

How did we get here?

Judges and government agencies that looked the other way played an important role in the rise of our next president, author David Cay Johnston explains

THE MAKING OF
DONALD
TRUMP

DAVID CAY JOHNSTON
AUTHOR OF THE POWER PRIZE

"The Making of
Donald Trump"
by David Cay
Johnston

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There's something in "The Making of Donald Trump" for everyone. For Christians, one of Donald Trump's favorite Bible verses is an "eye for an eye."

For lawyers, Trump's apparent enjoyment of lawsuits doesn't seem to keep him from settling more than he's won, yet he claims that he "never settles" because "you have to hit those who screw you ten times harder."

For esoteric-tax-law enthusiasts, Pulitzer Prize winner David Cay Johnston provides a thorough tour of loopholes and exceptions to the rules via Trump's management of his assets, properties, private jets and more. For those who think the country should be run like a business and no one can do that better than soi-disant billionaire Trump, examples of his colossal failures abound. One headline read, "You May Be Worth More Than Donald Trump."

For anyone who's wondering how our democracy could produce such a president, Johnston's outline of Trump's life and career is an exquisite, easy-to-follow explication of Trump's choices and conduct.

As Johnston reports on Trump's various dealings, he details the intersection of the many systems that played vital roles in the rise of our president-elect. Johnston does wonder why a particular judge or regulatory body at times might not have asked further questions of Trump's conduct, history, record or shady connections with the mob, and notes that, without government intervention, Trump would have likely been "swept into the dustbin of history." He does not attribute Trump's rise to anything beyond that, but it is the failure of the overall system – the courts, auditors, governors or attorneys general, regulatory bodies and legal loopholes – that has enabled Trump to sustain his dishonest, exploitative and vindictive practices.

Johnston also does not point out that the failure of these systems to protect the average consumer or worker, in favor of protecting the wealthy, is why so many voters were questioning business, politics, economics or education as usual. And those voters were casting Trump, whose rise in politics depends not on the current system's dismantling but its perennial dysfunction, as their savior.

By Johnston's account Trump is a serial liar, swindler and unsuccessful businessman who should not be anywhere near the White House. The facts of Trump's activities should have caused voters to pause; yet they didn't. That is not included in Johnston's account, published before Trump's election, but surely it, too, is crucial to the making of Donald Trump.

Johnston's short chapters and conversational, occasionally sardonic, style reveal case study after case study of auditors, commissioners and regulators of all stripes (from casino to building permit to



ILLUSTRATION BY KATIE WHEELER

IRS) turning the other cheek, to quote another passage from Christian Scripture. Johnston provides the right amount of family history to introduce his book. Then he launches into Trump's deals with mobsters, his failure to pay illegal immigrants for demolishing a skyscraper with no safety gear and nothing but sledge hammers, the wildly varying estimates of his wealth, other contradictory claims and the many lawsuits oozing with entitlement and blinkered disregard for limits, whether in the form of regulations or other people's needs.

The real making of Donald Trump is not just that he followed in his father and grandfather's crooked footsteps, but in the blind eye the legal and regulatory systems turned on his odious conduct as a casino operator, landlord, property owner and taxpayer and in the financial help of the government.

"If government hadn't saved him by taking his side against his bankers, we almost certainly would not be imagining the prospect of Donald Trump living at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Instead, he would have drowned in a sea of red ink," Johnston writes.

It's not that a reader can't get a keen sense of the deal-wielding, rule-bending, self-aggrandizing personality that is Trump. It's that precisely this profile of a chaotically greedy, serially dishonest man whom no amount of attention, money or fame seems to satiate is exactly what the people think they want.

Johnston, an award-winning journalist of almost 50 years, said he's taken his "knowledge of Trump and the many thousands of pages of Trump documents I've collected in my nearly half a century as an investigative reporter." But he does not

address what happens when facts that should at the very least give any voter pause are either irrelevant or themselves serve to garner support for a dangerous man.

For it was not a lack of information that made people flock to perhaps the most ardently underqualified (to say the least) candidate in history for the highest office in the land. We in the Information Age are saturated; we suffer from awareness fatigue, not awareness deficits. As late-stage, allegedly free-market capitalism spits out more and more people; as technological advancement, which was supposed to be the bastion of that ever-elusive ideal of progress, renders more and more human beings obsolete in terms of labor markets; as fewer and fewer governments move quickly enough to meaningfully represent their citizens' interests, the growing number of people who have been hurt by the system want no more of the same.

Trump, for all his incoherence, bigotry and blustering, is a powerful symbol of hope for those the status quo is crippling. We are no longer in a narrative, culturally speaking, where a clear, well-backed presentation of facts holds sway. The stories offered by liberalism, progressivism and capitalism, much as they've weathered before, are crumbling, and the void they're leaving behind is the exact size and shape of Donald Trump. All the reports of Trump's persistent disregard for others, his willingness to lie, cheat and make claims he could change at any moment, his racism, sexism, ableism and xenophobia were not enough to keep him out of the White House.

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