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Book Review: I Alone Can Fix It: Donald J. Trump's Catastrophic Final Year, by Carol Leonig and Philip Rucker

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Discussed in this review:

I Alone can Fix It: Donald J. Trump's Catastrophic Final Year. By Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker. Penguin Press. July 2021. ISBN 978-0593298947. 592 pages. Hardcover, \$30.00.

Written by highly distinguished journalists Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker, *I Alone Can Fix It: Donald J. Trump's Catastrophic Final Year in Office* is a wide-ranging and exhaustively documented historical account of the varying events that occurred during the last year of Donald Trump's presidency. While any compelling work on the events of a presidency is significant, this book provides groundbreaking details about important recent historical events. These events included the beginning and progression of the COVID-19 pandemic, protests related to racial injustice in the United States in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, the 2020 presidential election campaign, and the many ways Trump attempted to overturn the outcome of that election.

Part One of the book examines the origin and first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. One theme that becomes clear from the authors' analysis is that Trump quickly enacted a travel ban from China (in January 2020) but was, by contrast, slower to do so with Europe and other countries. This pattern was consistent with his enacted foreign policy, as China was viewed as a rival in many respects relative to other nation-states since the day he announced his run for the presidency in 2015 (e.g., see Trump, 2015).

Leonnig and Rucker provide an array of evidence that Trump sluggishly announced concrete steps to slow the pandemic, downplaying the significance of COVID-19 when substantial action would have saved lives. Among other statements, Trump maintained that COVID-19 was totally under control, that the travel ban from China would soon eradicate the few remaining COVID-19 cases, and that this virus was just like the flu (Doggett, 2020). None of these statements was true, of course; in fact, in a February 2020 interview with Bob Woodward, Trump conceded that COVID-19 was far deadlier than more common illnesses like the flu. With one notable exception—the development of COVID-19 vaccines—the U.S. government's response to what would become a pandemic lagged far behind other countries around the world. A significant amount of expert advice was not followed initially but, instead, was eventually and selectively adopted. The implications of these delayed decisions would become—and are still becoming—clear, with the United States surpassing over 835,000 deaths (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

In Part Two of the book, the authors examine the ways Trump and his administration responded to the protests related to racial injustice in the United States after George Floyd's murder in May 2020. As the authors note, Trump wanted to hold legally responsible the police officers who either caused or did not prevent Floyd's death. Simultaneously, though, the authors offer substantial evidence that Trump reacted strongly and negatively to those who protested, especially violent protesters. In fact, Leonnig and Rucker provide convincing evidence from multiple interviews that Trump wanted to use armed U.S. soldiers to stop the protests to "show strength." However, General Mark Milley, then-Defense Secretary Mark Esper, then-Attorney General Bill Barr, and others persuaded Trump that doing so would be unwise since this action would create more problems than it would solve. While Milley participated in the infamous, ill-advised photo-op of Trump holding a Bible in front of St. John's Church after protestors were

forcibly cleared, he learned from his judgment error and applied that lesson in the aftermath of the November 2020 election.

Part Three contains a fascinating insider account of the last months of Trump's reelection campaign. In particular, the authors marshal an impressive array of interview evidence of varying missteps by then-President Trump and his reelection campaign, including insufficient responses to trends in underlying polling data which would ultimately be the campaign's undoing, his comments about the Proud Boys and similar groups during the first presidential debate, and the spread of COVID-19 traced to the largely unmasked and non-socially distanced crowd at the event where he announced Amy Coney Barrett's nomination to the Supreme Court. These missteps occurred amid notable policy successes from the Trump Administration during this time, including the Abraham Accords to further peace in the Middle East and the successful, soon-to-be-revealed development of both the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines. The authors imply that due to his mistakes, Trump could not capitalize on these policy successes.

The last chapter of Part Three previews the way Trump's presidency would end: by articulating an increasingly bombastic series of election-related grievances that culminated in the January 6, 2021, insurrection. Not coincidentally, this provides a seamless segue into the final part of the book—an exhaustive investigation of the legal and other ways Trump tried unsuccessfully to overturn the results of the 2020 election. These efforts were predicated upon a single premise, that Trump would have won had the election not been stolen. This narrative originated from Trump's attorney at the time, Rudy Giuliani, when the latter saw the election results unfolding on the night of Election Day. Giuliani advised Trump to simply claim that he had won Arizona, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan without any evidence that he was victorious. These were all states that Trump narrowly lost.

His efforts progressed from there through over 60 ultimately failed legal challenges that he filed in various courts in the weeks following the election (Cummings et al., 2021). However, his attempts to overturn the election went beyond lawsuits, including a phone call to the Georgia Secretary of State's office in which Trump badgered the secretary to find him enough votes to change the election outcome and attempts to persuade state legislatures to override the outcomes of free and fair elections in their states. These efforts were ultimately unsuccessful.

Leonnig and Rucker are at their best in the last part of the book, where they provide vast interview evidence of all the White House and campaign staffers who knew Trump's claims of a stolen election were false. Moreover, the authors painstakingly document how these staffers tried to persuade Trump to accept his election loss, concede, and move on from the stolen election narrative. When Trump could not be persuaded to drop the false narrative, he tried to persuade then-Vice President Mike Pence to refuse to certify the election results on January 6 before the House and the Senate. Pence refused to do so on January 5, as there was no legal basis for such an action.

On January 6, Trump held a rally approximately two miles from the Capitol in which Giuliani called for "trial by combat" and Trump encouraged those in attendance to march to the Capitol building. Many attendees and others took Giuliani and Trump's advice, with some marching peacefully toward the Capitol and others storming the Capitol complex shortly after arriving. Leonnig and Rucker elaborate on attempts by White House staffers, Chris Christie, Alyssa Farah, members of Congress, and others to persuade Trump, as the insurrection unfolded,

to call on the rioters to leave the Capitol building. He did so, but only hours after the insurrection began.

The authors document clearly the wide-ranging actions that General Mark Milley and others undertook to prevent the U.S. military from becoming involved in overturning the 2020 election. Milley believed that “we [the military] don’t determine the outcome of the election” (Leonnig & Rucker, 2021, p. 434), and he and others worked behind the scenes to collaborate with key members of Congress to ensure a peaceful transition of power, secure the January 20 inauguration of Joe Biden as president, and more. (These and other efforts are detailed in the just-released book *Peril*, by Bob Woodward and Robert Costa.) In this respect, Milley applied the lesson he had learned a little over 6 months prior by not involving the military in any way or appearing in uniform with respect to political processes.

Leonnig and Rucker spectacularly and exhaustively describe the events of the last year of Trump’s presidency while providing substantial evidence supporting a key theme: Trump cared more about his own reelection and political prospects than he did about the country. This comes through in the way the authors impressively detail Trump’s reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, the protests related to racial injustice, his campaign, and his grievances about the outcome of the 2020 election.

Though expansive, their analysis left me wanting more in two places. First, I would like to have read more about the aftermath of Trump’s first impeachment. Leonnig and Rucker do elaborate on some of this in Chapter Three (“Seeking Revenge”), but I perceived that there was a lot more here that needed to be described. This would have served as supplemental evidence strengthening the book’s central theme. In fairness to the authors, though, COVID-19 fast became the dominant story, and in this respect, the choice to focus more on the pandemic is understandable.

Second, Leonnig and Rucker excelled at detailing the progression of the pandemic and the Trump Administration’s varying responses to it until Election Day 2020. Yet, after that day, COVID-19 is conspicuously absent from their storyline. While Trump was obsessively focused on overturning the 2020 election results, another wave of COVID-19 cases and deaths had begun in earnest. The minimized attention on COVID-19 in their narrative represents a missed opportunity by the authors to highlight that the limited presence of a national COVID-19 mitigation strategy by that time was further evidence supporting their thesis.

These two issues do not detract from the excellence of *I Alone Can Fix It*; rather, they allow room for scholars and historians to infill the missing pieces. This book speaks to the ways Trump tried to enhance his political prospects and reelection efforts while some of his actions ultimately inhibited him from doing so. This volume is essential to academics and non-academics alike who want to better understand the last year of Trump’s presidency. The book should be of particular interest to presidency scholars, as some of Trump’s actions (attempted or fulfilled) implicate the imperial presidency (Schlesinger, 1973) and unitary executive theories (e.g., see Delahunty & Yoo, 2002). This volume is also valuable to undergraduate students since the authors illuminate many issues that political institutions and scholars regularly study, including interbranch relations and the nature of presidential power. The book will undoubtedly sit alongside many other important works on individual presidents and their terms, or parts thereof, in office.

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