
**Reviewed by** Mark Oromaner (Independent Scholar)

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**Commissioned by** Zef Segal (Department of History, Philosophy, and Jewish Studies, the Open University of Israel)

**Demagogues in American Presidential Politics**

Andrew E. Stoner (1964–2022) was a prolific author of books on journalism, history, popular culture, and politics. In addition, he held a PhD in public communication and technology from Colorado State University and was an associate professor of communication studies at California State University, Sacramento. *Fear, Hate, and Victimhood: How George Wallace Wrote the Donald Trump Playbook* was published in the year of his death.

In terms of writing style, Stoner’s work lives up to the expectations one is likely to have of a journalist and prolific book author. He applies his writing ability to solid research into newspaper reports, speeches, interviews, and relevant literature on the life of George Wallace. Readers not familiar with the outline of Wallace’s life will benefit from the timeline that precedes the text. The timeline begins with Wallace’s birth (August 25, 1919) and concludes with his death (September 13, 1998). Wallace was elected governor of Alabama in 1962 and 1970. He was prohibited from serving a successive term; his wife Lurleen was elected in 1966. During this period, he explored presidential ambitions and ran in Democratic primaries in 1964, 1972, and 1976, and on a third-party ticket (American Independence Party) in 1986. Readers are unlikely to be familiar with details of these events; however, they are likely to have some knowledge of Wallace’s “stand in the schoolhouse door” at the University of Alabama and his “segregation forever” inaugural address, both in 1963. Finally, many readers are likely to remember that Wallace was a target of an assassination attempt during the 1972 Democratic primary in Maryland. As a result of this attempt, he spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair. However, he was elected governor in 1982. It was not until 1986 that he announced that he would retire from public life at the end of his term as governor.
Stoner’s intention was to document how Donald Trump followed Wallace in using “insult, resentment, xenophobia, and even anger as a guidebook for his candidacy for the White House” (p. 3). Stoner does this mainly through “rhetorical analysis.” He is less than successful in his attempt to demonstrate how Wallace’s approach to political office provided a playbook for Trump. What is the exact meaning of a playbook? Trump is well known for his ignorance of history and for his relative avoidance of reading material. To draw parallels between some of Wallace’s political tactics and rhetoric and those of Trump does not prove that the latter used the former’s approach as a playbook. Trump has made it clear that he does not like losers, and from his perspective Wallace is considered a loser. Also, which Wallace is Stoner referring to? The early Wallace who ran on a regional racist platform or the late Wallace who ran on a national platform of states’ rights? Stoner engages in hyperbole when he states: “Played out, then, is the idea that the Trump presidency is an actualized version of the Wallace presidency that never was.” Although we know what a Trump four years in the White House is like, given the willingness to modify his positions, especially on the race issue, I doubt that anyone knows what a Wallace presidency would have been like. Stoner proposes that while Wallace may be viewed as only a four-time loser, “in fact, (Wallace) may simply be a prelude to a tune whose time had not yet come” (p. 5). I would argue that both Wallace and Trump were able to play the same tune that has always been a component of the complex American culture, for example, racism, populism, xenophobia, and white superiority.

Fear, Hate, and Victimhood opens with a brief introduction and concludes with an equally brief epilogue. These two frame the six substantive chapters. The first four of these chapters explore the tactics of would-be demagogues and authoritarians, such as Wallace and Trump. The first tactic is to set up an in-group/out-group dichotomy. Both focused on white Americans as the in-group. For Wallace the out-group was “Negro” Americans while for Trump various groups were specified: Mexicans, African Americans, Muslims, immigrants. In either case, “the result then is the legitimization of xenophobia, ethnocentrism, and white nationalism” (p. 8).

A second tactic involves the creation of a “fierce antipathy of the establishment—all levels of government, the media, education—basically all established elements of society (sans the police or the military)” (p. 37). However, Trump has indicated that certain police and the military are not exempt from this kind of antipathy. In addition, both Wallace and Trump included intellectuals and dissenters in their definition of the establishment.

The third tactic of these demagogues is to convince in-group members to “understand themselves as victims in a system that actually privileges them” (p. 65). The general argument is that out-group members make demands that are threats to members of the in-group. This is the well-known phenomenon of “reverse discrimination.” Both Trump and Wallace frequently refer to themselves in terms of victimhood and to the society-wide victimhood phenomenon as “the great replacement” of whites by minorities. They have a zero-sum view of their societies.

A fourth tactic of demagogues is the use of spectacle and performance. Both Wallace and Trump put on a show with music, pageantry, engagement with critics in the audience and in the larger world, and extreme controversial, provocative language. At times, they provoked critics to engage with them. The “show” has been refined by Trump, former star of the television program The Celebrity Apprentice.

The fifth chapter is devoted to the “double-edged sword” that demagogues face when they simultaneously rely on various communication channels to spread the word and attack the messengers. Extreme examples are Trump’s use of the term “fake news” and his description of the media
as an “enemy of the people.” However, “The hatred Trump feels for the media appears to be felt equally by reporters who cover Trump and find themselves frequently referred to as ‘losers’ and ‘awful people’ who ask ‘nasty questions’” (p. 143). With slight changes, this statement could be applied to Wallace, especially during his early campaigns for the presidential nomination. Stoner concludes this analysis by stating that, “in the end, Wallace and later Trump simply ‘confuse and conflate policy with spectacle’—and its an empty pursuit” (p. 139). However, like it or not, Trump has been elected president once and may be on his way to a second term.

In the sixth and final chapter, Stoner argues that Wallace was good at using reporters and the costly and time-consuming radio and television to spread the messages of his persona and campaign. Trump has the added advantage of being a master at the use of new media, such as Twitter. The 140-character tweet “can be composed and broadcast within seconds” (p. 184). Stoner provides many possible explanations for his position that Wallace was a loser and that Trump was a winner. After all, Wallace lacked the wealth, media savvy, business connections, charisma, etc. of Trump. In addition, Stoner points out that the two ran in different political and technological environments. Stoner points to the importance of both individual characteristics and cultural elements in accounting for the success or failure of the demagogue.

_Fear, Hate, and Victimhood_ should be read by all who are interested in American political campaigns and, in particular, in the evolution of Wallace as a presidential hopeful. This is not a book for those interested in the evolution of Trump as a presidential candidate or as a demagogue. The inclusion of references to Trump make sense when they are viewed from the perspective of parallels with the career of Wallace.

Although Stoner’s focus is on the biographical level, both of his subjects must be understood within the context of the broader history and culture of the United States. For example, in _Fake News Nation: The Long History of Lies and Misinterpretations in America_, James W. Cortada and William Aspray point out that “fake facts and fake news in their various forms have long been present in American life, particularly in its politics, public discourse, and business activities—going back to the time when the country was formed.”[1] In addition, in _It Can Happen Here: White Power and the Rising Threat of Genocide in the US_, the anthropologist Alexander Laban Hinton argues that Trump (and I would add Wallace) was not exceptional in his dramatic rhetoric about white superiority.[2] Stoner, the journalist, has provided two case studies that should encourage more professional social scientists and historians to conduct additional analyses of the long history of systemic white power and of demagogues at all levels of political power in the United States.

Notes


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