

Brian Klaas: ‘The incentives for a Trump 2.0 will be exactly the same as the incentives for Trump’

*In his first year in power, argues [Brian Klaas](#), Donald Trump has deployed the tactics of despots and begun to corrode the institutions of US democracy. What happens next? Democratic Audit editor [Ros Taylor](#) spoke to him about his new book, *The Despot’s Apprentice*.*

The last time [we spoke](#), your previous book, [The Despot’s Accomplice](#) had just come out. That was looking at US complicity in aiding and abetting undemocratic regimes abroad. Now you’ve written a new book about Trump and the threat he poses to democracy. What’s your biggest worry?

The book looks at Trump’s threat on two fronts. One is the way Trump is mimicking the tactics of authoritarian regimes and borrowing their strategies to undermine democracy in the US. The second is accelerating all the trends that I talked about in *The Despot’s Accomplice* – that the US is a two-faced actor, professing support for human rights and democracy and simultaneously cosying up to Saudi Arabia and regimes like that. Trump is amazingly consistent, but he’s consistent on the wrong side. He’s cheerleading for terrible regimes, and he’s eliminated a lot of the human rights and democracy language from both US rhetoric and US policy. So there’s a much bigger focus in US diplomacy towards transactional short-term deal-making that makes Trump look good, and much less on investing in long-term alliances or building a more democratic world in the long term.

Each of the chapters takes a tactic from an authoritarian regime that Trump uses – albeit to a lesser extent – and draws a parallel between them. There’s the Orwellian cult of personality, where Trump constantly lies to promote his own ego and his narcissistic need for affirmation. He’s called the press an enemy of the people, which is harsher rhetoric than he’s used towards actual despots. He’s been filling the White House with nepotism, hiring family members, generals, cronies: he’s even appointed his son’s family wedding planner to be in charge of housing in New York and New Jersey. Then you have a really worrying politicisation of the rule of law, which is an essential component of authoritarian rising. It is basically saying that the law is a weapon against enemies and to save allies. Trump has already pardoned one of his political allies, Joe Arpaio, in Arizona. He’s called to lock up his opponent and now he’s going after Bob Mueller and trying to discredit him – keeping in mind that this is a Republican-appointed person from Trump’s own party. Those aspects are really dangerous, because they are things that you can’t walk back easily.

So what does it look like when a demagogue uses despot-like tactics in a democratic system? And that’s exactly what’s happening. On the one hand, the institutions are still intact. Congress still has power, the courts still matter, the checks and balances are working. On the other hand, he’s corroding democracy by poisoning the system and by poisoning the minds of a third of Americans, who believe that authoritarianism would be no problem as long as it was in their favour.

Finally, the book looks at how Trump is breaking the norms of democracy in ways that have enlarged what is acceptable. I think about the first time that he said ‘fake news’. It was an international story. And now it’s a daily occurrence. The first time he called to throw Hillary Clinton in jail, there was a gasp. Now it’s ‘Oh, just another tweet.’ I think you can simultaneously hold the view that Trump is being contained more than he would be if he was actually head of an authoritarian regime – and that at the same time he’s dragging the US closer to that regime.

Why can’t we get traction on Trump? He has done things that would have destroyed any other president. Is it just the Republican party to blame, or are other institutions not stepping up?



The Republican party exists in an environment where most of the elections for Congress are lost in the primary, as opposed to the general election. So in 2016 the average House member won re-election with a margin of victory of 37.1% – which is something that you see in authoritarian regimes. Some of this is demographics. but some of it is gerrymandering. The Republican base basically has the power to destroy Republican incumbents and elect another, more extreme Republican, because they know that they're probably not going to lose to a Democrat. That's killed off compromise, and it's made people who personally would say that Trump is terrible back him 100%. That's a big factor and it's made possible by the polarisation of American politics.

Then there's the whataboutism that's become really common in American politics. This term – tellingly – came from the Soviet Union, where they would get criticised by the US for human rights abuses and then they would point to some far more minimal problem in the US and say that there's a false equivalence. Trump is a master of this, and it is what his spin team always does. Any time that there's an accusation, or obvious wrongdoing, they use their favourite bogeyman – Hillary Clinton – and say 'What about this?' For the people who absolutely despise Hillary Clinton, that's a very effective tactic. Sometimes the bogeyman is the system. For a large number of people in the US, Trump will never be more guilty than the system he attacks. That's why people who normally would profess bipartisan principles, like a free press and the rule of law being apolitical, don't care about them as much. They'd much rather have him attack that system. Whataboutism as a political norm is one of the big stories of 2017.



Mike Pence, Paul Ryan, Donald Trump and Mitch McConnell celebrate the passage of the Tax Cuts Act. December 2017. Photo: [White House](#). Public domain

A lot of people say to me: 'Trump is not Mussolini or Hitler.' That's absolutely true, there's no question. But if a Mussolini-like figure tried to come into America and corrode the system from within, that person would be rebuffed immediately because people like Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell, who've been complicit with Trump, would see the threat. I think because of Trump's showmanship and his bumbly nature, people falsely believe that he is less insidious. They think, 'that's Trump, we can focus on the tax plan,' or whatever it is. In a robust democracy like America, the only type of person who can destroy that from within is someone who is viewed as a non-threat. And that is what Trump has done masterfully.

A lot of people thought that he was going to be an isolationist because of his plans on trade, and that he wouldn't get involved abroad because it wasn't what his base was interested in. But even leaving aside Russia, he's deeply involved abroad – such as in his interventions with Duterte and in North Korea. A lot of the democracy promotion the US does abroad is still going on because the funding hasn't run out yet. But presumably in the next year or two that will start to change.

You're right that a lot of the funding has been on auto-pilot, but he's destroyed the effectiveness of the funding already. Take the Philippines or Turkey. The embassies are still doing the right work – the people who are lifelong diplomats, many of which have left because Trump has made them ineffective – they're still fighting the good fight. But then Erdogan rigs a referendum to consolidate power further in Turkey. The State Department says the referendum was seriously flawed and we call for all parties to show restraint and to restore democracy. Then Trump calls and congratulates Erdogan, and nothing else matters. It undercuts every pro-democracy signal the US has.

With Duterte, it's the same thing. You get pressure from the US embassy that supports human rights. But then Trump explicitly praised Duterte's drug war in a phone call and then they met together. One of the most chilling moments was when Trump met Duterte at the ASEAN summit in Manila. They joked about journalists being spies in the Philippines, and then laughed about it. The Philippines is the third most dangerous place for a journalist to operate. That moment of laughing with a despot who has overseen a system in which doing investigative reporting is basically a death sentence – it's an unthinkable shift in US foreign policy, compared to even the two-facedness I talked about in *The Despots' Apprentices*.

There's also a fundamental shift in how foreign policy is formulated under the Trump administration. The decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem was not a calculated decision. There was no consultation of allies. It was something that would fire up his political base. The second thing is that Trump Tower opened in Manila in 2017, and there are two Trump Towers in Turkey. If he is nice to despots Trump benefits financially from licensing deals, or better business. Or he risks expropriation of his properties. Which was not true under Obama, or any president in modern times. The democracy promotion agenda has effectively been undercut by one person, and that's the person at the top.

Is the Russian inquiry going to make the difference?

I think the Russian investigation could bring down Donald Trump. It's speculation still. In the Watergate scandal – which is the last time a US president was taken down by an inquiry – it was four or five days between the release of the smoking gun tape and when Nixon resigned. Up until that point, nobody knew it existed and the inquiry had been open for a year and a half. Up until that point, Nixon claimed that he was not a subject of the investigation. There are very many similarities here. You have a president trying to claim he's not under investigation, and all signs pointing to the fact he is – in addition to collusion, there's obstruction of justice and a whole lot of other potential criminal liabilities.

I think it is absolutely obvious that there is no innocent explanation for what happened. On the collusion aspect, the smoking gun is the Trump Jr emails that say: 'We're offering you high-level sensitive dirt from the Russian government on Hillary Clinton.' And they say, 'We love it. When can we set up a meeting?' And then they have the meeting in Trump Tower with Trump's son, son-in-law and campaign manager. At that point, the rosier interpretation is that they tried and failed to collude. But they still tried. So to me that's the end of that story. The obstruction of justice question I think was over when Trump admitted that he fired James Comey because of the Russian investigation.

Ultimately what I fear may happen is Mueller has a report that says there's a high degree of probability that Trump committed crimes, he gives it to Congress and Congress effectively shrugs, engages in whataboutism and then tries to discredit Mueller. That is a really dangerous scenario because you'll have two-thirds of the country believing – correctly – that Mueller's investigation was fair and thorough, and a third viewing this as an assault on their guy. One of my next research projects is about these voters- in some literature they're referred to as latent authoritarians – who would accept authoritarian rule as long as it's done to their initial benefit. They don't care about procedure. That's what's different about Trump. Those people always existed in western democracies – they exist in Europe, they exist in the US – but there's been a sort of pact among elites that they don't engage with this behaviour, because it's so out of balance. Trump has broken that down, so that these people cheer that type of behaviour, and they also expect it.

That's why I'm worried about the post-Trump era. Even if he gets impeached, even if he gets removed from office, that third of America that is totally OK and excited about everything he's been doing are still part of the system. They're still a huge electoral force, and the incentives for a Trump 2.0 will be exactly the same as the incentives for Trump. In the book, I have a chapter called The Forerunner which imagines a scenario in 2020. It looks at how Trump has paved the way for a much more polished version of himself: a Reagan-esque or Obama-esque figure with the political discipline of a normal politician, but the same ideology and tactics as Trump. That is an effective and probably winning strategy, and one that would be much more dangerous.

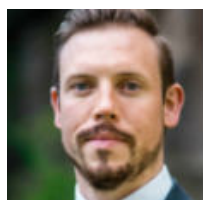
- [The Despot's Apprentice: Donald Trump's Attack on Democracy](#) is published by Hurst.
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About the interviewee



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