer Ackerman proposes an answer to these questions. If *Wildland* is a leisurely “Letter,” Ackerman’s *Reign of Terror* is a passionate jeremiad. But it has an important point: don’t blame all of

Trumpism on Trump. His presidential predecessors and rivals helped pave his path to the White House, and with it, a channel for the inchoate frustrations of tens of millions.

Americans have always been quick to blame outsiders, Ackerman reminds us. When a giant truck bomb sheared open a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, killing 168 people and injuring many more, countless officials and journalists who should have known better—even the great Chicago columnist Mike Royko—assumed the bombers must be Muslim jihadists. They turned out to be two homegrown white supremacists, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols.

Then came the attacks of September 11, 2001, when the culprits *were* Muslim, and President George W. Bush declared his war on terror. From then on, Ackerman shows, the claim that the main threat to American democracy was a sinister, elusive network of alien conspirators was entirely a bipartisan affair. At every step, Democrats colluded with Bush. Democratic senator Joe Lieberman introduced the bill that created the Department of Homeland Security. Barack Obama opposed the war in Iraq but declared Afghanistan the “necessary war.” Hillary Clinton supported both wars as a senator, refused to unconditionally condemn torture, and as Obama’s secretary of state dropped hints that she was among the administration’s hard-liners. When she ran for president in 2016, a phalanx of retired generals backed her. Obama’s stepped-up drone warfare against al-Qaeda was supervised by the same CIA official who had run the agency’s torture sites under Bush. The list could go on.

Reign of Terror runs through all the grim consequences of Bush’s grandiose promise, just after September 11, to “rid the world of evil”: the CIA’s torture operation, the US Army’s humiliation of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, the Fox network’s glamorization of brutal treatment in the TV show *24*. Franklin Graham described Islam as “a very wicked religion” and his fellow evangelist Jerry Vines called the Prophet Muhammad a “demon-obsessed pedophile.” Hate crimes soared against Muslims—and against anyone who didn’t look like citizens of what Sarah Palin called the “real America.” At a Sikh temple in suburban Milwaukee in August 2012, an army veteran embarked on a shooting spree that left six dead and four wounded, one of whom died of his injuries in 2020.

With this sorry history at the center of politics since 2001, the country was ready for Trump. And Trump, says Ackerman,

understood something about the War on Terror that [his critics] did not. He recognized that the 9/11 era’s grotesque subtext—the perception of nonwhites as marauders, even as conquerors, from hostile foreign civilizations—was its engine.

He wielded that insight to eventually win the White House—starting years earlier with the charge that Barack Hussein Obama was a secret Muslim born in Kenya. As Ackerman puts it, “The mortar of birtherism was the War on Terror.”

But even when the target of those slurs was elected president, he did little to change the policies he inherited. Obama’s Defense Department continued to distribute up to half a billion dollars’ worth of surplus military equipment a year to local police, reinforcing the myth that the enemy without was also within. Although Obama, especially in retrospect, voiced some uneasiness about the tiger he was riding, Ackerman believes that he “squandered the best chance anyone could ever have to end the 9/11 era” by not declaring the war on terror officially over after Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden in 2011. Perhaps. But with the tremendous momentum of that crusade, Republicans ruthlessly eager to exploit any signs of weakness, and the vast amount of money and number of careers at stake, truly ending this war would have entailed greater political risks than the cautious Obama was willing to take.

Trump, of course, further inflamed the fear whipped up by the war by directing it at new targets closer to home: “rapists” from Mexico supposedly flooding across the Rio Grande, caravans of job-grabbing, welfare-abusing refugees from Central America, Black Lives Matter protesters, and more. Bernie Sanders, one of the few truth-speakers Ackerman finds during this dark era, said it best: “There is a straight line from the decision to reorient US national-security strategy around terrorism after 9/11 to placing migrant children in cages on our southern border.”

The demonization of Muslims and foreigners, however, was not the only precondition for Trump’s race-based politics of resentment. A profoundly important additional one—a sea change in the US economy—is the subject of the best of these three books, Farah Stockman’s *American Made*.

One of its virtues is that she periodically shares a little of herself, but never so much that the narrative becomes self-centered. As the product of an interracial marriage between two college professors, she found that

if a white waitress treated our family rudely, my mother, who’d experienced blatant racism all her life, assumed that the waitress disapproved of interracial couples. My father...thought she must be cranky after a long day on her feet. I always wondered which one was right. That was why I became a journalist, to talk to the waitress.

Stockman is wise enough to see, however, that the story she tells here—and the difference between herself and the people she is writing about—has less to do with race than with class.

A few weeks after the 2016 election, a large ball-bearing factory prepared to close. “Rexnord of Indianapolis is moving to Mexico and rather viciously firing all of its 300 workers,” tweeted Trump. “No more!” The first part of Trump’s tweet was, unusually for him, fully accurate. The second was not, because he ultimately did little to reverse the enormous outflow of American manufacturing jobs to low-wage countries. Stockman’s vivid, gracefully written account, an outgrowth of reporting she first did for *The New York Times*, zeroes in on the lives of three steelworkers at Rexnord: John Feltner, a white man; Shannon Mulcahy, a white woman; and Wally Hall, a Black man.

For John, who calls himself a hillbilly, working at Rexnord meant carrying on a proud union tradition, just like his factory worker father and coal miner grandfather and great-grandfather. A union job gave John the security he needed to avoid bankruptcy, which he had been through once, and to dream of a better life for his kids. He was an official of his local, and he and his wife held their son’s wedding rehearsal dinner at the union hall. For Shannon, who grew up in a trailer park, a job at the factory was a chance to escape an abusive man and, later, pay the medical bills of a disabled grandchild. And for Wally, it was a step up into steady employment; only after Stockman had known him for a year—her kind of reporting takes immense patience—did he reveal that he had spent time in prison for drug dealing.

All three of them took pride in their work, cherishing possibly apocryphal stories of how the ball bearings they expertly crafted ended up inside a retractable stadium roof or a nuclear submarine. Shannon felt particularly proud at learning skills that the men around her first claimed were beyond the reach of any woman:

If the batch furnace spat flames like the gates of Hell, she knew how to calm it down. If the autoquench—as high maintenance as an aging beauty queen—stopped in midcycle, she knew how to coax it into performing again.... Her favorite furnace was the Tocco, which broke down like a needy boyfriend when she left it alone too long.

Eventually men would sometimes ask her for technical advice.

There were hints that the jobs at Rexnord might not last forever. The factory speeded up its output of bearings, but “almost all of them were being shipped to a warehouse rather than to a customer.” And during labor negotiations, the company was surprisingly quick to agree to some union demands. Still, the move to Mexico came as a shock.

Stockman notices that the plant’s Black employees seemed less distraught than the white ones, for they had mostly grown up without the expectation of secure and lasting jobs. Workers differed in their willingness to train the people taking over from them. Fearing that it might make it easier for the plant to close, the union had not

demanded obligatory severance payments in its contract with Rexnord. The company now said it would give severance, and a raise for their remaining weeks on the job, only to those who were willing to train their replacements.

Some workers balked and saw to it that factory machinery arrived in Mexico missing essential parts, but others, desperate to earn what they still could, agreed to do the training. One of the most poignant moments in a book that abounds with them comes when the warmhearted Shannon can't help but befriend the Mexicans who have come to learn how to do her work: "Tadeo, who was the same age as her son, seemed like a sweetheart." He apologizes, hand on heart, for taking her job—something some of the Mexicans apparently hadn't understood would be the case when they were sent to Indiana for training. Shannon compares notes with another Mexican, Ricardo, and they realize that he is paid one sixteenth of her salary.

On the day that Shannon's beloved Tocco furnace was loaded onto a truck for Mexico, there happened to be an eclipse of the sun. She watched it outside the factory with Ricardo: "In an instant, the sunny afternoon turned dark as night."

The American industrial working class has endured stress before, and it often didn't end well. A century ago, for instance, when such workers were overwhelmingly white and male, they faced competition for scarce jobs from the more than four million men released from the army at the end of World War I, from immigrants, and from the Great Migration of Black Americans moving north. Immigrants and Blacks became the scapegoats. One result was the 1924 immigration bill, which largely slammed the country's door shut for the next four decades. Another was some of the worst racial violence since the end of slavery. Hundreds of Black Americans were killed in the Red Summer of 1919, and possibly as many as three hundred in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921, when white mobs torched three dozen blocks, including a thriving business district known as Black Wall Street.

"For too long," President Biden said last June at the centennial observance of the Tulsa massacre,

we've allowed a narrowed, cramped view of the promise of this nation to fester—the view that America is a zero-sum game where there is only one winner. "If you succeed, I fail. If you get ahead, I fall behind. If you get a job, I lose mine."

Instead, a lot of us would like to feel that we're all in it together: if you get ahead, I can get still ahead too. But Stockman's sensitive portrait shows how the world is not that way for millions of Americans.

"There are only so many jobs in this building," a white union steward warned one of Rexnord's first Black workers. "And if you take one,

that means that our sons or son-in-law or our nephew can't have it." And on top of this, for people like those at Rexnord, is the prospect that there may abruptly be no more jobs in the building at all.

The combined impact of disappearing jobs and the widening gap between workers like Stockman's trio and Osnos's hedge fund millionaires in Greenwich means an end to one facet of the American dream: that you will earn more than your parents. That was true for 90 percent of people born in 1940 but is the case for only 50 percent today. And those who lost their jobs at Rexnord, like most people without college degrees, know they're not in that fortunate 50 percent.

This was the mood of threat that Trump spoke to and magnified so brilliantly. As Stockman puts it, "Trump had a chip on his shoulder, like the steelworkers did." When the Carrier Corporation, just down the road from Rexnord, also announced plans to move jobs to Mexico, Trump, at an Indianapolis rally, "asked Carrier workers to call out their years of seniority. Ten years. Seventeen years. Eighteen.... Trump told workers what they wanted to hear: that they *deserved* their jobs because they were Americans."

Of course, he couldn't save most such jobs, or deliver on his promises to "bring back coal!" (production of which dropped precipitously during his presidency) or to abandon job-vacuuming NAFTA (he did little more than change the name). But however fraudulent his rhetoric, it addressed deep fears. And even if health or legal troubles remove Trump from the political scene, he has still charted the path for imitators to follow.

All three of Stockman's subjects struggle to find new work. Shannon, who has dreams about the factory, runs into several old colleagues at a job fair, but they're leery of manufacturing positions for fear another plant may close. The saddest fate befalls Wally, the Black man. He suffers an apparent heart attack but adamantly refuses to go to the emergency room, having once been billed \$27,000 for an appendectomy. A few days later he is dead. At his funeral, Stockman writes, a friend from the factory "recited a ritual text about death being a great equalizer, felling both pauper and prince. Yet...a prince would have gone to the hospital when he had chest pains. A prince would have had health insurance."

Again arises the question of anger. Who can Wally's friends and family blame for his vanished job and lack of insurance? After all, Shannon thinks, it was the company that made the decision to send the factory to Mexico. But who was ultimately responsible? Could they be appealed to? In recent years the plant was first owned by a British conglomerate, which sold it to the Carlyle Group, a private equity firm (with a Greenwich connection, incidentally: George H.W. Bush, who grew up there, was a Carlyle adviser after his presidency). Then Carlyle sold it to another private equity firm, which used Rexnord's

assets as leverage to borrow money, then sold it to a group of mutual funds. “Shannon never did find the list of shareholders,” Stockman writes. It is no wonder that for a time, her “Facebook page filled up with conspiracy theories.” On the pages of other workers, Stockman finds rumors that China has purchased the Grand Canyon.

The most dangerous tinder for any kind of fascist movement is people who are losing ground economically. Support for Hitler rose dramatically when millions of Germans lost jobs in the Great Depression—which also spurred the rise of other far-right movements or dictatorships throughout much of Europe, in addition to strengthening Mussolini’s hold on Italy. In the United States, we were lucky to have a president who could powerfully respond to the crisis in a different way, but other voices still had appeal: by some estimates, tens of millions of Americans listened to the diatribes of the “radio priest” Father Charles E. Coughlin, who loathed Jews and admired Mussolini and Hitler. Before he was assassinated in 1935, the demagogic Huey P. Long of Louisiana was attracting followers from the rest of the country and preparing a run for the White House.

The tinder is there today in the people Stockman portrays: men and women who are unlikely to ever again earn a decent wage from manufacturing, and who may never earn an equivalent wage from anything else. To the half of Americans who are losing ground economically, both Republicans and Democrats have offered little of substance. But Trump gave them something crucial: people to blame. John Feltner, Stockman’s longtime union loyalist, voted for him in two elections and, she notices one day, has a Confederate flag in his garage.

Is it any wonder that people like him listen to racist pundits like Tucker Carlson who talk of the “Great Replacement” of white people? American workers are indeed being replaced: by Tadeo and Ricardo in Mexico, by low-paid laborers in China and other countries, and, perhaps most of all, by machines. The Black workers at Rexnord—40 percent of the total—are being replaced as well.

Are there solutions to these hardships? They won’t be complete, quick, or easy, but we can picture some: accessible, well-thought-out retraining programs, a better safety net against unemployment, health insurance on a par with other developed nations, increased taxation of great wealth, renegotiating world trade rules that make it so easy for jobs to race to the lowest-wage countries. Brown University’s Costs of War project estimates that the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, plus interest and veterans’ care expenses, will eventually cost us more than \$8 trillion. Imagine if that money had gone toward better educating Americans for jobs in our fast-automating economy and protecting them from some of its risks. Our social landscape could be significantly different.

Even before the Trump years, however, our sclerotic political system was ill-equipped to consider such programs seriously, distorted as it is by the disproportionate power that thinly populated, conservative rural states have in the Electoral College and the Senate. Not to mention that the Democratic Party is almost as much under the sway of corporate lobbyists as the Republicans are. But now, as tinder smolders and Trump, his imitators, and a powerful right-wing media complex fan it into flame, something more is happening. In states they control, Republicans are attempting to suppress voting by ethnic minorities and the poor, and to put the counting of votes in highly partisan hands. If we cannot turn back the Great Replacement of democracy itself, the path ahead will look as dark as that day of the solar eclipse.

Adam Hochschild

Adam Hochschild's next book, *American Midnight: The Great War, a Violent Peace, and Democracy's Forgotten Crisis*, will be published in October. (May 2022)