

BOOKS

# The Real Reason Trump Loves Putin



A new book explores the American right's tendency to admire and want to emulate foreign dictators.

By Franklin Foer



Brendan Smialowski / Getty

MARCH 1, 2024, 8:17 AM ET

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**F**OR NEARLY THE ENTIRETY of the past decade, a question has stalked, and sometimes consumed, American politics: Why do Donald Trump and his acolytes heap such reverent praise on Vladimir Putin? The question is born of disbelief. Adoration of the Russian leader, who murders his domestic opponents, kidnaps thousands of Ukrainian children, and interferes in American presidential elections, is so hard to comprehend that it seems only plausibly explained by venal motives—thus the search to find the supposed kompromat the Kremlin lords over Trump or compromising business deals that Trump has pursued in Moscow.

But there's a deeper, more nefarious truth about people on the right's baffling unwillingness to criticize the Kremlin: They actually share its worldview. Putin worship isn't even an aberration in the history of conservatism, merely the latest instance of a long tradition of admiring foreign dictators. Over the past century, without ever really blushing, the American right has similarly celebrated the likes of Adolf Hitler, Francisco Franco, and just about every Latin American military junta that called itself anti-communist.

The right hails these dictators as ideological comrades in the war to preserve traditional society, the values of order and patriarchy, against the assault of the decadent left. Unlike conservative politicians in the United States, these foreign leaders don't even need to bother with mouthing encomiums to concepts like tolerance, freedom, and democracy. They can deliver reactionary politics in the unvarnished form that some hard-liners on the American right have always hoped would take root in their own country. As the journalist Jacob Heilbrunn argues in *America Last*, his history of conservatives' romance with dictators, "Conservatives have searched for a paradise abroad that can serve as a model at home."

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# America Last - The Right's Century-Long Romance With Foreign Dictators

By Jacob Heilbrunn

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Heilbrunn makes the interesting decision to begin his history on the eve of World War I. A primary villain in these chapters is the newspaper columnist H. L. Mencken, perhaps the most celebrated curmudgeon in the history of American letters. Walter Lippmann called him “the most powerful influence on this whole generation of educated people.” A conservative movement as such did not exist in the earliest decades of the 20th century, just a constellation of reactionary intellectuals and their wealthy patrons who nodded in agreement, nostalgic for the antebellum South and a world before mass suffrage. Mencken, the most eloquent of the reactionaries, put their cantankerous thoughts into ornate, often quite funny prose.

Mencken believed fervently in the superiority of German civilization—and in the leadership of its racist, war-mongering monarch, Kaiser Wilhelm. This reverence stemmed from ancestral pride; Mencken’s paternal grandfather came from Saxony. But his affection for Germany also grew from his disdain of American democracy, which he believed ceded control of society to mediocre politicians. By contrast, he liked that Germany was “governed by an oligarchy of its best men.” Just before America officially entered World War I, he

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submitted an article to *The Atlantic* in which he imagined that Germany might one day conquer the United States and create a new utopia on its shores. Ellery Sedgwick, then the editor of this magazine, had the good sense to reject it. “I have no desire to foment treason,” Sedgwick wrote him.

Jacob Heilbrunn: Behind the American right’s fascination with Viktor Orbán

At the height of the war, Mencken worried that he might be persecuted for propagandizing for an enemy regime, so much so that he buried the German keepsakes he collected and a diary from his wartime visit to the country in his Baltimore backyard. But in the years that followed the conflict, he returned to extolling the virtues of Wilhelmine autocracy. His publication, *The American Mercury*—perhaps the greatest literary journal of the age and also home to retrograde political opinions—ran revisionist accounts of the war, which shifted blame away from Germany.

Looking back on World War I, there were compelling conservative reasons for considering intervention a catastrophe. Financing the war required the imposition of a federal income tax, which never went away in peacetime. And no matter one’s political stripe, the war’s staggering body count was hard to justify. But what emerged on the right in the aftermath of the fighting wasn’t a form of pacifism—rather, it was a set of conspiratorial arguments that became a dishonorable tradition of isolationism. This pattern would repeat itself at the onset of every war: The isolationists would point an accusatory finger at bankers, whom they accused of being eager to profit off bloodshed. They would describe the authoritarian enemies of the United States as helpless victims, peaceful governments minding their own business. In the course of casting the dictators as the injured party, conservatives airbrushed their records of militarism and racism. Minimizing these sins wasn’t just a matter of rhetorical convenience; it was an act of sympathy. In the case of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, a significant segment of the intellectual American right shared their racialist views about the superiority of Nordic peoples.

**H**EILBRUNN ISN'T THE FIRST to tell the story of the right's barely submerged affinity for Hitler. Philip Roth's great counterfactual novel, *The Plot Against America*, takes this affinity as its premise—and as does Rachel Maddow's recently published history, *Prequel*. But it's always bracing to be reminded of how former President Herbert Hoover made excuses for Hitler before the war and how the press baron William Randolph Hearst commissioned stories by him.

The biggest fans of fascist autocracy weren't yokels shaking their pitchforks, but cultivated patricians from the oldest New England families. Benito Mussolini's American fan section consisted of the eminent literary critic Irving Babbitt, a legendary Harvard professor, and the modernist poet Ezra Pound. Not just Hearst but also Henry Ford and others among the nation's richest men were some of the chief apologists for Nazi Germany. Their attraction—sometimes subconscious, but quite often stated flatly—was born of fear that America was slipping away from them, as immigrants poured into the country and mass democracy took hold. Fascism represented a hopeful example of a revanchist elite reversing the tide.

Hitler's defeat, and the full knowledge of the horrors of the Holocaust, did little to spur the right to rethink its admiration of authoritarianism. In fact, the historian Fred Siegel once described the late 1940s and early '50s as the moment when the isolationists attempted to exact revenge. Senator Joe McCarthy and his allies tried to tear down the reputations of the internationalist proponents of the New Deal who most fervently advocated for the war, by smearing them as Communists. But McCarthy was also waging a retrospective argument about World War II: that the Americans had no claim to superiority over the Germans. When he burst onto the scene, in 1949, McCarthy held hearings into what he described as the mistreatment of a Nazi Panzer division, on trial for murdering dozens of American prisoners of war. McCarthy speciously argued that the Germans were being tried on trumped-up evidence. Such accusations about America's supposed abusive treatment of Nazis became a right-wing trope. Henry Regnery's publishing house provided an outlet for criticism of the Nuremberg trials, before it went on to print books by William F. Buckley, James Burnham, and Whitaker Chambers that launched the modern conservative movement.

Adam Serwer: Conservatives are defending a sanitized version of ‘the Great Replacement’

In its Cold War guise, the revived right made the celebration of autocrats abroad a foundation of its foreign policy. Buckley’s magazine, *National Review*, the flagship of the movement, published regular panegyrics to anti-communist generalissimos, heaping adoration on the likes of the Dominican Republic’s Rafael Trujillo, Portugal’s Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, and Spain’s Francisco Franco. Regardless of how many opponents they murdered or how many dissidents wasted away in their jails, they were described as the true defenders of Christendom against the heathen mob. The implication was that these dictators weren’t just on the right side of the Cold War; they possessed spine and ideological fervor that American leaders lacked.

Because the American right was so quick to extol foreign dictators in hyperbolic terms, its members were frequently treated like suckers by those regimes. During the Reagan era, the lobbyist Paul Manafort—who would go on to be Trump’s 2016 campaign chairman—made a fantastically lucrative living by trying to bolster the image of autocrats as latter-day incarnations of Thomas Jefferson. In the late ’80s, Manafort took the Angolan guerilla leader Jonas Savimbi, a former Maoist, and whisked him around Washington think tanks, touting him as a “freedom fighter.” That label required overlooking, among other inconvenient facts, how Savimbi’s army conscripted women into sexual slavery.

The Cold War, at least, provided a plausible geostrategic case for supporting these goons—and many of the socialist movements they battled were unsavory in their own ways. In fact, one school of foreign-policy thought, embodied in the realism of Henry Kissinger, a name that goes strangely unmentioned in Heilbrunn’s book, argued that alliances with dictators made sense on purely utilitarian grounds. Aligning with Chile’s Augusto Pinochet and the apartheid government in South Africa was a matter of national interest, nothing more, nothing less. The moral calculus of realism was repugnant in its own way, because it turned a blind eye to human suffering caused by dictatorships. But it was very different from the right-wing celebration of autocracy, which was a matter of shared values. That reactionary faction of the right continued

to espouse affection for dictatorship even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when there was no longer an overriding foreign-policy justification for championing such regimes. Those affections persisted, because the impulse to find an alternative to America's democracy persisted.

Heilbrunn's book opens with verve, then becomes a touch slapdash as the narrative drives toward the present. Even though Trumpism is his hook, Heilbrunn spends exceedingly few pages on the subject. But the present moment should be the shocking culmination of his narrative: Foreign dictators are now thoroughly attuned to the tendency that *America Last* describes. How else to explain why Putin grants exclusive interviews to Tucker Carlson, or why Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán hosted a gathering of the Conservative Political Action Committee? These autocrats understand that the American right's tendency to treat its favored leaders, domestic and foreign, with servile devotion makes it a supremely useful ally. If Trump returns to power, Putin can count on him to turn a blind eye to his military adventures, and Orbán can count on him to refrain from criticism of his power grabs.

But what makes Heilbrunn's history, ultimately, so poignant is that the American right no longer needs to project its displaced desires onto leaders in other countries. It doesn't have to shop abroad for a tribune who channels the movement's deepest, most subversive desires. Trump is the foreign dictator that they craved all along.

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Franklin Foer is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*.

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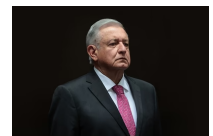
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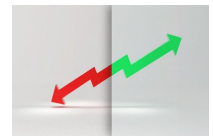
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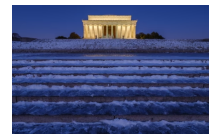
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