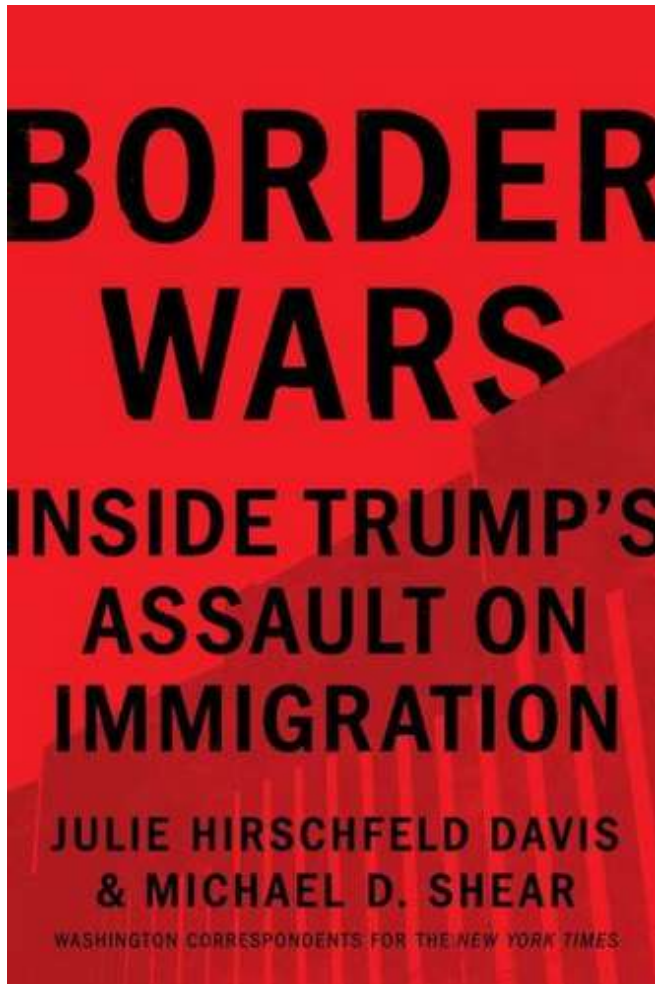


‘Border Wars’ can be exceptionally enlightening

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“Border Wars: Inside Trump’s Assault on Immigration” by Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Michael D. Shear. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019, 480 pages, \$28 (hardcover).



“The question is about your legacy. Will you be remembered as Donald Trump, the xenophobic president? ‘I hope not. Because I’m not that way. I hope not – I think you’re right – I think the perception might be more that way than the other. I hope not. I would like to have a great immigration policy. I’d like it to be fair. I do not want criminals coming into our country. I don’t think you do either.” – Donald J. Trump (The Oval Office) June 25, 2019.

“By the time he entered politics, Trump had grown to see immigration as a zero-sum issue: what is good for immigrants is bad for America,” Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Michael D. Shear explain near the beginning of “Border Wars: Inside Trump’s Assault on Immigration,” their new tome – and, at 480 pages, it certainly qualifies for that distinction – on the current administration’s posture on one of the most divisive issues facing contemporary America.”

“But even as Trump embraced those hard-line views, he remained conflicted, often describing himself to friends as benevolent and wanting to be liked by the many immigrants he employed,” the authors continue. “As a budding politician, he harbored ambitions of

appealing to Hispanic voters who he believed would share his anger at illegal immigrants because they were competing unfairly for jobs.”

So begins one of the most comprehensive and compelling dissections of immigration policy in the United States that I have ever had occasion to contemplate. Davis and Shear provide a front-row seat to many of the pivotal meetings that served to shape the Trump administration’s still-evolving policy regarding those who want to enter our country through established protocols and those who have decided to pursue more nefarious strategies. More importantly, their exhaustive descriptions of these intimate interactions can help the general public acquire a more revealing, and ultimately a more realistic, portrait of Trump and his associates.

Included in the narrative are in-depth explorations of several episodes that have, at various times, earned the “breaking news” moniker on most of the news channels we have come to prefer over the last couple of decades based on our individual political orientations. These events include the implementation of the highly controversial policy of separating families at the border, the time

Trump apparently came within 24 hours of closing the entire border with Mexico and his seeming obsession with erecting a physical border that would seriously harm those attempting to breach it. In each case, the dynamics displayed by his ever-changing inner circle of advisers is examined in some detail in order to arrive at a coherent rationale for what ultimately happened.

Although “Border Wars” succeeds on many levels, it is first and foremost an insightful character study of the historically unlikely occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. Witness the following excerpt from “The Trump Effect Fades,” the 10th chapter and one I found particularly instructive:

“By now, Trump’s inner circle had become accustomed to hearing him speak in crude ways about immigrants. Here, though, was a moment of clarity about the new commander in chief. He understood virtually nothing about how foreigners came and went from the United States, and yet he had a visceral antipathy toward them. In his mind, they were a teeming mass of infiltrators that was changing the face of the country for the worse. Trump was not a policy expert, not an ideologue with well-formed views. He was a real estate executive and reality TV star who spoke and acted from his gut, and his outburst revealed the racially tinged stereotypes that moved him. He had surrounded himself with people like (Stephen) Miller, who were singularly focused on the evils of immigration and had learned to play on the ego and instinct of a president who could not bear to be seen as weak. And although he was the privileged grandson of a German immigrant and husband of a Slovenian one, Trump understood keenly the political power of blaming migrants for the ills and dangers facing the country.”

Structurally, the book consists of 33 relatively succinct chapters, with each devoted to a different perspective on the Trump administration’s immigration policy. One of the features I appreciated is the inclusion of an eight-page, black-and-white album of pictures in the center of the manuscript that showcases all the key players mentioned in the text. It was nice to be able to put a face with the names of individuals with whom I was not already familiar – and there were several. Overall, the authors approached their subject matter in a fair and balanced way, although their progressive predisposition occasionally makes its way to the surface in both self-evident as well as more understated passages.

Davis is the congressional editor at The New York Times, where she also has double duty as the deputy Washington editor. Her resume includes stints at Bloomberg News, The Associated Press, The Baltimore Sun and Congressional Quarterly. She was awarded the 2009 Everett McKinley Dirksen Award for Distinguished Reporting of Congress.

Shear is a White House correspondent for The New York Times’ Washington bureau; his resume includes 18 years at The Washington Post, where he was part of the Pulitzer Prize-winning team that covered the Virginia Tech shootings in 2007.

I believe many readers – regardless of their political leanings and affiliations – will find “Border Wars” exceptionally enlightening. By the way, Davis and Shear did manage to get an audience with the president while they were doing the research for this volume; the quote at the beginning of this review (and the book itself) is his response to a question they asked him during that interview. So is the following, which also concludes the release:

“He was hoping this book would help people see it his way. ‘If I like it,’ he said as we turned to leave, ‘I’ll tweet it out.’”

Don’t look for a tweet anytime soon. Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.