

The best books of the week

FT Books Essay Political books

The people who enabled Trump

Who paved the president's way to power? Jacob Weisberg and Anthony Scaramucci offer two visions of America in retreat



Activists protesting in March 2025 against law firm Paul Weiss, which had offered free legal services to the Trump administration after the lifting of a presidential executive order that had barred it from federal contracts © Michael M Santiago/Getty Images

Joe Miller

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Hours after Donald Trump announced his so-called “Muslim ban” in 2017, Brad Karp dispatched dozens of lawyers from his elite New York firm to airports, where they worked through the night to file emergency petitions on behalf of stranded travellers.

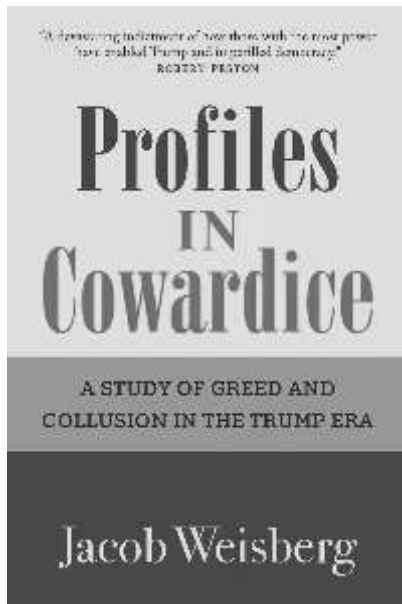
Less than a decade later, the Paul Weiss chief was on his metaphorical knees in the Oval Office, inking a dubious deal to do free work for the Trump administration, in exchange for the lifting of a plainly unlawful executive order the president had signed, targeting his firm.

Karp's pusillanimity is the first, and perhaps most deserving, target of Jacob Weisberg's ire in *Profiles in Cowardice*, a chronicle of capitulations to Trump during his second term in office. The book contrasts the moral fragility of eight contemporary American leaders with the strength shown by the senators John F Kennedy lauded in his 1956 book *Profiles in Courage*, and by members of his postwar generation. Card-carrying progressive Karp, Weisberg argues, had less to lose than George Anastaplo, who in a 1950 Illinois Bar Association interview refused to answer a question about whether he was a communist on the grounds that it was a violation of the First Amendment of the US constitution, and was forced to drive a taxi to make ends meet.

In Weisberg's analysis, those who checked Trump's power during his first presidency were "absent, complicit or openly supportive" after his re-election in part because they feared ostracism or violence, or wanted to protect companies or institutions they held dear. "The Great Capitulation of 2025," he writes, "was both a societal failure and a series of smaller, personal tragedies."

Weisberg's study is most interesting when it coolly examines the incentives that led individuals to abandon their convictions. He marshals his journalistic skills to explain his view that Karp — who agreed to be interviewed for the book, presumably unaware of its working title — transformed Paul Weiss from a litigation-led firm with high ideals, to a deals shop dependent on fickle Wall Street clients, and was thus in a more precarious position when Trump came knocking. It is the kind of examination lacking in other accounts of our age, like former Trump backer Anthony Scaramucci's *All the Wrong Moves*, also published this month.

Much of Weisberg's book retreads familiar ground — and it would be superfluous if it merely added to the hundreds of high-anxiety screeds spawned by the Trump era. But the author's decades-long experience as a reporter, his easy prose, and his meticulous research help frame recent events in something approaching a historical perspective. At many points in the past two years, prominent people made "the seemingly rational choice of safety," Weisberg surmises. But democracy, he credibly contends, ultimately dies by "a thousand respectable, reasonable retreats".



Billionaire Jeff Bezos, the author reminds us, stood up to Trump during his first term, telling the president it would not be “appropriate” for him to pressure the Washington Post — which he owns — to be kinder to the US administration. But in 2024, he pulled a planned endorsement of Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris, went on to remodel the paper’s opinion pages to be less adversarial to conservatives, and paid Melania Trump \$40mn for a puff documentary. Whether Star Trek obsessive Bezos was motivated, as Weisberg claims, by a fear that his Blue Origin rocket company would lose out on government contracts just as it was trying to compete with Elon Musk’s SpaceX, is a matter of conjecture, but it is an interesting hypothesis nonetheless.

Kentucky senator Mitch McConnell, another of Weisberg’s targets, was once principled enough to co-sponsor sanctions against apartheid South Africa, defying his party’s leader, Ronald Reagan — and a stickler for Senate rules. Yet he found reasons to deny Barack Obama a Supreme Court nomination, and even after he was elected for his seventh, and likely last term, stopped short of orchestrating the impeachment that would have ended Trump’s political career.

Where Weisberg excels is in his cross-examination of less obvious candidates. Few would pick George W Bush, whose descent into cuddly senescence has done much to blunt his disastrous legacy, as one of the villains of the Trump era. But Weisberg contrasts Bush’s silence on Trump — even as the president gutted one of his great achievements, the life-saving Pefar Aids prevention programme — with the bravery shown by his former vice-president Dick Cheney, and Cheney’s daughter Liz, who sacrificed her career to help lead a probe into the attempted insurrection on January 6 2021. Weisberg is again persuasive when he argues that a clear public intervention by Bush in 2016, while unlikely to have changed any Maga minds, might have given moderate Republicans permission to vote for Hillary Clinton, in a race that ultimately hinged on 40,000 swing state votes.

Some of Weisberg's selections are less convincing. Blackstone's Stephen Schwarzman, a vocal champion of free enterprise, is singled out for watching on as Trump's ad hoc tariffs "reduced CEOs to fawning supplicants", even as he was uniquely "insulated from retaliation".

Surely the charge sheets against Palantir's Alex Karp, who went from being a Hillary Clinton backer to supporting Trump's immigration crackdown, or venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, who apparently turned into a Maga mega-donor because he was slighted by the Biden administration, are longer than Schwarzman's.

Yet even in less successful chapters, Weisberg's encyclopedic examination of the "mood of capitulation" in Trump's orbit serves a purpose as an antidote to the peripatetic coverage of their various climbdowns. In isolation, each act of cowardice, or indeed of Trump's appetite for revenge, might be explained away — James Comey, former head of the FBI, had it coming; Apple was doing its fiduciary duty by contributing money towards the president's ballroom. Presented in unison, they paint a picture of a uniquely perilous moment few have lived up to.

"What Trump has damaged most is not just personal integrity but the organizational scaffolding — legal, educational, and civic — that sustains democracy," Weisberg concludes. Courage requires publicly "acting in defense of embattled institutions and professions", he says, for those wanting to end up on the right side of history.

White House communications director Anthony Scaramucci (who held the post for only 11 days) talking to reporters outside the White House in July 2017 © Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post/Getty Images

By his own admission, history will judge Anthony Scaramucci. In the only entertaining chapter of his book, the smooth-talking Wall Street investor provides a partial account of his 11 days in Trump's first administration (apparently his downfall was precipitated by colleagues envious of his frequent trips on Air Force One), concedes he was "intoxicated by power" and concludes his brief Maga turn "doesn't reflect well on me".

But Scaramucci, who frequently reminds us he rose from humble roots on Long Island to become the toast of the World Economic Forum in Davos, ultimately absolves himself and fellow collaborators. Trump, he says, is the "result of bad decisions made by others" — the others being those who welcomed China into the World Trade Organization in 1999; those who launched the War on Terror without raising taxes; and those who bailed out the banks in the financial crisis.

These “Three Catastrophic Decisions” account for the bulk of wrong moves of the book’s title, and are blamed for birthing a regime that seeks to “end the American Republic as we’ve known it”. Over 270 pages, Scaramucci — who unlike Weisberg has first-hand knowledge of Trump’s coterie, and in other outlets is convincing in analysing their malign motivations — makes the by now well-rehearsed case that globalists who “stopped looking out for American workers” are responsible for the rise of populism. He marries this with precious little reflection on the millions of dollars he made from the system he now critiques, beyond allowing that he was “smug” and “arrogant” when at the height of his banking career.

A late convert to semi-protectionist economics, Scaramucci peppers his run-through of political mis-steps with insights such as “history doesn’t progress smoothly” and “America is a mess”. Populism, he tells us, “arises . . . because of real, widespread economic grievances”, apparently in the belief that people will pay \$30 for such sagacity in 2026. His prescription for fixing the ills of our age includes advice such as “Use Tariffs — Where They’re Appropriate” and “Don’t Use Tariffs Where They’re Not Appropriate”.

There are, however, two reasons to read Scaramucci’s book. The first is to understand how utterly discredited neoliberalism has become, that a well-connected Manhattan financier of broadly centrist politics can afford to dance on its grave without fear. The second is as a depressing counterpoint to Weisberg’s submission to the annals of history.

The man who understood the danger of Trump well enough to raise the alarm in 2016 (while still supporting another Republican candidate, he told the BBC he would relocate to London if Trump won) only to abandon his principles once Trump took hold of his party, has now been rehabilitated into a popular anti-Trump podcaster. Already, tech billionaires and Silicon Valley firms that bankrolled Trump are hiring Democrat lobbyists and preparing to shower the party with cash in hope of absolution. If Scaramucci’s trajectory is anything to go by, they may well succeed, leaving books like Weisberg’s to provide lonely testimony.

Profiles in Cowardice: A Study of Collaboration in the Trump Era by Jacob Weisberg

Penguin Press \$31/£20, 288 pages

All the Wrong Moves: How Three Catastrophic Decisions and Years of Sh*tshow

Politics Led to Trump — and How We Find a Way Out by Anthony Scaramucci *Henry Holt*

\$29.99/Bodley Head £25, 336 pages

Joe Miller is the FT's senior enterprise correspondent in the US

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