



IDEAS

A Political Party Unhinged From Truth

What I learned while I worked on a book about the state of the GOP

By Robert Draper



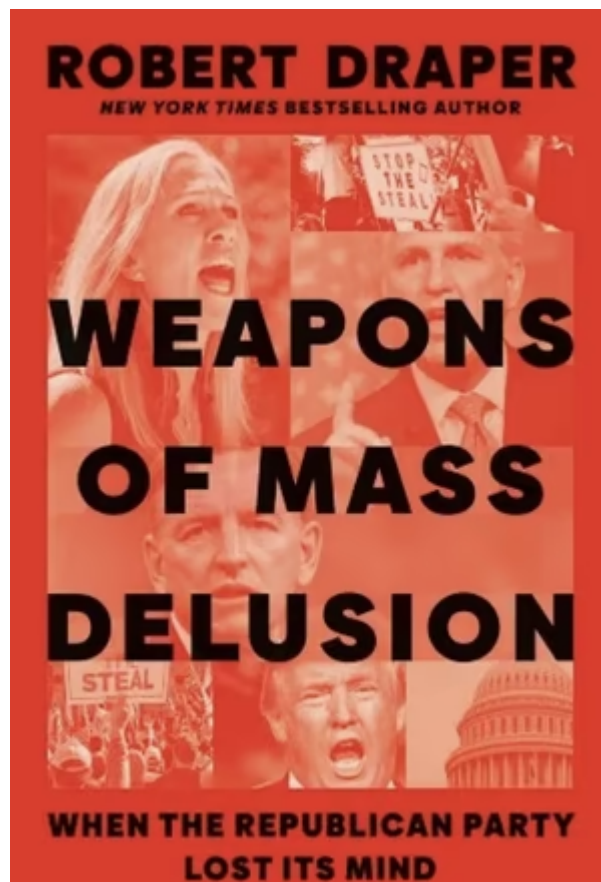
Cornell Watson / Redux

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In March of 2020, I sat in a federal courtroom in Utah and watched a man stand before the judge and murmur through sobs, “This wasn’t me. This wasn’t me.”

The defendant, a 55-year-old health-insurance salesman named Scott Brian Haven, wasn’t protesting his innocence. He openly acknowledged that over the two-year period before his arrest in the summer of 2019, he had placed 3,950 calls to the Washington offices of various Democratic members of Congress, spewing profanities and threatening violence against them.

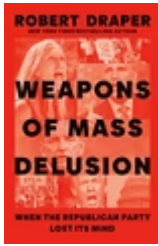


This article is adapted from
Draper's recent book.

But as the prosecutor listed a sampling of Haven's vile threats in the courtroom, the defendant—a devout Mormon who served meals to homeless people in downtown Salt Lake City—seemed unable to recognize those sentiments as his own. One of the objects of his harassment had been Jerrold Nadler, the chair of the House Judiciary Committee. “I’m at his office,” Haven had said in one call to Nadler’s office. “I’m right behind him now. I’m going to shoot him in the head. I’m going to do it now. Are you ready?”

After his arrest, while languishing in a federal jail cell, Haven learned that the Democratic representative was a father and grandfather, just like he was. When he shared this revelation with the judge during his sentencing, he marveled, “There’s so much more to know about people than we hear about in the news.”

That stuck with me as I began work, a few months later, on a book about the state of the Republican Party. Haven, as it turned out, got his news from the conservative talk-radio-show hosts Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh—and, of course, from the president he so admired, Donald Trump. But as my reporting proceeded through the tumultuous end of Trump’s presidency and beyond the madness of January 6, 2021, I frequently encountered Republicans who, like Haven, could not conceive of Trump’s adversaries possessing human attributes. Instead, they viewed Democrats, government bureaucrats, and members of the media like me as any combination of Communists, traitors, swamp creatures, and human scum.



Weapons Of Mass Delusion - When The Republican Party Lost Its Mind

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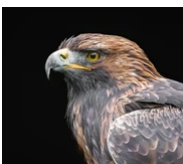
Being viewed in this dire manner by people I'm seeking to interview isn't optimal, obviously. But even when I clear that initial skepticism, I arrive at a more formidable obstacle. I believe that it's equally important to know what conservatives believe and to publish what's real. Like other journalists, I now find myself soliciting the opinions of American conservatives who remain committed to a factually bereft and quasi-apocalyptic view of our political landscape. To be clear: I am not referring to the sort of spinning, caricaturing, or routine dissembling one comes to expect from political campaigns of both parties. Rather, it is the wholesaling and mass consumption of dangerous, dehumanizing lies that concerns me. And in this regard, there is simply no question as to which party is guiltiest.

Until very recently, I never found reporting on Republicans difficult. I was born in Texas and grew up in the Houston suburban congressional district that was represented in the 1960s by one of the state's few Republican officeholders, George H. W. Bush. The Democrats who held sway over Texas back then bore little ideological distinction from their GOP counterparts; indeed, my grandfather Leon Jaworski was the state chair of Democrats for Nixon in 1972, one year before the latter would name the former to be Watergate special prosecutor. (Eight years later, in 1980, Jaworski would become the national chair of Democrats for Reagan.) In 1998, I spent a great deal of time profiling the governor of my state, George W. Bush, as he ran for

reelection while contemplating higher office. In 2005, I moved to Washington to write a book about Bush's presidency, for which Bush and his White House lieutenants cooperated extensively. On the heels of that venture, I covered the vicissitudes of the McCain-Palin presidential campaign at close range. When the Tea Party wave restored the Republicans to power in the House in 2010 and brought 84 GOP freshmen to Washington, I spent a year embedded in their ranks for another book.

At first, Trump's ascendancy did not seem to have much bearing on how I and other journalists covered the conservative movement. Most of the hard-core Republicans on the Hill had favored Ted Cruz as a candidate and viewed their party's nominee warily. Aware that I had spent a fair amount of time with Trump for a *New York Times Magazine* story, several conservative members peppered me with questions about their new party leader. To the chagrin of the House Freedom Caucus, President Trump vowed to me early on that he would "prime the pump" of the economy with big-ticket items like a sweeping infrastructure initiative and paid family leave (his daughter Ivanka's pet project). But as Trump's hold over the GOP base tightened—notably in direct proportion to the intensity of the attacks against him—nearly every elected Republican fell into line. By August of 2020, when the Republican National Committee declined to produce a new quadrennial party platform, conservative principles had manifestly become whatever Trump said they were.

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But what were those principles, exactly? The reply I've heard over and over from rank-and-file Republicans is "America First"—a pithy slogan that falls well short of articulating what America's role in the world should be, or how, for that matter, alienating our historical allies while embracing strongmen in Russia, North Korea, Turkey, Serbia, and Hungary serves America's long-term national interests. Neither, for that matter, does it make clear exactly what kind of fiscal or social policy at home best characterizes putting America first.

Where the slogan falters as a policy platform, however, it succeeds mightily as both a shield and a sword. After all, to declare yourself country-first is to set yourself beyond reproach. Conversely, to place yourself in opposition to an "America First" conservative is to invite the belief that you may very well be "America Last." In an earlier time, Republicans might have left it there. Today, however, GOP politicians and right-wing influencers from Trump on down helpfully connect the dots: To be "America Last" is to be unpatriotic, un-American, a Communist, traitorous, treasonous, an enemy within.

[Tom Nichols: Trump's new recruits](#)

I heard Republicans express these sentiments about their political adversaries intermittently before the 2020 presidential election, but with vehement near universality after Trump lost. Just as those of us who were inside the Capitol on January 6 regard that day as an unforgettable cataclysm, so too do many millions of Republicans consider November 3, 2020, to have been the signal moment when evil actors thwarted the will of the people. In Mesa, Arizona, I stood in line for a conservative rally and found myself talking with a young man who described in elaborate detail the bipartisan nature of the election-stealing conspiracy, adding, “And the intelligence community had to be in there too.” In Manchester, New Hampshire, I heard a former professor and prominent election denier, David Clements, tell an audience that “the entire ‘deep state’ was in on it.” And in Perry, Georgia, I attended a Trump rally where the predominating slogan on shirts worn by attendees stated simply: TRUMP WON.

It took months of reporting before I fully appreciated the pervasiveness of the Big Lie. As I came to learn, the hallucinatory claim that a grand if largely unnamed conspiracy managed to snatch victory away from Trump and hand it to Joe Biden is not a trivial, stand-alone falsehood. Instead, it has become as central to the MAGA belief system as the crucifixion of Jesus is to Christianity. It affirms the martyrdom of their revered leader as well as the incorrigibility of his persecutors. Furthermore, it encourages the belief that the former president’s imagined adversaries across the globe have colluded with domestic malefactors to undermine all manner of American liberties. In these fevered scenarios, Venezuela and South Korea have corrupted our electoral ballots, China has implanted COVID vaccines with mind-control devices, and liberal Jewish billionaires like George Soros have underwritten acts of domestic terrorism. I attended a two-day ReAwaken America convention of right-wing influencers earlier this year at a Phoenix megachurch in which each of these claims was uttered from the stage, to

more than 3,000 attendees. And I'm sorry to report that those conspiracy theories were not even the craziest I heard at the convention.

I should also note that the price of admission to ReAwaken America was \$225 a person, further proof of an emerging cottage industry that promotes delusions en masse. Within this ecosystem, the central premise is all-encompassing fraud: election fraud, medical fraud, monetary fraud, media fraud, judicial fraud, religious fraud. Everything is suspect, requiring endless audits and investigations. Meanwhile, only the loudest voices on the right merit trust. Hence Trump's official social-media platform, tellingly dubbed Truth Social. Hence a host of MAGA propaganda outlets with dubious names like Real America's Voice and One America News. (One conservative radio show I stumbled upon in my reporting was hosted by Trump's former Virginia campaign co-chair, John Fredericks, who labeled himself America's "Godzilla of Truth." On one of his programs, Fredericks had listened passively while the former president claimed, without the slightest evidence, that the state of Virginia—which Biden had carried by 10 points—had been stolen from him.)

What happens to a political party when it becomes unhinged from objective truth? A couple of weeks ago, I received a phone call from a woman who until recently had served in a position of regional prominence in the Texas Republican Party. The woman had read something I'd written pertaining to the insurrection at the Capitol and found it to be thoroughly inaccurate. She wished to inform me that friends of hers had been there on January 6 and had seen nothing remotely riotous taking place. But, the woman added, whatever violence had occurred that day had been the work of antifa. She then said that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's videotaped phone conversations that afternoon, in which she implored governors to deploy National Guard troops to the Capitol, had been entirely staged. The woman closed by declaring

that those who remained in federal custody for January 6–related offenses were being “politically persecuted.” When I asked her where she had gotten all this information, the woman replied that she had done her own research.

Throughout her monologue, the woman sounded completely sure of herself, unswerving in her belief that the violence I had witnessed firsthand on January 6 was entirely made up but was in any event understandable, given her certainty that the 2020 election was stolen. That self-certitude is what has stayed with me, more than the rambling illogic. I wish I knew what it would take for her and millions of her MAGA compatriots to one day be disabused of their shared delusions—to look back in chagrined amazement and say, as Scott Haven did in the federal courtroom, “This wasn’t me. This wasn’t me.”

This article is adapted from Draper’s book [Weapons of Mass Delusion: When the Republican Party Lost Its Mind](#).

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