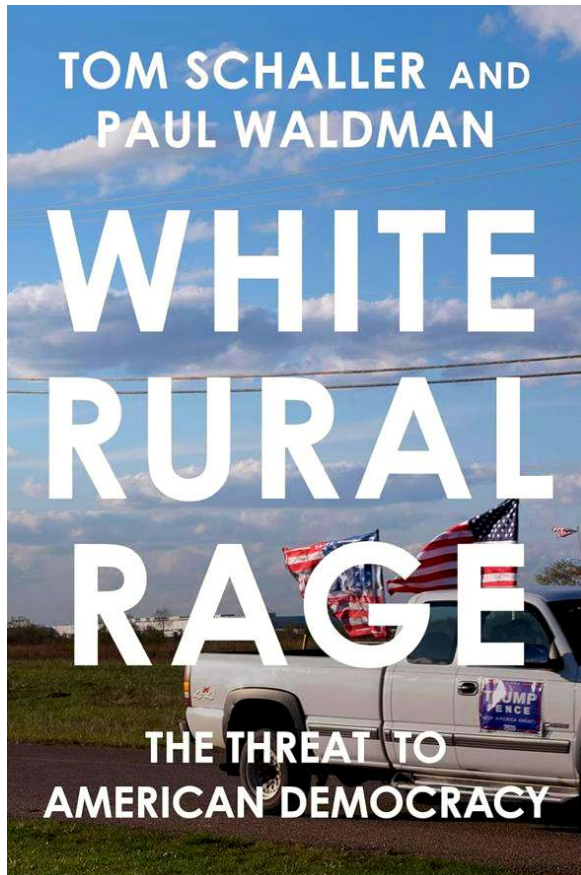


‘White Rural Rage’ a must read wake-up call

Posted: Sunday, June 16, 2024

“White Rural Rage: The Threat to American Democracy” by Tom Schaller and Paul Waldman. New York, NY: Random House, 2024, 320 pages, \$32.00 (hardcover).



“Rural America has suffered greatly in recent decades,” Tom Schaller and Paul Waldman convincingly assert near the beginning of “White Rural Rage: The Threat to American Democracy,” their recently released attempt to warn us about an unfortunate and increasingly dangerous transformation currently taking place in this country. “Layered atop cultural resentments that are nearly as old as our country, this suffering has produced powerful antipathies that are aimed not just at certain groups of Americans, but often at the American democratic system itself.”

“Were rural White Americans as disempowered as they believe themselves to be, their anger would be impotent,” the authors continue. “They would mutter ‘Try that in a small town’ to themselves, indulging in meaningless fantasies of revenge against the liberals and urbanites they despise. But they are not disempowered. In fact, in critical ways, they have more power than any other large demographic group in America.”

So begins one of the more in-depth and – I believe - accurate critiques of what we all seem to be

experiencing on a daily basis. Those of us who grew up in the post-war era; i.e., the 50s through the 70s, came of age during a time when the democratic ideas on which our nation was founded were considered absolute, even bordering on sacred. The mantra of my generation included the notion that what routinely happens in our countries could never happen here; in fact, we fought a world war to preserve those ideals. But as Schaller and Waldman make abundantly clear, much of that confidence in our way of life may have been misplaced.

Spend any time at all on social media and you’ll see what the authors are talking about in vivid detail: racism, xenophobia, transphobia, baseless conspiracy theories, calls for violence as a legitimate political strategy, and a general sense of malaise at the perception that the social order is evolving in ways that undermine those who traditionally and historically held a dominant role in the cultural, economic, and political hierarchy. Instead of addressing legitimate problems and inequities, our politicians – particularly those who lean to the right - seem to spend most of their time stoking fear and anger primarily to appeal to those who see themselves as becoming progressively more irrelevant. The result is an echo chamber that is seriously undermining American democracy.

Structurally, the book is comprised of a prologue followed by eight relatively succinct yet remarkably powerful chapters that collectively form an exceptionally solid narrative supporting the

authors' primary thesis in an almost bulletproof manner. Moreover, the manuscript is one of the most extensively researched volumes I have had occasion to peruse in recent memory, with 26 pages of source notes (in reduced font) at the conclusion of the main text. Anyone seeking to poke holes in their argument had better have their ducks in a row because it is obvious Schaller and Waldman have done their homework.

A former columnist for The Washington Sun, Schaller is a professor of political science at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. His resume includes articles in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times, and he is a frequent commentator for several news outlets including ABC, CBS, and MSNBC. His previous books include "Common Enemies: Georgetown Basketball, Miami Football, and the Racial Transformation of College Sports," which was published in 2021, "The Stronghold: How Republicans Captured Congress but Surrendered the White House," in 2015, and "Whistling Past Dixie: How Democrats Can Win Without the South," in 2006. Waldman is a former columnist for The Washington Post who has written for the Los Angeles Times, The Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune, and The Week. He is also the author of four previous books, including "Being Right Is Not Enough: What Progressives Can Learn from Conservative Success," in 2008, and "The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories that Shape the Political World," with Kathleen Hall Jamieson, in 2002.

Schaller and Waldman rightly conclude that the primary driver of anti-democratic sentiment among rural Americans is not manifestly racial in origin. Although animosity often expresses itself in overt as well as covert prejudice toward non-Whites, the real culprit is – and always has been – economic in nature. This is a thread that winds its way through the entire effort, but it is most explicitly evident in "Despair, Distraction, Disillusionment, and Democratic Decline," the final chapter and one of the most enlightening.

"Despair inevitably sets in once jobs disappear, wages stagnate, benefits vanish, healthcare facilities close, and young people leave after graduation in search of greener pastures," the authors explain. "Unable, but also mostly unwilling, to cure what ails their constituents, strategic politicians concerned with their own power divert their constituents' attention away from their suffering by ginning up grievance-fueled culture war distractions. Because those wars are never won, and because the material miseries are left unaddressed, rural folks become increasingly disillusioned."

"At this point, they start wondering whether the foundations, principles, and norms of U.S. democracy are worth defending and begin engaging with demagogues who offer tempting alternatives," they continue. "With each successive iteration, the problems of rural communities deepen, the opportunity for politicians to manipulate their resentment grows, rural grievances fester, and democratic commitments further deteriorate."

As Barbara F. Walter, the New York Times bestselling author of "How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them," astutely observes, "America's seemingly most patriotic citizens - rural Americans - are losing their faith in democracy because both the Democratic and Republican parties have long ignored their needs. This important book argues that the survival of our democracy depends on our willingness to strengthen the heartland economically, rather than exploit its fears."

I could not agree more. "White Rural Rage" is a well-articulated and compelling wakeup call that more Americans – both rural as well as urban – need to read and take to heart. Highly recommended.

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