

TIRED OF WINNING

**DONALD TRUMP AND
THE END OF THE GRAND OLD PARTY**



Jonathan Karl

New York Times bestselling author of
Betrayal and *Front Row at the Trump Show*

ALSO BY JONATHAN KARL

Betrayal

Front Row at the Trump Show

The Right to Bear Arms: The Rise of America's New Militias

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For my family

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INTRODUCTION

On the roadway outside the Mar-a-Lago Club in Palm Beach, Florida, a few dozen Trump diehards showed up to herald the big announcement. Decked out in gear emblazoned with the former president's name, they came armed with flags—not American flags, but Trump flags, hailing his last campaign rather than the one he was set to announce. The biggest banner of all loudly proclaimed, **TRUMP WON**.

The atmosphere was festive but the crowd was small. There had been about as many people waiting in line at Howley's diner across the lagoon earlier in the day. But the limited turnout wasn't for lack of hype. Trump had promoted the impending launch of his third presidential campaign as perhaps the "most important speech given in the history of the United States of America" and a day—November 15, 2022—that "will be remembered FOREVER."^[*]

The setting was fittingly opulent for such a grand occasion. Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address on a scarred battlefield in southern Pennsylvania; Trump's play for history would come under the grandiose crystal chandeliers, gold-adorned mirrors, and gilded Corinthian columns of the Mar-a-Lago ballroom.

Two days earlier, Trump's preparation had included a round of golf with Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, who used the time on the links to encourage Trump to hold off on launching another presidential campaign. The effort to delay continued into the afternoon, with Senator Graham later meeting Chris Ruddy, a Mar-a-Lago member and longtime Trump friend, for lunch and asking him to help convince the former president to pull the plug on the planned announcement. As they spoke, Graham got a call from Fox News host Sean Hannity, who was on the same page: There needed to be an all-out effort to talk Trump out of kicking off his third campaign—at least for now.

Many of Trump's most longtime supporters and advisors wanted nothing to do with his supposed rendezvous with history, and neither did most of his own family. Trump's children were all together at Mar-a-Lago for his daughter Tiffany's wedding the weekend before his planned announcement, but they quickly dispersed before their father jumped into the 2024 fray. Tiffany was off on her honeymoon. Don Jr. had embarked on a hunting trip, and claimed bad weather prevented him from making it back in time. Even daughter Ivanka—who was front and center for Trump's first campaign launch in 2015 and served as his senior advisor in the White House—opted to stay away, releasing a statement wishing her father well but making clear she would have nothing to do with a campaign this time around. Trump's wife, Melania, agreed to be there, but only after what was described to me by a Trump family friend as some fairly intense negotiations—and the former first lady remained mostly out of sight of the cameras, spending less than thirty seconds onstage at the very end of her husband's speech.

I arrived at Mar-a-Lago a few hours before the main event, returning to the place Trump called the “Southern White House” for the first time since I'd spoken with him there weeks after he left the actual White House as a defeated and disgraced president. In my March 2021 interview, which took place in the middle of the club's lobby, Trump lashed out at many of the Republicans who had served him. He said Attorney General Bill Barr had betrayed him by debunking his stolen-election claims, and he accused former United Nations ambassador Nikki Haley of being disloyal—pronouncing her political career over—because she had condemned his behavior on January 6. He mocked Senator Graham for crawling back to him “maybe a few hours” after trying to distance himself following the attack on the Capitol, and he slammed the Republicans who had voted to impeach him, including “stupid Liz Cheney.” He took shots at Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell and House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy. “If McConnell and McCarthy fought harder,” Trump told me, “you could have a Republican president right now. And now they don't have anything.”^[1]

I could tell Trump was relishing the opportunity to trash his fellow Republicans—he seemed to enjoy it more than going after his real political opponents in the Democratic Party. “You know what?” he said. “I find this stuff so exhilarating and so interesting. You see, Biden couldn’t have this conversation with you.”

Trump harbored no such resentment, however, for those who stormed the Capitol on January 6 and threatened his vice president, chanting, “Hang Mike Pence!” “Well, they were angry,” he told me. “It’s common sense, Jon.”

I didn’t try to debate with Trump in that interview or to argue with him. I was trying to draw out his true thoughts about the destructive end of his presidency, and I couldn’t believe what I had just heard: Trump was not only refusing to condemn calls for his own vice president’s execution; he was justifying them! I figured these words would surely be the last straw, driving top Republicans to finally disavow the leader of their party once and for all. But when the audio was published, GOP officials greeted the former president’s comments with a shrug—or ignored them altogether.

I was reminded of those “Hang Mike Pence!” chants as I walked by the Trump diehards on my way back into Mar-a-Lago. The flags they were waving were like the two enormous TRUMP 2020 banners that had been draped over the inaugural platform on the west side of the Capitol on January 6 as the rioters made their way inside. But the atmosphere was entirely different. The people standing outside the resort where Trump would be making his announcement didn’t look like a threat to the Republic; they looked like aging hippies hanging outside a Woodstock anniversary concert because they couldn’t get tickets to see the show.

Once I was inside, the first familiar face I saw was that of Mike Lindell, the mustachioed businessman who peddles pillows and conspiracy theories about voting machines. He was loitering near the television cameras in the back of the room, eager to be interviewed but not generating much interest. His reputation as a loudmouth preceded him: When you try to talk to Lindell about politics, he shouts at you just as he does in his MyPillow infomercials, but with less credibility.

A few other Trump-list celebrities were in attendance. Convicted felon Roger Stone was milling about, as was Sebastian Gorka, who served

briefly in the Trump White House and is known best for hawking Relief Factor pills on Fox News. And sitting prominently in the second row was a guy dressed in a suit designed to look like a brick wall. Back in the 2020 campaign, the man had developed a modest social media following by wearing his brick suit to Trump rallies. Now he had a prime seat for the 2024 launch.

The list of who *wasn't* there is much more telling, as nearly every high-profile figure from Trump's White House and previous campaigns decided they had better places to be. Kellyanne Conway was missing in action, as were the other key players in his 2016 campaign—Steve Bannon, Hope Hicks, and Dan Scavino. Trump's Treasury secretary, Steven Mnuchin, didn't show, and neither did his secretary of state Mike Pompeo. In fact, not a single confirmed cabinet secretary from the Trump administration made the trek to Mar-a-Lago. Trump had four press secretaries and four chiefs of staff over the course of his four-year presidency, and went zero for eight in getting any of them to be there for his big day.

This wasn't a coincidence—the people who knew Trump best actively decided to steer clear of his launch. The former president had hoped to showcase his sustained political strength by parading a number of supportive Republican lawmakers through the hall, but only two members of Congress were spotted: Representative Troy Nehls of Texas and Representative Madison Cawthorn, the scandal-plagued twenty-seven-year-old who had managed to lose a Republican primary in North Carolina with Trump's endorsement months earlier and would be leaving public office in a matter of weeks. Representative Matt Gaetz of Florida—who was among those who'd urged Trump to delay the campaign announcement—said that he wanted to go but that he had to stay in Washington for votes. The last House vote that day was at 1:17 P.M., and Trump's speech at Mar-a-Lago began at 9 P.M.

Some of the no-shows offered strikingly lame excuses. Sean Spicer, the longtime Republican flack who sacrificed his dignity to serve as Trump's first press secretary, was spotted at the West Palm Beach airport the day after his former boss's announcement. What kept him away? He hadn't "adjusted to daylight savings time yet," he said. It had been nine days at that point since clocks had been set back an hour.

Media outlets couldn't skip the event entirely, like Spicer did, but many of them ducked out early. CNN cut away from Trump's speech after about thirty minutes, and even Fox News didn't air the diatribe in full. Trump's favorite newspaper, the *New York Post*, mocked the former president in the following morning's edition, confining the news to a single line at the bottom of the front page: FLORIDA MAN MAKES ANNOUNCEMENT. On page 26, the *Post* also noted Trump was famous "for gold-plated lobbies and for firing people on reality television," and would be seventy-eight on Election Day.

The distinct lack of enthusiasm didn't seem to bother Trump as he entered the ballroom to the soundtrack from *Les Misérables*. The words blaring from the ballroom speakers while Trump walked to the stage set the tone Trump wanted set:

*Do you hear the people sing?
Singing a song of angry men?*

But once Trump started speaking, the men and women in the ballroom seemed more bored than riled up. About thirty-five minutes into the speech, I noticed a few attendees were getting up to leave. Before too long, what had started as a trickle became a steady stream of people working their way to the exit near the back of the room. Once people heard Trump announce he was running for president again and snapped some selfies with the former president speaking in the background, they didn't want to sit through his ramblings about past glories and why he was now a victim. As the exodus grew, the staff blocked the exit, citing security. Visitors were told they could not leave until the event was over. They were now captive at Mar-a-Lago.

Watching from afar, Steve Bannon, Trump's former chief strategist, found the speech devoid of the kind of disruptive, controversial, and counterrevolutionary ideas that ignited Trump's first run for the White House. In this speech, Trump offered a series of stale and unoriginal ideas, like imposing term limits on members of Congress in order "to further drain the swamp." To Bannon, that was a joke. "We had a chance to drain

the swamp,” Bannon told me after the speech. Of Trump, he added, “You chose sides. You ain’t draining, you’re filling.”

The world had changed dramatically since 2015, but Trump’s third campaign announcement did bear some resemblance to his first, when he descended a Trump Tower escalator next to Melania. In each instance, he didn’t bother leaving home to let the world know he was running for president—the first announcement taking place down the elevator from his Trump Tower apartment, and this one down the stairs from his Mar-a-Lago residence. And at the start of both campaigns, he had virtually no support from prominent Republican officials or party donors. In 2015, Trump had so few political followers at the start of his campaign that he put out a casting call offering aspiring actors fifty dollars to enthusiastically cheer him on through his opening speech; in 2022, his team barred the exits to ensure people stuck around for the entire address.

[2]

But the Donald Trump who spoke at Mar-a-Lago in November 2022 was not the same person who had come down the escalator seven years earlier. In 2015, the self-described billionaire and reality-TV star—with his own private jet and a supermodel wife—could present himself to Republican primary voters as the ultimate winner. He can’t anymore.

Against most of his own allies’ wishes, Trump chose to announce his third presidential campaign exactly one week after the GOP suffered crushingly disappointing results in the midterm elections—results that arguably did more damage to the former president’s standing in the party than his role in the January 6 attack on the Capitol.

Apparently to some, inciting an insurrection is bad, but losing clearly winnable Senate races—that’s inexcusable.

After two years of out-of-control inflation, rising crime, and chaos along the southern border, Republicans—and just about everyone else—expected voters to punish President Joe Biden and incumbent Democrats with a red wave rivaling the GOP’s Tea Party gains in 2010. It didn’t happen.

Instead, Republicans lost dozens of seats they believed they would win, barely gaining control of the House of Representatives and losing ground in the Senate. And as the disappointing results came in, no factor loomed larger than Donald Trump. Many of the candidates the party put up were

hand selected by the former president in the primaries, and he picked some real crackpots. And the more electable nominees were forced to defend Trump's lies about the 2020 election or else face withering attacks from the leader of their party. American voters had clearly had enough—and the dismal election results finally woke some top Republicans, at least for a moment, from their yearslong stupor: *We can't win with this guy anymore.*

Tracking the returns on ABC News's election night broadcast, I relayed to viewers what was quickly becoming the key takeaway in Washington: "The biggest loser of the night is Donald Trump." That may have been obvious on November 8, 2022, but the truth is, Trump wasn't just the biggest loser of the midterm cycle. He's the biggest loser in the history of American politics—and he'd earned that title well before the first votes had been counted in 2022.

Six years earlier, Trump had shocked the world and won an election almost nobody thought he could win. It was arguably the biggest electoral upset the United States had ever seen—a genuinely impressive feat for someone with no political experience. He survived controversies that would have destroyed just about anybody else, and he vanquished enemies—Democratic and Republican alike. He presided over a legitimately strong economy until the pandemic hit in 2020, and despite his belligerence and ignorance of global affairs, his four years in office coincided with relative peace around the world. You don't become the biggest loser without having a hell of a lot to lose.

And Trump did have a hell of a lot to lose. He entered office in January 2017 not only with an opportunity to redefine the Republican Party for decades to come, but also having built a brand as one of the most successful businessmen in America. Sure, he wasn't *actually* as prosperous as he claimed—his empire was built on a mountain of debt, and he found a way to go bankrupt six times in the hotel and casino business—but he managed to define himself as a symbol of wealth in the American psyche. [3] There's a reason hip-hop artists reference Trump in their songs about becoming rap moguls and not, say, Stephen Schwarzman or Sam Walton.

Winning—and winning bigly—was key to crafting and maintaining this image, and a hallmark of Trump's first presidential bid in 2015. "We are going to win so much, you may even get tired of winning," Trump

famously boasted in April 2016. “And you’ll say, ‘Please, please, it’s too much winning, we can’t take it anymore, we can’t take it anymore, Mr. President—it’s too much.’ And I’ll say, ‘No, it isn’t. We have to keep winning. We have to win more. We’re going to win more.”^[4]

There was a certain logic to this obsession. “If you have a record of winning, people are going to follow you,” he told biographer Michael D’Antonio before launching his first campaign. “You can be tough and ruthless and all that stuff and if you lose a lot, nobody’s going to follow you, because you’re looked at as a loser.”^[5]

Those ten words—“if you lose a lot, nobody’s going to follow you”—explain Trump’s behavior after the 2020 election better than just about anything that’s been written in the years since. He was so terrified of his winning being exposed as a facade that he was willing to tear down American democracy. He knew that if his devotees accepted the truth—that he lost to Biden by seventy-four electoral votes and more than seven million individual votes—Trump’s time as a force within Republican politics would come to an end. If his image as a winner was Trump’s superpower with Republicans, losing is his kryptonite.

American history is filled with stories of men and women who suffered great defeats, faced adversity, learned from their mistakes, and bounced back to reach even greater heights. That’s Abraham Lincoln’s story. That’s Martin Luther King Jr.’s story. In some ways, that’s the story of the United States itself, beginning with the Continental Army’s crushing defeat at Fort Washington in November 1776. The comeback kid is a quintessentially American story, but it’s not Donald Trump’s.

Trump’s story—the story this book will attempt to tell—is one of failure. His most visible defeat may have come in November 2020, but Donald Trump was losing long before he entered politics and he’s continued losing after he left the White House. His losses are so big and so thorough, they have infected just about everything and everyone he’s touched. Donald Trump is the biggest loser, yes, but so are many of the people who crossed his path as he ascended to the presidency: the people who remained loyal to him and the people who betrayed him; the people who enabled him and the people who confronted him. Humiliation.

Unemployment. Jail. Few who come in contact with Trump walk away better off for having done so.

But there is one area where Trump has been an undisputed winner. Over and over again, he has vanquished once-prominent Republicans who have tried to take him down, and in the process, he has remade the party in his own image. His luck may run out in 2024. Some of the most powerful people in the party are certainly tired of winning, or, more precisely, tired of Trump winning. Once again, they are determined to stop him. But whether Trump wins the GOP nomination again or loses it—or whether the prosecutors finally catch up to him and he goes to prison, for that matter—the party has changed. This is no longer the party of Reagan and Bush, Romney and McCain. It's the party of Donald Trump.

CHAPTER ONE

“COME RETRIBUTION”

Twenty-five years before my first book about Donald Trump was published, I wrote a paperback entitled *The Right to Bear Arms: The Rise of America’s New Militias*. My first book, written in the wake of Timothy McVeigh’s 1995 bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building, tracks the emerging anti-government movement that inspired McVeigh to make war on federal law enforcement agencies that he, and many other far-right activists, believed posed a threat both to America and to themselves.

On the cover of the book is a photograph of a building engulfed in flames—the Branch Davidians’ Waco, Texas, compound called Mount Carmel. Federal law enforcement learned the group was stockpiling weapons and explosives and, after a disastrous fifty-one-day siege in early 1993, attempted to storm the compound. With agents closing in, several Branch Davidians set fire to the building, apparently preferring to die rather than be captured by authorities. The body of the cult’s leader, David Koresh, was found with a gunshot to the head. Investigators concluded he was killed by one of his deputies.

The episode was widely considered a colossal failure by the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), which coordinated the assault. To some, though, the debacle represented something far more sinister than a federal raid gone horribly wrong—they saw it as a deliberate plot by the FBI and the ATF to trap and murder the Branch Davidians.

The Right to Bear Arms tracks how the Waco siege became a rallying cry for a national movement of mostly right-wing activists who believed Washington, DC, was dangerously corrupt and out to get them. Forming what they called “citizens’ militias,” they stockpiled arms and ammunition as well as food and survival gear. Some of them played weekend war

games, practicing makeshift military maneuvers in vacant parking lots, on farmland, or in remote woodlands. I interviewed members of these groups. I read their writings, listened to their talk shows on shortwave radio, and attended some of their meetings.

“The ranks of the militias are made up of factory workers, veterans, computer programmers, farmers, housewives, small-business owners,” I wrote in the book’s introduction. “The most shocking thing about these ‘paramilitary extremists’ is how normal they are. They are your neighbors. But in another sense, many members of America’s new militias live in a parallel universe, where civil war is already being waged by tyrants within the federal government.”

On the furthest fringes of this movement were individuals who wanted to take revenge on the federal agencies responsible for not only the siege in Waco but a host of other transgressions—both real and imagined. McVeigh, for example, cited the government’s “increasingly militaristic and violent” actions as his rationale in a letter to Fox News correspondent Rita Cosby weeks before he was executed under the federal death penalty. In the letter, he argued that his bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City—at the time the deadliest domestic terrorist attack in American history—was “morally and strategically equivalent” to the US military striking government buildings in countries around the world.^[1]

But McVeigh was an exception that proved the rule. For the most part, the members of these citizens’ militias I encountered condemned the Oklahoma City bombing. They weren’t terrorists; they were ordinary Americans who had grown increasingly paranoid. “Their mantra is self-defense,” I wrote in 1995. “They have formed not to wage a campaign of terror but to defend themselves from a terror campaign they believe is already being waged by their own federal government.”^[2]

In the run-up to my book’s publication, I planned a small party for friends and family at the Heartland Brewery in Manhattan and decided to spruce up the party invitation with some over-the-top words of praise from my friends and colleagues. A couple of my fellow reporters at the *New York Post* offered up some choice words, and on a whim, I decided to call a famous New Yorker who was both a reliable source and known for making hyperbolic statements to see if he would give me a quote as well.

He readily agreed to provide a glowing endorsement of the book—provided I wrote it up myself. So I did:

“What a book! Karl is one of the best in the business—tough, fair and brutally honest.”

—DONALD J. TRUMP

Trump signed off on the quote. To this day, I don’t know whether he actually read the advance copy of *The Right to Bear Arms* I sent him—but more than a quarter of a century later, he announced that the first rally of his 2024 presidential campaign would be held in a familiar location: Waco, Texas.

Largely irrelevant in both the Republican primary and the general election, Texas was an odd choice for the campaign kickoff. A Trump spokesman would later deny the venue selection was at all related to the massacre that took place there almost exactly thirty years earlier—he claimed Waco was chosen solely because it was “centrally located” and “close” to big cities like Dallas and Houston^[3]—but plenty of rally attendees drew the connection between the setting and Trump’s central campaign message.

“[Trump’s] making a statement, I believe, by coming to these stomping grounds where the government, the FBI, laid siege on this community just like they laid siege on Mar-a-Lago and went in and took his stuff,” Charles Pace, a Branch Davidian pastor who knew Koresh but left the Mount Carmel compound several years before the deadly fire, told *The Texas Tribune*’s Robert Downen. “He’s not coming right out and saying, ‘Well, I’m doing it because I want you to know what happened there was wrong.’ But he implies it.”^[4]

Shortly after the rally was announced, I asked Steve Bannon, who had served as the CEO of Trump’s 2016 campaign and had once again emerged as one of Trump’s most important advisors, why the former president would go to Waco for his big campaign reboot. He wasn’t particularly coy.

“We’re the Trump Davidians,” he told me with a laugh.

Even less subtle than the rally's venue was how Trump kicked it off, standing silently onstage with his hand on his heart while he waited for the playing of "The Star-Spangled Banner." But this wasn't a traditional version of the national anthem. Trump's campaign had queued up "Justice for All," a rendition of the song recorded over a jailhouse phone by a group of about twenty inmates serving time in a Washington, DC, jail for taking part in the assault on the US Capitol.^[*] In the song, the so-called J6 Prison Choir makes its way through Francis Scott Key's lyrics while Trump's voice interjects with stray lines from the Pledge of Allegiance, which he recorded at Mar-a-Lago.^[*]

As the recording blared over the loudspeakers, video footage from the January 6 riot played on the massive screens flanking the stage. It was a bizarre display, but also pitch-perfect in setting the tone for what was to come over the next ninety minutes: a defiant Trump at his most inflammatory, telling his followers to prepare for one final standoff with the shadowy enemies out to get him—and them. "For seven years, you and I have been taking on the corrupt, rotten, and sinister forces trying to destroy America," he said. "They've been trying to destroy it. They're not going to do it, but they do get closer and closer with rigged elections."

"2024," Trump declared, "is the final battle."

This wasn't a campaign speech in any traditional sense. Trump echoed the themes of paranoia and foreboding embraced by David Koresh and the anti-government movement that grew out of the Waco massacre. "As far as the eye can see, the abuses of power that we're currently witnessing at all levels of government will go down as among the most shameful, corrupt, and depraved chapters in all of American history," he said.

The substance of Trump's grievances paled in comparison to the resentments harbored by the people I wrote about in *The Right to Bear Arms*. Twenty-five years ago, members of those citizens' militias had some legitimate reasons to distrust the federal government. Their behavior was extreme, but they were responding to tangible government actions that had resulted in death and destruction. More than eighty Branch Davidians died in the Waco siege. Three other people had been killed in the Ruby Ridge standoff one year earlier, when federal law enforcement officials tried to arrest a survivalist and self-described white separatist named

Randy Weaver—who lived in a plywood cabin with no electricity or running water in northern Idaho—on weapons violations. Weaver was eventually acquitted of the original firearms charges, but his life was never the same: His wife, son, and dog were killed during the standoff—his wife shot by an FBI sniper while she was holding their ten-month-old daughter. The episode left an indelible stain on the FBI’s reputation, with several agents censured and suspended after a lengthy investigation. “Don’t call Randy Weaver paranoid,” I wrote in the book. “His worst fears about the government have already come true.”

As Bannon made clear in my conversation with him, Trump’s presence in Waco that day was designed to evoke similar feelings of injustice and persecution among the former president’s followers. “They’re not coming after me,” he told the crowd. “They’re coming after you—and I’m just standing in their way, and I’m going to be standing in their way for a long time.”

Trump had used variations of the line before. “It was not just my home that was raided last month,” he said at a September 2022 rally in Pennsylvania, referencing the search warrant the FBI had executed at Mar-a-Lago. “It was the hopes and dreams of every citizen who I’ve been fighting for since the moment I came down the golden escalator in 2015.”

The message certainly seemed to resonate with his supporters, but its brazenness was staggering. Whatever you think about the investigations Trump was facing at the time, he certainly invited the scrutiny. Special Counsel Jack Smith was probing Trump’s role in the January 6 attack and his failure to turn over classified material the FBI found at Mar-a-Lago. Fulton County district attorney Fani Willis was investigating his efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election results in Georgia. And Manhattan district attorney Alvin Bragg was nearing an indictment on charges related to hush-money payments Trump made weeks before the 2016 election to a porn star, Stormy Daniels, with whom he’d allegedly had an affair.

The folks cheering Trump at his rallies had not taken boxes stuffed with classified documents out of the White House—and it’s safe to assume none of them spent tens of thousands of dollars to cover up an affair with an adult-film star. Several hundred Trump supporters were being prosecuted for assaulting police officers and storming the Capitol on