

NONFICTION

A New Book Tracks the Rise of Right-Wing Extremism in the U.S.

At a time of social turmoil, Luke Mogelson's "The Storm Is Here" explores how we got to this point.

By Arlie Russell Hochschild

Sept. 13, 2022

THE STORM IS HERE: An American Crucible, by Luke Mogelson

To get a feel for Luke Mogelson's new book, you might watch a bit of the footage he captured during the Jan. 6 Capitol siege. You'll hear "traitors to the guillotine" and "kill Mike Pence" bizarrely juxtaposed with "protect the Constitution" and "Christ is king." At one point, protesters smash video equipment taken from news crews, pile it up and set it on fire. "There you go," someone shouts, addressing journalists trying to report the event. "Now you can't!"

But in "The Storm Is Here," Mogelson, a contributing writer for *The New Yorker* who has covered wars in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, does indeed report the events on our battlefields at home. Going beyond the events of Jan. 6, he shows how such protesters often proudly bond in communities of imagined apocalypse. More broadly, he traces a disturbing link between mobilized extremists, the dominant faction of the Republican Party, and the big lie.

Zone by zone, Mogelson takes us to recent skirmishes — demonstrations against Covid shutdowns in Grand Rapids, Mich.; anti-Black Lives Matter protests in Minneapolis; Proud Boys gatherings in Portland, Ore. — all of which, he rightly argues, led up to Jan. 6. We listen in with him to fiery talk — in a barbershop, at rallies, in cafes — among the Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, Boogaloo Bois and other extremists, as if to war drums. A 68-year-old retiree compares a pandemic lockdown to a Nazi takeover, telling Mogelson that, now stripped of our freedoms, "we're a trigger pull away" from mass violence. "We're getting to the point where people have had enough."

Many "accelerationists" among the Boogaloo Bois and QAnon, already eager for burn-down-the-government mayhem, urge others to join them and target anyone who favors "moderate participation" — even those on their own side of the political spectrum. Mogelson compares some of the views of the Islamic State to those he discovers in QAnon: ISIS hates moderate Muslims, he observes, in the same way QAnon followers hate moderate Republicans.

Most important, Mogelson points to a bracing existential truth: "One emotional feature of contemporary conflict," he muses, "is the ever-present, low-frequency dread of random catastrophe." He relates "the missile tearing through the roof" in war to a rampage through the nation's Capitol in peacetime: "When no place is immune from haphazard demolition, more abstract structures — the invisible schema that holds societies together — also become precarious. ... I don't think of this as a psychological phenomenon; I think that war reminds us how things are not as sound and solid as we believe." This is the book's wake-up call.

Powerful though it is, "The Storm Is Here" has a few flaws. At times I felt dizzy moving among continents, American states, extremist groups and animating issues (Ebola, Islam, masking, shutdowns, fallen statues, racist police departments, the 2020 election). For my taste, the author doesn't take enough time — camera down, phone ringer off — to ask *why* this is happening.

Any book's importance stems from both the questions it answers and those it raises. According to a new study of people arrested or charged for deeds on Jan. 6, 86 percent of them were not affiliated with an extremist group. What brought them to the Capitol, and what continues to divide our nation, was their belief — despite a great mountain of evidence — in a lie that the 2020 election was stolen. Even today, about 40 percent of Americans — and three-quarters of Republicans — *still* believe this. (Whether the ongoing congressional hearings change these percentages remains to be seen.)

Why has the big lie stuck? Maybe it's because Donald Trump made it appear more plausible by attaching it to a truth. And that truth, for the blue-collar white men among his base, is a powerful sense of loss, suggested by the last word in the slogan Make America Great Again. Red and blue states increasingly represent two economies, with Republicans turning more toward agriculture, extraction and manufacturing, and Democrats toward high-tech and professional services. The gap between them is widening: Between 2008 and 2018, the nation's Democratic congressional districts saw median household income rise to \$61,000 from \$54,000, while incomes in Republican districts fell to \$53,000 from \$55,000. They have suffered other losses too; white men living in Republican counties have higher death rates than white men living in Democratic counties, and the gap between those rates increased more than sixfold from 2001 to 2019. Poor rural white Americans also report less optimism about the future than do equally poor Black or Hispanic ones.

From "loss" Trump has moved the emotional needle to "stolen." The right to work and remain maskless during a pandemic, stolen. Story of heroic America, stolen. Statues, stolen. Culture, stolen. White power, stolen. Old-time manhood, stolen. Election, stolen. With "stolen," as opposed to the more circumstantial "loss," it's much easier to assign blame. For the stolen election: the deep state, RINOs, Democrats. For stolen white livelihoods: China, immigrants, minorities. And one thing more, many MAGA enthusiasts say to themselves: Donald Trump will save us. The Democrats are preventing Trump from saving us. He is being stolen from us. And Trump has moved the needle from "stolen" to "steal me back."

THE STORM IS HERE



AN AMERICAN CRUCIBLE

LUKE MOGELSON

In this way, Trump broke with moderate Republicans to ally with far-right activists such as those we meet in this book, while painting Antifa as a far greater threat. Never mind that over the past 25 years, as Mogelson notes, right-wing extremists in the United States have killed 320 people, and those claiming an antifascist agenda have killed one. Since Trump's inauguration, right-wing terrorists have carried out 140 violent attacks; left-wingers, a dozen.

But just who are these extremists? In a recent interview, a neo-Nazi co-organizer of the 2017 Charlottesville march, now struggling with repentance, told me: "My buddies were my family. We all drank too much, were angry fists looking for a fight, and I was ready to die a hero's death." Such men — and generally they are men — welcome violent protest as prime-time theater in which they can play heroic figures of high rank in some fearsome hierarchy of rage.

They are the extreme edge of a vaster red-state America that feels hidden beneath the sunnier narrative of a more prosperous blue-state America: Work hard and success will follow. "Most people outside Appalachia ignore us," one man in his 40s in Pike County, Ky., told me. "But the rest blame us for our problems. We're drawing government checks. We have drug problems. But they don't see all the things we've lost — good jobs, closeness to family, community trust, a debt-free life, pride."

Whether a grievance, or a promise, is based on fact can come to feel beside the point. A former coal miner in an Appalachian county where 80 percent voted for Trump in 2020 told me he had recently gotten back on his feet after losing his job and falling into drugs. "When Donald Trump came to town in 2016, he told us he was going to bring back coal," he said. "I knew Trump was telling me a lie. But I felt like he saw who I was." The storm is here, Mogelson's important book warns us, in the threat of public violence and at the ballot box. It's here because a loss has for too long gone unrecognized, and because a lie that ties itself to this loss can feel more compelling to some than a truth that ignores it.

Arlie Russell Hochschild is writing a follow-up to her book "Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right," a National Book Award finalist.

THE STORM IS HERE: An American Crucible | By Luke Mogelson | 360 pp. | Penguin Press | \$29