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HOW ONE BIG GUY MANIPULATES THE “LITTLE GUYS” The Flawed “Superhero” And The Crisis of Values

Nirmal Ghosh, *Backlash: Donald Trump And The Remaking Of America*.
Singapore: World Scientific, 2025, 180 pages, US\$29.

The book *Backlash: Donald Trump And The Remaking Of America* by veteran journalist and former Washington, D.C. bureau chief of *The Straits Times*, is a timely and concise volume at a time when the world is bracing for the second term of an unpredictable president of the most powerful country on earth. The value of this book lies in its brevity, which provides readers a montage of events that led not only to the rise of Trump but also, as the title of the book indicates, the impending “backlash” against the perceived, either real or imaginary, erosion of social stability and its accompanying anxiety. The term “backlash” itself describes a historical pattern in American politics where social strain leads to a backlash, often characterized by prejudice against minority groups or perceived elites. In this sense, Trump’s second term in the Oval Office is seen as a backlash against globalization, progressive social change, immigration, and foreign military interventions, all of which are perceived to contribute to a resurgence of social strain.

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Engineering a Backlash

The book is brief, with five chapters. Each chapter addresses distressing socio-economic or political factors that contributed to the rise of Trump and the accompanying backlash against those socio-cultural and political agendas perceived to create social instability and economic uncertainty manifesting in anxiety. Chapter 1 deals largely with the process of electing the president, the electoral college system, and its relationship to the presidential race and electoral processes. Here, the author notes an important event, in his words, “...the seeds of Trump’s victory were sown when [Barack] Obama won in 2008, and watered when he won again in 2012” (p. 16). This is a vital observation since it was during these fateful years that we began to witness the culmination of racial movements such as “Black Lives Matter” and the cultural war or the “Woke” movement that, taken together, substantially contributed to the perception of disorder and slow erosion of the value system among many, especially among white Americans (p. 16). Chapter 2 addresses critical issues of gun control (p. 47–57) about the rising incidence of gun violence (p. 42–46), the hot button issue of abortion and the anti-abortionist camp (p. 58–62), and wealth inequality (p. 69–75). These are some of the most sensitive issues in the United States today, and the government policies that prioritize or neglect these issues reverberate throughout every nook and corner of this vast country.

Chapter 3 considers the rise of Trump in the context of a backlash against globalization that is characterized by high job insecurity, and the movement of industries and manufacturing jobs outside of the United States (p. 83–87). Statements made about the 2008 financial crisis by Trump’s closest aide, Steve Bannon, only exacerbate the feeling of anxiety among the so-called “little guy.” In his words, the financial crisis of 2008 helped the rich, and “...the guy who’s going to pay for it is



the little guy” (p. 85). Such fear of insecurity among the “little guy” is augmented by connecting it with the issue of immigration and identity, terms that are emotional and highly charged (p. 89–99). Trump was able to manipulate this fear. For Trump said in an interview, real power is “fear” (p. 103). Chapter 4 is an extension of the previous chapter, where with “fear” he is seen as a strongman able to deal with and cut through the political and bureaucratic red-tape to restore stability, not just domestically but also internationally in foreign affairs (p. 106–127). The book ends with Chapter 5 which is fittingly titled, “Bracing for Turbulence.” Indeed, an apt description of the days, months, and years ahead for the world and the United States, specifically. It ends on a dire cautionary note about the events and testing times for the institutions (p. 143) that had been put in place more than three centuries ago. How well these institutions stand the test of time will surely be put to its litmus test under conditions of spiraling ideological conflict, feral cultural wars brought about by globalization, the paradox of immigration, and the declining influence and power relative to other rising powers.

Crisis of Values

The book is a good illustration of the ‘values’ crisis’ occurring in the United States today. The ‘values’ crisis’ or ‘crisis of values’ is about what it means to be “American.”¹ The author does a good job of highlighting that the rise of Donald Trump is not a product of the past few years. Rather, it is the product of long decades of transitioning under a hyper-globalized and capitalized age, where stability, certainty, and predictability are rapidly replaced by uncertainty, instability, and anxiety. And the

¹ Wayne E. Baker, *America's Crisis of Values: Reality and Perception* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

trauma of a country undergoing transition from being the sole power to now having the prospect of sharing power with other countries (Chapters 4 and 5). This is coupled with rising uncertainty and instability of employment brought about by the rise of technology that threatens to make many jobs redundant, and the cultural war or the ‘woke’ movement that is fiercely challenging the religious base (Thompson 2022) underpinning American society (Chapters 1-3). All these confounding factors are poignantly mentioned by the author in the five chapters that constitute the book.

Societies undergoing transition, where volatility becomes the essence under the prevailing economic and political system, create conditions for the rise of strongmen (or strong women) or authoritarian leaders², such as Trump in America, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Orban in Hungary, LePen in France, Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Alice Elisabeth Weidel in Germany, and Erdogan in Turkey, who promise to end social anxiety through measures such as, for instance, Trump’s policy of mass deportation of illegal immigrants, providing job security for average Americans, protecting American industries, among many others. The rise of Trump is perhaps an indication of where democracies, in general, are heading in a hyper-globalized age of AI-driven economies, where automation and the talk of AI replacing human jobs are raising concerns, especially among those whose jobs may be at risk. In such an environment, people look for security in a leader³ who will perhaps be their superhero, or in more

² Francois Alexi Martel, Philip Moniz, Ashwini Ashokkumar, and William B. Swann Jr., “Identity Fusion and Support for Political Authoritarianism: Lessons from the U.S. Insurrection of 2021,” *Political Psychology* 46, no. 1 (2025): 129–143.

³ Jack Thompson, “Does it Matter if the President Isn’t Pious? White Evangelicals and Elite Religiosity in the Trump Era,” *Politics and Religion* 15, no. 4: (2022): 762–782. doi:10.1017/S1755048322000219; and Jake Womick, Tobias Rothmund,

Weberian parlance, a populist or a charismatic leader. Thus, Trump is an example of such a hero.⁴

Rise of a Japanese Trump

Another more recent trend is the rise of the far-right populist party in Japan, Sanseito. Sanseito's rise to prominence in the July 2025 Upper House election under its leader, Sohei Kamiya, is an excellent illustration of what we have been witnessing in Trump's America, with its "America First" slogan. Sanseito's popularity with its "Japanese First" agenda and warning against the "silent invasion of foreigners" in Japan has managed to come out of this election as one of the biggest winners, from one to fourteen seats.⁵ Trump-style emulation is gaining popularity not only because it works in an age of media-bubble, misinformation, and disinformation⁶, but also because it perhaps indicates a certain zeitgeist, or spirit of the age, we are living in that makes charismatic or populist leaders desirable even in mature democracies—such as Japan, the United States, and France. Sanseito's message was simple; it portrayed itself as an "anti-globalist" party against immigration. Indeed, the Sanseito party depicted itself as more nationalistic and conservative than the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, which is a conservative party (Khalil and Ng 2025). This is similar to how Trump showed himself to be more

Flavio Azevedo, Laura A. King, and John T. Jost, "Group-Based Dominance and Authoritarian Aggression Predict Support for Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 10, no. 5 (2018): 643–652.

⁴ Martel, et. al.

⁵ Shaimaa Khalil and Kelly Ng, "The Rise of the Far-right 'Japanese First' Party," BBC, July 21, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly8onnjnv5o>

⁶ Allison M.N. Archer, "The Effects of Elite Attacks on Copartisan Media: Evidence from Trump and Fox News," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2023): 887–910.

conservative and nationalistic than the veteran Republican Party members.⁷ The party's rise has to be understood in the context of decades of stagflation that Japan has been reeling under, just as the rise of Trump has to be understood under the context of the 2008 global financial crisis, the election of Obama as the first black president of the United States, and the consequence of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

The point here is not about Japan. Rather, it is about how the inner, non-tangible, and unquantifiable factors, and our perception of events and information, contribute to the rise of authoritarian-style leadership to restore and rescue the sinking ship.⁸ There is an element of perception to this. Psychological science has long established how essential our perception is to the understanding and absorption of information that goes into the construction of how we view the world, others, and our place in it, often overlooking the complexities that make up any political phenomenon.⁹ Studies reveal a striking connection between perceptions of moral division in society, i.e., the social system may have begun to fall apart, and the support for populist, authoritarian leaders.¹⁰ The studies further suggest that individuals are more inclined

⁷ Garen J. Wintemute, Sonia L. Robinson, Elizabeth A. Tomsich, and Daniel J. Tancredi, "MAGA Republicans' Views of American Democracy and Society and Support for Political Violence in the United States: Findings from a Nationwide Population-representative Survey," *PLoS ONE* 19, no. 1 (2024): e0295747, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0295747>

⁸ Martel, et. al.; and Womick, et. al.

⁹ James C. Camparo and Lorinda B. Camparo, "Are Political-opinion Pollsters Missing Ambivalence: 'I Love Trump'... 'I Hate Trump,'" *PLoS ONE* 16, no. 3 (2021): e0247580, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0247580>

¹⁰ Martel, et. al; and Charlie R. Crimston, Hema Preya Selvanathan, and Jolanda Jetten, "Moral Polarization Predicts Support for Authoritarian and Progressive



to back populist leaders, like Trump, if they sense a decline in societal morals, whom they believe can reestablish order.¹¹ The findings underline how a perceived moral polarization, such as the ideological binary chasm between Republicans and Democrats in the United States (p.118), not only drives people toward authoritarian leaders, but also fuels a preference for bold, rule-breaking leaders who promise to disrupt the status quo¹² that are represented by figures like Trump, Kamiya, Erdogan, Bolsonaro, and Orban among many others.

What is of even more concern is that such perceived breakdown of the social system is implicitly attached to the idea of race, such as America for Americans, Poland for Poles, Hungary for Hungarians, Japan for Japanese, Europe for Europeans, and so on. Such simplified slogans, often discounting the complexities of interdependent factors, coloured in a narrative of nationalism and jingoism against anyone that is perceived to symbolize the other, or the opposite, becomes a clarion call for those, especially the middle-class that constitutes the larger proportion of the population in mature democracies, whose socio-economic security and stability are threatened by the forces of unrestrained globalization, capitalism, and immigration.¹³ Perhaps this explains why a study¹⁴ found that a significant number of white

Strong Leaders via the Perceived Breakdown of Society,” *Political Psychology* 43, no. 4 (2022): 671–691.

¹¹ Crimston, et. al.

¹² Martel, et. al.; Wintemute, et. al.; and Ron Levi, Ioana Sendroiu, and John Hagan, “America First Populism, Social Volatility, and Self-reported Arrests,” *Proceedings of the National Academic of Sciences of the United States of America* 117, no. 43: (2020), 26703–26709, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2006223117>

¹³ Camparo and Camparo.

¹⁴ Kiara A. Hernandez, Taeku Lee, and Marcel F. Roman, “White Power! How White Status Threat Undercuts Backlash Against Anti-democratic Politicians,” *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 10, no. 1 (2025): 86–110.

Republicans continued to support Trump in the wake of the January 6, 2021 insurrection, particularly when they perceived that white Americans were being unfairly discriminated against, causing them to adopt a sense of victimhood.¹⁵ While prior research suggests a short-term decline in Republican support for Trump after the Capitol attack, the new research indicates that perceived racial (or, us versus them perceptive) threat¹⁶ can insulate political leaders from the ramification of their actions, even when leaders conduct themselves in anti-democratic ways and exhibit criminal behavior.¹⁷

How Democracies Die Slowly

Ultimately, the book cautions about how democracies are susceptible to the emergence of authoritarian leaders, and how such democratic erosion happens imperceptibly. What we can skim off the book is a cautionary tale on how to protect democracies and the institutions that support the existence of democracy in the first place. This is especially relevant to democracies in South and Southeast Asia. Most democracies often do not collapse suddenly, like the 2021 Myanmar military coup d'état. Rather, they die gradually, often at the hands of elected officials, those representatives of the people, those who are charged with the legitimacy and duty to protect the fundamental foundations of democracy. As a study suggests, democracies backslide through gradual erosions of political norms and institutions that threaten the objective of

¹⁵ Miles T. Armaly and Adam M. Enders, "'Why Me?' The Role of Perceived Victimhood in American Politics," *Political Behavior* 44 (2022): 1583–1609, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-020-09662-x>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Hernandez, et. al.; Wintemute, et. al.; Ashley Jardine and Spencer Piston, "Trickle-Down Racism: Trump's Effect on Whites' Racist Dehumanizing Attitudes," *Current Research in Ecological and Social Psychology* 5 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cresp.2023.100158>; and Levi, et. al.

checks and balances so fundamental to the existence of democracy. In other words, the erosion of democracy begins at the ballot box.¹⁸

We have been witnessing such gradual erosions in many democracies, especially those democracies that have been a model for many others, from the United States to Western Europe. Indeed, as Levitsky and Ziblatt state, “The erosion of democracy takes place piecemeal, often by baby steps. Each step seems minor—none appears to truly threaten democracy. Indeed, government moves to subvert democracy frequently enjoy a veneer of legality.” Under this ‘veneer of legality’ the elected representatives undermine democracy by rejecting the democratic rule of the game, tolerate or encourage violence, and curtail the civil liberties of opponents and the independence of the media.¹⁹ To conclude, it is perhaps prudent to recognize that the United States is now in uncharted waters where the foundations that were laid with the culmination of the American Revolution will be put to their litmus test. In the words of the author

... an era of turbulence is certainly upon [the United States], in which political and cultural wars will likely become more feral, and the resilience of key pillars of the Union—built-in checks and balances, freedoms and separation of church and state [...]—will be tested, and contested, more seriously than at any other time in its post-Cold War history. And the outcome of those internal struggles will inevitably reverberate around the world (p. 143).

All in all, Ghosh’s book is an excellent read to understand the unique crossroads that the United States now finds itself in. How the country

¹⁸ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals About Our Future* (Penguin Random House, 2018).

¹⁹ Ibid.

deals with various sensitive issues mentioned in the book will to a great extent determine, and affect, the environment, not just for Americans but also for the people living in the rest of the world.

Note on the Reviewer

Salikyu Sangtam is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Tetso College in Chumoukedima, India. He teaches political theory and research methods. His research focuses on Chinese thought, and non-western political thought. He is a regular contributor for the *Rising Asia Journal*. In 2023, he was invited to an international conference held in Beijing, China organized by the School of Philosophy, Renmin University of China on the theme “Chinese-Style Modernization: Philosophical Perspectives in a Global Context.” And in the early parts of 2024, he was also invited to an international conference organized by the Wuyi Research Institute of Chinese Civilization, Wuyi University, Nanping, China on the theme “Wuyi Forum on the Two Integrations of Five Millennia of Chinese Civilization and Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.” In addition, he has served on numerous invited occasions as a resource person in academic workshops as well as delivering lectures.