Political scientists focused on American politics are habitually asked to function as soothsayers of sorts: What is the United States’ future role in the world? What do its leaders really mean and how might all of this affect transatlantic relations? There are no simple binary answers to such questions—which is why we can address them without ever getting it completely wrong. The same does not hold true for elections, in which we are asked to predict the outcome of what amounts to an either/or dynamic. If nothing else, the tumultuous campaign cycle of 2016 has collectively reminded us of this.

As of January 2017, the Republican Party heads the Executive Branch, controls both Chambers of Congress, holds thirty-three state governorships, and has already secured a fifth and crucial seat for a conservative justice on the Supreme Court. On paper, this does not bode well for any argument built on the premise of an existential crisis of conservative forces in U.S. politics. Trump’s surprising electoral success and the (less surprising) Republican majorities in Congress are the proverbial elephants in the room—pardon the tired metaphor.

Torben Lütjen’s Partei der Extreme: Die Republikaner therefore does well to open with an introduction on the topic of Trump’s remarkable streak of primary victories in early 2016. As Lütjen thus points out from the get-go, this is not really a book about the GOP—as the title might lead readers to believe—but rather one on the state of American conservatism. The tensions, the ideological crises, the inconsistencies, identities, and many contradictions associated with this movement are essentially what fuels Republican extremism: Throughout the early Obama years, the Tea Party popularized the moniker RINO (Republican In Name Only), lobbing it as an insult towards politicians seen as inauthentic and not conservative enough. These, in turn, had to double-down on far-right stances or risk being replaced by candidates who were willing to do so. More recently, Trump’s ability to mobilize disillusioned voters by harnessing xenophobia and deep frustration with the status quo was first tolerated and then embraced, when it proved to be politically effective. All of these, to Lütjen, are symptoms of a loss of control (“Kontrollverlust”) over the Republican Party’s own narrative.

Hence, the introduction, titled “Der Geist, den sie riefen,” portrays Trump as a manifestation of Republican extremism and centers around the GOP’s inability to prevent his nomination. Chapter 2, “The Global March to Socialism,” makes the case for tracing the beginnings of contemporary U.S. conservatism back to the ideological struggles of the 1930s and an anti-Keynesian impulse. This paints the roots of today’s ideological struggles as a reaction to liberal progressivism and the institutions of the New Deal. It also sets the stage for the next three chapters, which center on the overarching framework of the Cold War, in which anti-communism, Barry Goldwater’s populist campaign, and the shift towards a Southern Strategy in light of Civil Rights legislation are singled out as central turning points. Under the fitting title of “Kulturrkrieg,” chapter 6 addresses the religious dimension of what was then still the new American right and which served as one of the cornerstones for the broad coalition of conservative forces that voted Ronald Reagan into office—the focus of chapter 7. Chapter 8, initially centered on the second Bush presidency, makes a convincing case for the notion of U.S. conservatism as a parallel information universe of sorts, in which fear and anger are continually stoked and which gave rise to the unruly Tea Party movement. All of this finally sets the stage for the rise of Trump, as argued in the book’s final chapter. It is here that the author also comes to the conclusion that there is little evidence to suggest that Trump would be able to win the presidency—a prediction obviously submitted for publication shortly before November 2016.
So, had this book been any different if the publisher had waited until after
the election? If we are to take the author’s main arguments seriously, then the
answer is: not really. The book’s main strength ultimately lies in setting up a
larger puzzle: How can this conglomeration of diffuse interest and ideologies,
built on false promises, anti-intellectualism, and, in parts, a downright nega-
tion of reality, nonetheless come to succeed at the polls? This is the question that
Lütjen’s book helps to set up and which remains highly relevant. Ultimately, the
irony is that many of the indicators that led political commentators to rule out a
Trump victory may well remain true to this day. Contrary to what Trump will
have us believe, the margin of his victory was slim and his first months in office
have seen his approval rating hit record lows. This is what might make Lütjen’s
main argument as valid in 2018, as it would have been in 2015.

However, the argument itself still deserves critical scrutiny. Trump is, by
definition, a Republican president. But is he a conservative? It appears that Lüt-
jen would argue against this notion, choosing to instead portray Trumpism as a
symptom of decline and crisis. This, in turn, might raise the question of where
we locate and define “true” contemporary conservatism. If it is uncontrollably
spiraling towards its own demise, then what do we make of the invigorated
Alt-Right movement and the rise of influential figures like the former executive
chair of Breitbart News and erstwhile member of the National Security Coun-
cil Steve Bannon? Are these political actors merely more symptoms of impend-
ing doom, rather than contemporary signs of transformation?

Furthermore, if internal ideological struggles are truly so detrimental to the
Republican party, then we would still need to take the carefully crafted national
strategy of gerrymandering into account, which will remain in place for upcoming
election cycles and may well continue to win Republicans districts in states
where the popular vote would otherwise have favored the Democrats. Add to
this the fact that restrictive voter ID laws make it hard for Democrats to capi-
talize on shifting demographic trends. On the state level, the GOP dominates
gubernatorial races, while its legislators foster powerful alliances with business
interests. And take into account the massive campaigns of misinformation aid-
ed by conservatively tinged forms of corporate mass media, which provide Re-
publicans with a massive advantage in voter outreach, while systematically ob-
scuring their failures. Finally, what about the crisis of progressivism, to which
U.S. conservatism, according to Lütjen’s own argumentation, has always been a
reaction: Would it not suffice for the forces of the left to falter, in order for the
right to win—as seems to have been the case in the recent election?

Perhaps the metaphors of demise and existential crisis as evoked by terms like
“Implosion” are therefore a bit misleading. Instead, we might attempt to explain
changes and transitions in order to highlight new fault lines and political alli-
iances. Much like its editorial deadline, the book’s rather unsubtle subtitle does
not do Lütjen’s work any favors, as it seems to suggest that a singular central claim
of conservative demise will be the focus. The book’s actual strength, however,
lies in the fact that it provides an excellent overview and portrait of the rise of
conservative forces in the United States and can serve as a timeless introduction
into the topic rather than a context-bound argument about a specific moment in
American politics. Meanwhile, it is written in a clear language and enjoyable tone
that would be suited for academic reading groups as well as the larger interested
public. Flawed predictions notwithstanding, Lütjen’s thoughtful work can and
should therefore serve as the basis for further academic debate and inquiry.

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