

BOOK REVIEW

***How Autocrats Abuse Power: Resistance to Trump and Trumpism.* By Richard L. Abel. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2024. Paperback, ISBN 978-1-032-62881-3**

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Rick Abel's books on autocracy share an important subtitle, *Resistance to Trump and Trumpism*. Convinced that Trump and Trumpism represent the greatest threat to American liberal democracy in a lifetime that has witnessed the dismantling of (formal) apartheid in South Africa, and the alarming, global and ongoing spike in authoritarian populism, Abel offers comprehensive and detailed accounts of how Trump abused power when he had it, and how Trump used autocratic techniques to hold on to power when he was at risk of losing the presidency through the electoral process.

In *How Autocrats Abuse Power* (2024), Abel applies analyses of the techniques of autocratic regimes in Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa, to show how Trump has undermined democracy in the U.S. Abel warns readers that, without the “decisive rupture of the existing order” precipitated by revolutions and coups to shine a light on obvious change, discrete processes can seem unthreatening when viewed in isolation (p. 1). Working against this (mis)perception of isolated moments and discrete processes, Abel carefully documents the many moves of an administration that defied analysis, partly by valuing winning above all else and almost at any cost. The chaos that ensued from continually and systematically disrupting conventions and disregarding the law ironically re-centered power in the figure of Trump and the populism of Trumpism.

Abel's two books are invaluable for illuminating the extensive de-democratization discernible in the woven together fabric of Trumpism. Abel details how Trump engineered and assembled a converging and consistent cluster of strategies, including a multipronged politics of resentment involving on attacks on media, political opponents and racialized, minoritized and marginalized populations, including, most notably, immigrants, all this while undermining the legislature's capacity to restrain and scrutinize executive power (Chapter Two). His strategies included deploying executive orders to bypass the legislature (Chapter Two), and as detailed in Chapter Three, a blatant politicizing of the institutions and actors of the criminal justice system “to protect his henchmen and allies despite vigorous resistance by judges and prosecutors,” issuing presidential pardons to nullify judicial decisions and replacing career prosecutors with political appointees (p. 5). Abel closes this book with a chapter evaluating the

success of resistance to Trump and Trumpism, arguing, as he has done before (in his Abel 2018 *Law's Trials*), that because of the inevitable overlap and proximity between law and politics, securing the rule of law in a democracy relies principally on protecting and securing the electoral process.

In *How Autocrats Seek Power* (2024), Abel details the rise of populist support for Trump in 2016 and his efforts to nullify the results of the 2020 elections. Chapter One's concise discussion of the origins of autocracy traces the polarization, identity politics, ideologies and histories that inform the "deeply divided political terrain" that Trump mined through a targeted and racialized populist rhetoric and politics (p. 12). In Chapter Two, Abel delves into a range of ways through which Trump undermined trust in the electoral process. Here, Abel traces the role of Trump's "troubling favoritism towards Russia" in multiple dimensions of Trump's life: personal/sexual, business and political, including of course, enthusiasm for Putin (p. 18). Detailing the Russian connection in both the 2016 and 2020 elections, Abel also ties together the many threads of Trump's history of delegitimizing and contesting elections, a history that pre-dates 2020. Once he was in office, attacking mail ballots was a principal strategy for delegitimizing the 2020 elections. Two and a half years before the 2020 elections, Trump "weaponized" the US Postal Service, appointing "a major GOP fundraiser and donor" as Postmaster General (p. 56). This political appointee proceeded to put in place practices that effected voter disenfranchisement. Judicial oversight, precipitated by an unprecedented number of judicial challenges to the 2020 election, provided a measure of repair for the infrastructural and political undermining of the elections engineered by Trump.

In Chapter Three, Abel details the intense two months during which Trump tried to overturn the election result. Taking readers from election day to the electoral college vote, Abel focuses on Trump's dynamics of denial, and his (and his followers') pressuring and intimidation of state officials in five states, and the subsequent litigating of the election. Chapter Four traces how, once it became evident that the Electoral College would name Biden the victor, Trump and his team tried a range of other strategies, including a slate of "fake electors" (p. 157), weaponizing the Department of Justice, vehemently resisting and rejecting the electoral college vote, all of which culminated in the January 6 insurrection. Abel closes the book with a measured but impassioned appeal for attention to the mechanics, relationships, dynamics and institutions of elections as the foundation of liberal democracy. Democracy needs to be saved, he writes, by "engaging in politics, litigation, and organizing at the state and local levels, where the battles are myriad, low-visibility, unglamorous, technical, and endless, and the victories incremental, often ambiguous, and subject to reversal" (p. 276).

In 2024, as Trump again looms large as a potential future president, Abel's taut writing, acute analysis and careful record-keeping, re-centering the values, institutions and processes of liberal democracy and the rule of law, are bearers of an urgent and instructive message. We need to understand what happened, how it happened and with what effects, if another slide toward systemic autocracy is not going to become the new normal for the United States. The two books described in this review stand powerfully on their own but are more instructive when read together, along with a third, *How Autocrats Attack Expertise: Resistance to Trump and Trumpism* (Abel 2023). There is a well-warranted urgency in Abel's production of these books. They are a

valuable resource, most certainly for sociolegal scholars who attend to the way law, politics, media and populism shape our present.

References

- Abel, Richard L. 2018. *Law's Trials: The Performance of Legal Institutions in the US "War on Terror"*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Abel, Richard L. 2023. *How Autocrats Attack Expertise: Resistance to Trump and Trumpism*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.