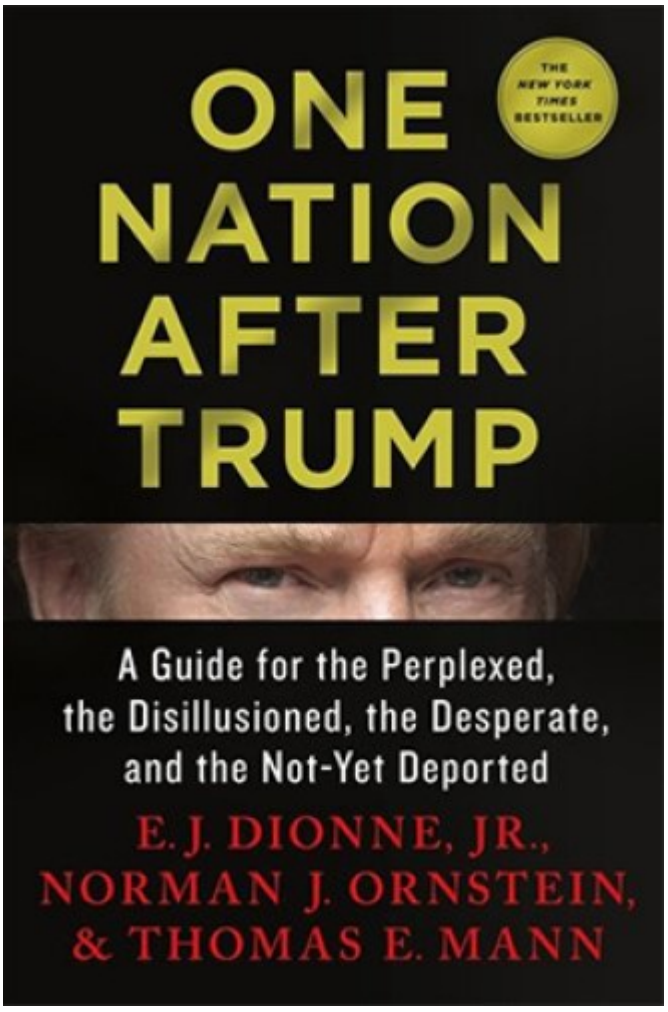
Is Trump a deviation from American values or an expression of them?

E. J. Dionne, Norman Ornstein, and Thomas Mann see this presidency as a distortion of the country's character. But what if it's the opposite?

by Anthony B. Robinson in the January 31, 2018 issue

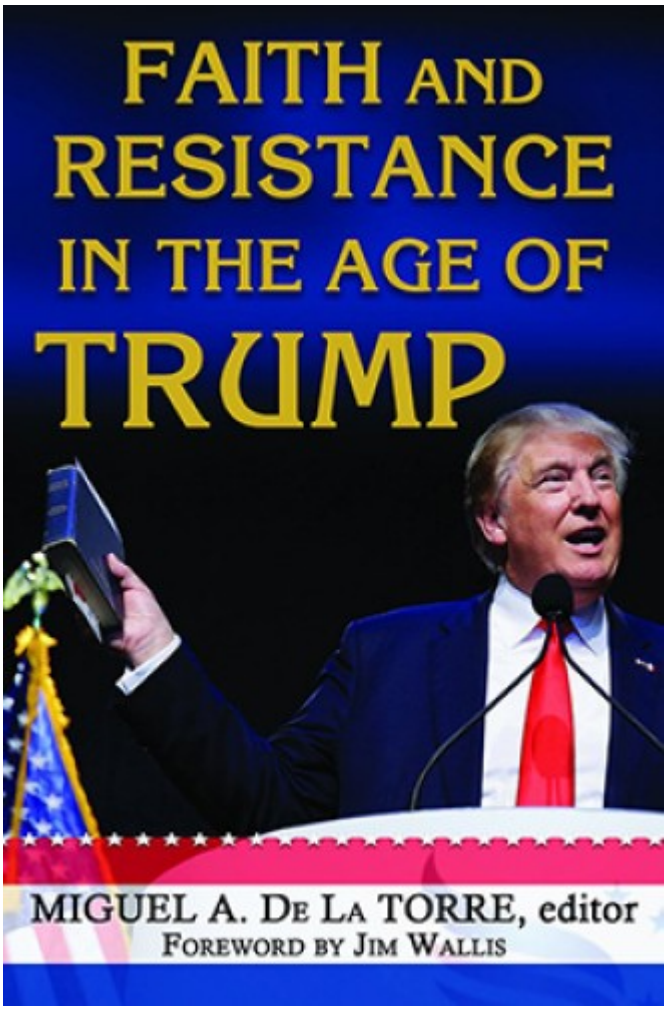
In Review



One Nation after Trump

A Guide for the Perplexed, the Disillusioned, the Desperate and the Not-Yet Deported

By E. J. Dionne Jr., Norman J. Ornstein, and Thomas E. Mann
St. Martin’s



Faith and Resistance in the Age of Trump

Edited by Miguel A. De La Torre
Orbis Books

Though these two books appear to be singing the same song—resistance to Donald Trump’s presidency and what it represents—they are actually quite different. The nub of the difference might be framed this way: Is Trump an anomaly, a departure from the norms of American life, politics, and society? Or is Trump an apocalypse—a moment when the hidden truth about America stands revealed?

For E. J. Dionne Jr., Norman J. Ornstein, and Thomas E. Mann, Trump's election, while not unprecedented, marks a break from past American politics. His is "not a normal presidency." They grant that Trump came out of a decades-long unraveling that has included a disastrous decline in our collective norms for governance, an extended period of institutional decay, and a three-decade radicalization of the Republican Party and its primary electorate. Still, he represents to them a malignant mutation threatening the system and society over which he presides.

The 23 contributors to *Faith and Resistance in the Age of Trump*, on the other hand, see Trump as neither a surprise nor a deviation. His election is an apocalyptic moment in which the real—but until now somewhat hidden—America stands evident for all to see.

And what is the America that has been so exposed? It is, in the words of Kelly Brown Douglas, a nation whose "defining narrative [is] Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism and the supremacist culture of whiteness that serves to protect it." She asks: "To what lengths will America go to protect its mythic identity of Anglo-Saxon greatness? Answer: The election of Donald Trump as president. This is the truth about America." Or as the editor of the volume, Miguel A. De La Torre, puts it, "for marginalized communities in the United States, especially racial and ethnic communities, Donald J. Trump is the true face of America."

If Trump is seen, with Dionne and company, as a dangerous deviation, then this crisis holds within it an opportunity for democratic renewal. While "Trump is a threat to our democracy and the product of its weaknesses, the citizen activism he has inspired is the antidote, the way to vindicate our long experiment in self-rule. Opposition to Trump is calling millions of Americans to a new sense of citizenship." Dionne, Ornstein, and Mann are clearly alarmed, but they are also hopeful. They strive to give voice and definition to a "national soul-searching" that could produce a "hopeful and unifying alternative" to Trumpism.

The authors of *Faith and Resistance* are more pessimistic. They see a stark choice, as Douglas puts it, between "the Anglo-Saxon myth of exceptionalism" and the "democratic rhetoric of being a nation of liberty and justice for all." Theologically, she frames this choice as one between "a divine vision that reflects an Anglo-Saxon God or a divine vision that reflects a God whose image is revealed through a racially, religiously, and culturally diverse humanity."

Simmering beneath the alternatives posed by these two volumes is one of most hotly debated questions that followed the election: Why did Trump win? Was it, as Ta-Nehisi Coates articulates in *We Were Eight Years in Power*, the vengeful resurgence of racism after eight years of a black president? Or was it, as J. D. Vance argues in *Hillbilly Elegy*, driven by the hollowing out of the economy and culture of America's smaller cities and towns, a phenomenon that delivered to Trump once reliably Democratic states like Pennsylvania and Wisconsin?

One Nation after Trump explores these competing interpretations and in the end refuses to choose between race and economics, seeing both as key motivators for Trump supporters. They suggest that widespread economic anxiety fanned the flames of racism, misogyny, and xenophobia.

The contributors to *Faith and Resistance*, on the other hand, tend to emphasize race as the driver. Jim Wallis writes, "Let's be frank here: This was, as Van Jones put it, a 'white-lash' election. It was a race election."

I'm not sure which of these interpretations is more accurate, but my hunch is to favor the direction taken by the authors of *One Nation after Trump*, for two reasons. Theirs is a less reductive argument: it portrays people and their motivations as complex. And their approach, as the title suggests, gives us more to work with. To conclude that Trump's election is nothing more or less than an expression of congenital American racism and white supremacy seems to be an argument about essence or being, which is hard to change. To conclude, rather, that Trump's election also had to do with economic and cultural dislocations that inflamed racism and xenophobia is to focus on behaviors, which may be susceptible to change.

As might be expected, Dionne, Ornstein, and Mann argue that progressives and the Democratic Party need to put economic issues front and center. "If the 2016 campaign teaches nothing else, it is that progressives without a robust economic agenda will be neither attractive nor credible to a large share of the electorate." While acknowledging that Hillary Clinton had an array of sound economic policies in her myriad position papers, these authors point out that fewer than 10 percent of Clinton's ads were devoted to economic themes or concerns. Meanwhile, fully one-third of Trump's ads targeted those issues. Without a convincing economic argument, the Democratic message was seen by many—as Mark Lilla argues in *The Once and Future Liberal*—as an appeal to identity politics. That approach backfired as Trump played white-identity politics.

One Nation after Trump devotes its entire second half to a broad vision of what progressives can and should be for (as opposed to being only against Trumpism), including a host of specific policy positions and proposals. These include a “charter for working families” and “a G.I. bill for American workers,” as well as proposed reforms to the electoral college and plans to overcome voter suppression, weak voter turnout, and Republican gerrymandering.

One of the stated intentions of *Faith and Resistance* is that each contributor “propose action.” Disappointingly, some fail to do that at all while others’ proposals remain largely abstract. In the end, the actions they propose are not so much policies to pursue as they are calls for choosing sides. The side for which these authors advocate is a worthy one—the side of diversity and equality, mutuality and reciprocity, and the inclusion of the marginalized. Choosing sides can lead to a certain psychic satisfaction—but it doesn’t diminish the hyperpolarization that fuels our current dysfunction, nor does it help readers envision specific next steps.

Whether Trump is anomaly or apocalypse, both book agree that these are not times for standing idly by or blithely intoning “this too shall pass.” Active resistance is the order of the day.