How Bush's Authoritarian Presidency Could Lead To Fascism

“When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag, carrying a cross.”

---Sinclair Lewis, author of It Can’t Happen Here, 1935

For the first time since the Nixon era, Americans have reason to doubt the future—or even the presence—of democracy. We live in a society where government conspires with big business and big evangelism; where ideologues and religious zealots attack logic and the scientific method; and where the ruling party encourages xenophobic nationalism based on irrational, manufactured fear. The party in power seems to seek a
perpetual state of war to hold on to power, and they are willing to lie, cheat, and steal to achieve their ends. The question must be asked: Are we headed toward the end of American democracy?

Nobel Prize--winning author Sinclair Lewis depicted authoritarianism American-style in his sardonically titled dystopian novel It Can’t Happen Here, published in 1935. Now, bestselling political journalist Joe Conason argues that it can happen here—and a select group of extremely powerful right-wing ideologues are driving us ever closer to the precipice.

In this compelling, impassioned, yet rational and fact-based look at the state of the nation, Conason shows how and why America has been wrenched away from its founding principles and is being dragged toward authoritarianism. Praise for the books of Joe Conason: “A comprehensive, well-researched indictment of a bunch of nasty people who really deserve it.”

---Molly Ivins on Big Lies

“When Joe casts his eye on the cadres of the right, they invariably emerge battered, with their arguments filleted, their sources of money exposed, and their real motives laid bare.”

—Michael Tomasky, former editor, The American Prospect, on The Raw Deal

“A hundred years from now the primary source on the so-called Clinton scandals will still be The Hunting of the President by Joe Conason and Gene Lyons.”

---James Carville on The Hunting of the President

This is the most forthright and incisive book on the Bush administrations lies, deceptions, subversions of the Constitution, and secret and illegal activities that I have read. Conason has a way with not only words but an ability to organize and present the damning facts in a clear and decisive manner.

He begins with a sort of reprise of some of the points made by Sinclair Lewis in his famous novel about the fascist threat to America in 1935, It Can’t Happen Here. Some of the parallels are stunning. For example:

Buzz Windrip, a charismatic politician with little intellectual curiosity but great capacity to appeal to the regular guy, is elected president. George W. Bush could play this part.
Windrip regularly expresses contempt for the press (except for the newspapers of the ultraright Hearst empire)... Murdoch\'s media empire including Fox News fits nicely.

Windrip is entirely the creation of Lee Sarason, a brilliant, ruthless strategist and advertising man... Karl Rove fits.

Windrip exudes a syrupy compassion for the white, Christian, middle-class family while proclaiming a staunch moral and patriotic conservatism. He often mentions that he has read the Bible at least a dozen times. Bush doesn\'t read that much, but he does hold daily pray sessions that everybody on staff is tacitly required to participate in.

His most important supporters are the nation\'s religious fundamentalists, notably a radio preacher with millions of followers who hails Windrip as God\'s chosen leader, and the country\'s wealthiest businessmen, who understand that he is their wholly owned instrument despite his populist rhetoric.

Soon after taking office [Sarason and Windrip] seize upon the genuine economic crisis besetting the country to arrogate more and more power to the White House. Windrip turns Congress into an advisory body and starts appointing hacks to the courts.

His government conducts business in near-total secrecy, acting to suppress or control the press while the Hearst media serve as propaganda outlets...lavishing praise upon the president and all his works, including his plans for a preemptive war on Mexico. (The quotes are from pages 5-7.)

Throw in George Orwell\'s prediction of perpetual war in 1984 in order to control the population and increase centralized power, and we can see that our Bush nightmare has all happened before except then it was fiction. Now unfortunately it\'s all too real. In this regard, Conason recalls James Madison\'s statement: No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.

And that brings us to Chapter 1, The `Post 9/11 Worldview of Karl Rove. Karl Rove, clearly has read his Madison (and Machiavelli too) and as one of the two brains behind Bush (Cheney is the other) he knew that the best way to increase the power of the presidency and to ensure Bush\'s reelection was to start a war. As Conason reports, Rumsfeld, Cheney, Rove, and Bush begin planning for the invasion of Iraq as soon as Bush was installed in the White House. In a most revealing insight into the neocon mind, Conason recalls conservative columnist Irving Kristol\'s 1989 essay on the Grenada invasion, used by Reagan to draw attention away from the disastrous terrorist bombing of a marine barracks in Lebanon. `The reason we gave for the intervention--the risk to American medical students there--was phony but the reaction of the American people was absolutely overwhelmingly favorable, Kristol gloated in retrospect. `They
had no idea what was going on, but they backed the president. They always will. (p. 29)

Mickey Herskowitz, one-time Bush family confidant, summed up the Bush attitude with Start a small war. Pick a country where there is justification you can jump on, go ahead and invade. Herskowitz quotes Bush as saying One of the keys to being seen as a great leader is to be seen as a commander-in-chief. My father had all this political capital built up when he drove the Iraqis out of Kuwait and he wasted it...If I have a chance to invade, if I had that much capital, I'm not going to waste it. I'm going to get everything passed that I want to get passed and I'm going to have a successful presidency. (pp. 29-30)

The really chilling thing here is Bush's complete and utter disregard for anyone's life--our soldiers, Iraqi citizens--who cares? Bush only cared about self-aggrandizement. His motivation was purely the will to personal power and glory. Such a man is easily manipulated by people like Rove and Cheney.

Conason goes on to describe how Bush, Cheney, Rove, and Attorney General John Ashcroft circumvented the Constitution and bullied both the press and Congress into giving them what they wanted. He details how corporate America and the evangelical right wing co-conspired to move this country terrifyingly close to an authoritarian state. The amazing thing about all this information is just how public it really is. (Conason provides copious endnotes.) Yet how little does the general public understand about what is going on, and, to be honest, how little does the average person care?

The real legacy of the Bush administration may be the tremendous increase in presidential power that he achieved through such chicanery as the use of signing statements on bills he has signed, basically saying the president as commander-in-chief has the power to do what he likes regardless of what this bill says. In inaugurating what is now called the long war, Bush has shown subsequent presidents the way to greatly increase their power. I suspect that future occupants of the White House, be they Republican or Democratic, will not be able to resist using such methods. Unless somehow Congress can be strengthened, the checks and balances that the Founding Fathers created will disappear and we will have an authoritarian state led by an imperial president with immense power. That is the Bush Legacy.