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Book Review by Vincent J. Cannato

CONTRACT KILLERS

Burning Down the House: Newt Gingrich, the Fall of a Speaker, and the Rise of the New Republican Party,
by Julian E. Zelizer. Penguin Press, 368 pages, \$30



IN NOVEMBER 1994, REPUBLICANS TOOK control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years. They won 54 seats and defeated 34 Democratic incumbents, including House Speaker Tom Foley of Washington. It was a staggering and historic victory.

Much of it was thanks to Georgia Representative Newt Gingrich, who would become the new House Speaker. Since his 1978 election to Congress, Gingrich had been leading a guerrilla war against Democratic House leadership. Being in the House minority is never fun, but Democrats had grown increasingly dismissive of their Republican colleagues. Throughout the '80s, Republicans

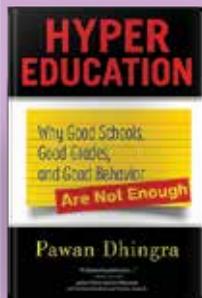
grew restless as they watched Democrats stymie President Ronald Reagan's agenda. Gingrich rallied the beleaguered GOP behind his "Contract with America" legislative agenda, promising stronger law enforcement, a balanced budget, and tax relief for the middle class.

GINGRICH'S 1994 REVOLUTION IS THE subject of Julian Zelizer's breezy, fast-paced new book, *Burning Down the House: Newt Gingrich, the Fall of a Speaker, and the Rise of the New Republican Party*. Zelizer, a Princeton historian and CNN political analyst, sees the 1994 election as an epochal moment. An objective observer

might think the Democrats lost their legislative control at least partly because their leadership had become increasingly corrupt. Instead, Zelizer believes Gingrich and his allies are wholly to blame for poisoning American politics and ushering in a new era of divisive partisanship.

Zelizer's disdain for Gingrich oozes through the pages of the book. Gingrich was a "reckless bomb-thrower" who acted like a "petulant child," walked with a "doughboy gait," engaged in "smug, know-it-all posturing," embraced a "bare-knuckle approach" to politics, and represented a "merciless version of the Republican Party." In Zelizer's narrative, Gingrich's no-holds-barred electoral

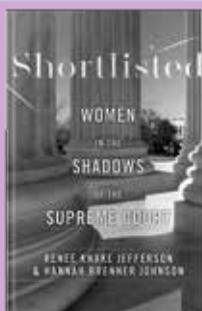
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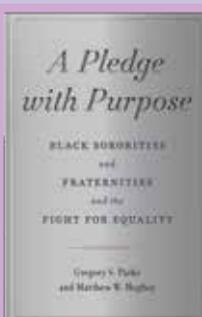
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tactics set a precedent for what was to come: "Now nothing was out of bounds as to what either party could do to the other in its drive to obtain a majority. Everything and everyone was fair game." Zelizer sees Gingrich as the successor to Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose notoriously ferocious attacks against alleged Communist influence in government pre-saged Gingrich's "rabid political style." That style "became the echo chamber of the Republican Party," which of course set the stage for President Donald Trump. The 2016 election played out the way it did because "Trump was thriving in the political world that Gingrich had created." And so, in Zelizer's eyes, today's Republican Party is the party of McCarthy, Gingrich, and Trump—the party of the personal smear, the political low blow, and the racialized innuendo.

GRANTED, GINGRICH COULD BE ABRASIVE and self-absorbed. By 1999, his bumpy leadership as Speaker, his ethics problems, and an extramarital affair with a congressional staffer led to his resignation. But his opponents were no angels either. The Democratic majority had long been indulging in the kind of petty corruption that blossoms when arrogance is combined with unchecked power. A major target of Gingrich's attacks was Democrat Jim Wright of Texas, Speaker of the House from 1987 to 1989. A career politician with bushy eyebrows and a hair-trigger temper, Wright was accused of influence peddling for various savings-and-loan companies. He had also published a book of speeches and essays for which he received 55% royalties in a clear effort to get around House regulations limiting honoraria and gifts. In his effort to unseat Wright, Gingrich actually reached out to collaborate with liberal good-government groups such as Common Cause, eventually prompting a damning Ethics Committee investigation.

The final nail in Wright's political coffin was a scandal surrounding his top aide, John Mack, who years earlier had nearly murdered a young woman in Virginia. For reasons unknown, Mack (whose brother had been married to Wright's daughter) received a light sentence and then went to work for Wright on Capitol Hill. When this story became public in the middle of Wright's ethics investigation, his days as Speaker were numbered and he resigned shortly thereafter. Zelizer consistently downplays these charges and even portrays Wright as a tragic hero, "a politician who loved his party and loved Congress," in contrast to the cynical Gingrich. The allegations against Wright, says Zelizer, "were not nearly as significant as the allegations surrounding

Nixon during Watergate." True enough, but somewhat irrelevant and hardly exculpatory.

NOR WAS WRIGHT AN ISOLATED CASE. Democratic Whip Tony Coelho, who made a name for himself with his aggressive fundraising, resigned days after Wright amid accusations of financial impropriety involving the sale of junk bonds. A couple of years later came the House post office and congressional bank scandals, which revealed that legislators were leveraging their power and connections on the Hill for financial gain. Although these scandals hardly rose to the level of Boss Tweed-style thievery, they contributed to a general feeling that Democrats had long been abusing their House majority. Three House Democrats were convicted on charges related to the bank scandal, and one Democrat, the powerful Ways and Means Chairman Dan Rostenkowski, was convicted on mail fraud charges related to the post office.

Moreover, it is simply not true that political polarization originated with the GOP. Take the case of the 1984 Indiana congressional race between Democrat Frank McCloskey and Republican Rick McIntyre, who was certified the winner by 34 votes. Democrats refused to seat McIntyre and decided to conduct their own recount which, miraculously, found that McCloskey had won by four votes. Zelizer finds nothing amiss with Democratic behavior in this story. But at least he tells it. He omits another crucial episode in the history of inter-party relations: the smear campaign against Robert Bork when he was nominated to the Supreme Court in 1987, epitomized in Ted Kennedy's infamous Senate speech, "Robert Bork's America." If Zelizer wants McCarthyite rhetoric, he should read Kennedy's speech.

While downplaying the problems of the Democrat-led House, Zelizer overstates the harm done by the Gingrich Republicans. In the decade after Wright's resignation, Zelizer claims, "the scandal wars escalated to create one of the most contentious periods in the government's history as the needs of governance and of legislating steadily took a back seat to the imperatives of intense partisan warfare." But did "the needs of governance and of legislation" really lose out to partisanship in the 1990s? In the ten years following Speaker Wright's ouster, under both Democratic and Republican leadership, Congress passed NAFTA and a number of other trade deals, welfare reform, the Family and Medical Leave Act, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, the Defense of Marriage Act, the Brady Bill, the 1994 Crime

Bill, the Taxpayer Relief Act (creating Roth IRAs), and the 1997 Balanced Budget Act. Some of those bills have lost political support since they became law, but they still make for an impressive legislative record.

THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT PARTISAN rancor increased during the '90s in the lead-up to Bill Clinton's impeachment, and that legislative gridlock began to take hold after 2000. But that gridlock was more a reflection of an evenly divided American electorate than of an aggressive GOP. The Republican caucus split between "establishment" Republicans incapable of leadership and an obstreperous Freedom Caucus that prized ideological purity over legislative results. The Republican turn to Trump might have been less a continuation of Gingrich's politics than a symptom of frustration with Republicans' performance in Congress since 2000.

Burning Down the House goes to extremes of partisan bitterness. Zelizer exhibits the annoying tic of describing nearly every Republican with disparaging adjectives—this is nothing new, but it is a surprise to find even the Nobel-Prize-winning economist Friedrich Hayek described as a "conservative ideologue." Worse yet, Zelizer argues that Reagan's 1980 election was "only...possible after fifteen years of a brewing political backlash toward the Democratic embrace of civil rights." A strange statement considering that Reagan won 489 electoral votes that year. Had he lost every state of the Confederacy to Jimmy Carter, he would still have won with 371 electoral votes. It doesn't seem

to occur to Zelizer that the 1980 landslide might have been the result of widespread unhappiness with years of economic malaise, as well as a desire to see U.S. foreign policy and military supremacy rehabilitated after Vietnam.

Zelizer's one-sided cluelessness can sometimes elicit an indulgent chuckle, as when he describes David Brock as "a onetime Republican attack dog who had reformed his ways." Apparently Zelizer is unfamiliar with Brock's long second life as a liberal "attack dog" at the George Soros-funded "fact-checking" website Media Matters. Other times, Zelizer's judgments are just plain nasty. He calls former Pennsylvania congressman and Gingrich ally Robert Walker "one of the most disliked members of the House, clad in unflattering and cheap three-piece suits." I can't find anyone with experience on Capitol Hill during this time who believes this statement is anywhere near true.

ON A DEEPER LEVEL, ZELIZER'S BIAS exemplifies a worrisome trend in American political writing. Here we have a book written by a well-respected academic who bemoans our bitter partisan politics. Yet he lacks the self-awareness to realize that he has produced what can only be characterized as a deeply partisan book. Reading *Burning Down the House*, one gets the feeling its author is upset not with Republican tactics themselves, but with the fact that those tactics are aimed at Democrats.

This makes one nostalgic for the time, beginning in the 1990s, when scholars took conservative ideas and politics seriously. One

of those scholars was Zelizer himself. That time has passed, in part because of Obama-era messaging that there is a "right side of history," which permits the righteous to dismiss and abuse those on the other side. The Trump presidency has only exacerbated this trend. But make no mistake: this all predates Donald Trump. If progressive liberalism is normative, then opposition to it must be categorized as transgressive. Republicans are "reactionary" and practice "backlash" politics, terms that assume history inevitably moves in one direction toward a "progressive" future. Sadly, *Burning Down the House* fits this pattern of recent scholarship. Zelizer approvingly quotes political scientists Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, who wrote in their book *It's Even Worse Than It Looks* (2012) that "The GOP has become an insurgent outlier—ideologically extreme...unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence, and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition."

It is fair to ask whether it isn't Zelizer, Ornstein, and Mann who are being "dismissive of the legitimacy" of their political opponents. The current Republican Party has many problems, but the attempt to pathologize the GOP is itself deeply anti-democratic. Unfortunately, I think we can expect more histories like this that seek to consign Republicans and conservatism, going back to Gingrich and even Barry Goldwater, to the dustbin of history. But that isn't history at all: it's political calumny.

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