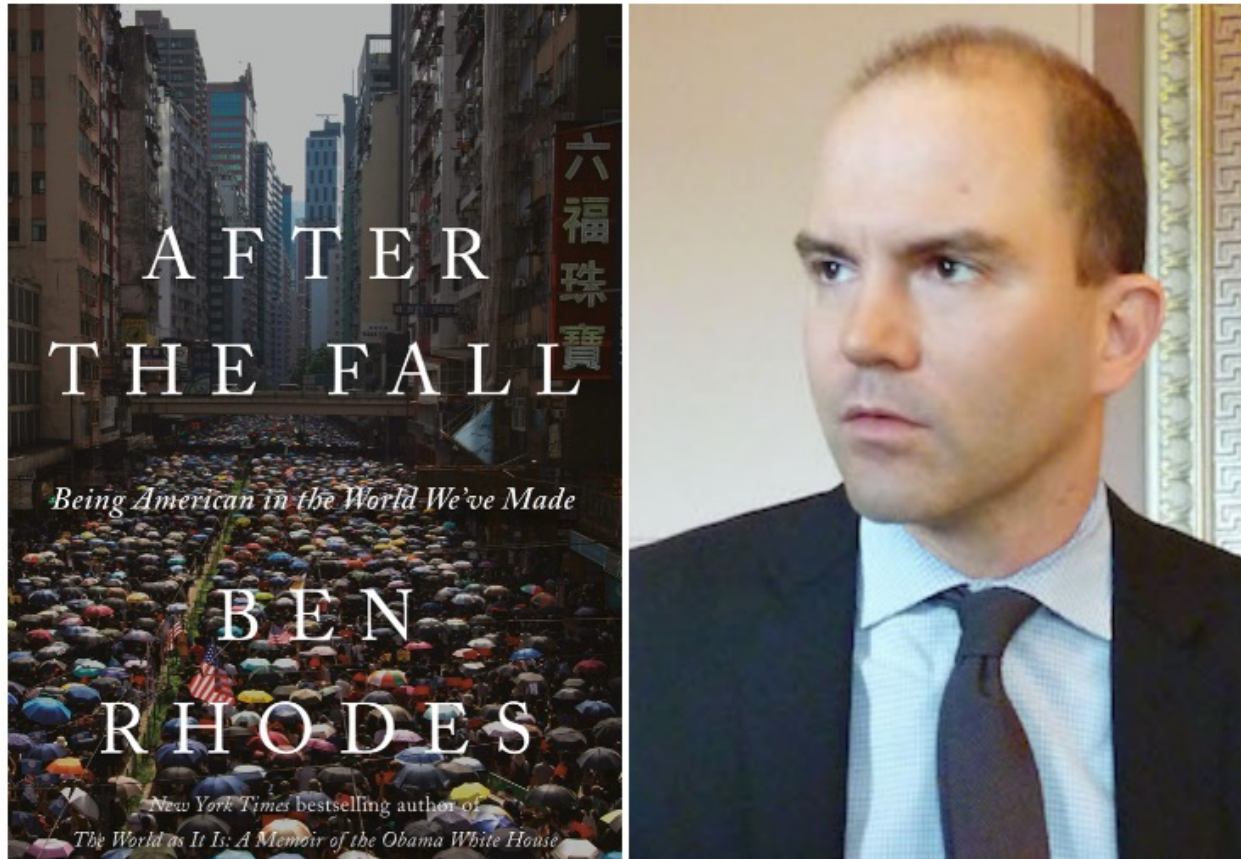


# Rhodes Rage

REVIEW: 'After the Fall: Being American in the World We've Made'

[Peter Berkowitz](#) • June 27, 2021 5:00 am



"After the Fall" and author Ben Rhodes / Amazon and AP

The acrimony and disorder of contemporary American politics, according to a host of conservative commentators, stem in significant measure from progressive elites' incendiary words and antagonistic conduct. Progressive elites, conservatives say, shower contempt on the United States as it is and on the ordinary middle-class and working-class Americans who are devoted to their local communities, love their country, embraced the Tea Party movement a decade ago, and voted for Donald Trump in 2016 and 2020. Many Americans who live outside of major cities and beyond the wealthy, bright-blue suburban enclaves that surround them—and a few who live there—resent the routine allegations of bigotry and backwardness to which they are subject by Democratic Party politicians and the mainstream media outlets. In the face of such longstanding provocations, say conservatives, their indignation and anger are understandable.

Progressives' loathing of conservatives, conservative politicians and pundits add, is rooted in an increasingly antidemocratic and illiberal agenda. Our progressive elites often identify democracy

not with voters' preferences but rather with a tendentious conception of what all reasonable voters should want. Our progressive elites frequently seem to prefer the company and counsel of fellow progressive elites from around the world to that of the large swath of their fellow citizens who vote for conservatives. And our progressive elites show a proclivity to undercut self-government by shifting political power from the local to the federal and from the federal to the transnational.

This assessment of the sources of America's discontents, fueled as it is by anger and indignation, paints with too broad a brush. It does not do justice to the variety of positions that can properly be called progressive. It fails to acknowledge the importance to liberal democracy in America of a party especially devoted to holding up American law and policy to universal standards of justice and revising inherited policies to keep up with changing circumstances. It overlooks the destabilizing effects on political cohesion of the information-age economy, globalization, and social media. And it downplays, or ignores, occasional conservative stodginess and obstreperousness as well as the pockets of genuinely noxious sentiment on the right.

Nevertheless, if conservatives were determined to press their maximal case in the court of public opinion against the left's propensity to vilify all things to the right of progressive orthodoxy, they could hardly do better than to introduce Ben Rhodes's new book, *After the Fall: Being American in the World We've Made*, as exhibit number one.

For all eight years of Barack Obama's presidency, Rhodes served as deputy national security adviser for strategic communications. By all accounts—including his own—Rhodes exercised outsized influence in molding Obama's foreign policy and in shaping public perception of it. According to a 2016 *New York Times Magazine* [profile](#), Rhodes "strategized and ran the successful Iran-deal messaging campaign." Substantiating conservative criticism that the Obama administration manipulated public opinion to gin up support for the Iran nuclear deal, Rhodes told journalist David Samuels that he could effectively shape the narrative because the reporters covering the White House "literally know nothing." Rhodes's jarring use of *literally* in its dubious figurative sense should not be allowed to obscure his unlovely combination of boastfulness and scorn, which fuels the impression of an imperious partisan ideologue.

Rhodes has been quite active since leaving the White House in January 2017—he published a 2018 bestselling book on his time in government, cohosts the podcast *Pod Save the World*, appears as a contributor for NBC News and MSNBC, and serves as an adviser to former president Obama—but little that he has done would call that impression into doubt. His book cements it.

In *After the Fall*, Rhodes sets out to understand what he perceives to be the calamitous authoritarian and nationalist turn the United States and significant parts of the world took in the wake of the Obama administration. Given his ambition to explain the rise of Donald Trump, you would think that Rhodes would begin by turning to articles and books about the broad sweep of American history; familiarize himself with the varieties of conservatism in America; and embark on a journey through the United States to speak to fellow citizens, particularly Trump supporters and especially those who—as we know from the work of Salena Zito and Brad Todd in *The*

*Great Revolt*—made the difference in important swing states in 2016 by switching their 2012 support for Obama to the real estate mogul and reality TV star.

Rhodes does none of this. Even toward the end of his book, when he recounts how he was reluctantly drawn into a conversation with a Trump voter—the host at a West Virginia inn at which Rhodes was staying to concentrate on writing his book—it does not dawn upon Rhodes that anything very useful could be gleaned by delving into the views and sensibility shared by a substantial portion of his fellow citizens.

Instead, and in accordance with conservatives' suspicions, Rhodes adopts an entirely different approach: "I increasingly sought out foreign voices that could give us a clearer sense of ourselves." Feeling like an "exile" in America, he flees his own country to interview "dissidents, activists, oppositionists—anyone, really, who looked at power from the perspective of an outsider." He finds such interlocutors resisting authoritarianism and nationalism—similar to the fiendish political forces that he believes have come to the fore in the United States—in Hungary, Egypt, Russia, and China. "Unburdened by being American themselves," Rhodes writes, "they experienced no difficulty of politeness or discomfort that prevented them from seeing the Trump years for what they were: an American experiment with fascism, albeit of a particularly incompetent and corrupt kind."

Although his interviews are engaging and he ably tells the tales of brave individuals struggling against oppression in foreign lands, Rhodes in the end diminishes the men and women with whom he speaks by using them as props to reaffirm what he believes he already knew before he embarked on his post-government reporting about the evils of Trump's America.

From "the lived reality" of his White House years, Rhodes acquired "the feeling that a cancer was metastasizing everywhere despite our efforts to treat it." He traces the cancer to "the ways in which decades of American capitalism, technology, and the politicized pursuit of national security had ripened so many people in the United States and around the world for crude nationalist appeals."

Rhodes raises only to reject out of hand the possibility that progressive overreach had anything to do with Trump's election. Rhodes certainly does not mention the ramming through of the Affordable Care Act on a party-line vote; the weaponization of the IRS against conservative groups; the characterization of the other side as "bitter" and as "deplorables"; and the defamation of tens of millions of Americans, in which Rhodes indulges, that the best explanation for opposition to Obama's policies was racism. The only blame Rhodes considers might be fairly directed at the Obama administration is for not pressing for greater progressive change.

Page after page, Rhodes hammers home his main message, which is directed at fellow progressives: You don't know how right you are to despise American conservatives and the Republican Party for electing to the highest office in the land "a fascist lunatic." Yes, President Trump demonstrated a penchant for the inflammatory and made errors in policy and in management of the federal bureaucracy. The January 6 Capitol Hill riot was a disgrace, and the president was derelict in his duty to call on the lawbreakers to desist. But law enforcement officials brought the trespassers under control and removed them within hours. Republicans

immediately condemned the criminal conduct and the interference with congressional responsibilities. Congress certified the 2020 election results that night. Only someone who cared little about the integrity of language could observe Rhodes's promiscuous use of the term "fascism" without wondering where during Trump's four years in office are the defining elements—the subordination of the individual to the nation, the natural hierarchy and rule by elites, the central planning, and the suppression of opposition—that would warrant the grave charge.

And what of the Trump administration's signature achievements—reducing regulation, cutting taxes, appointing judges committed to upholding individual rights and keeping government action within its constitutionally prescribed limits, pursuing fair trade deals, imposing severe sanctions on the Islamic Republic of Iran to impel it to cease development of nuclear weapons and rogue conduct across the Middle East, brokering the Abraham Accords, and leading friends and partners around the world in calling to account the Chinese Communist Party for crimes against humanity and genocide within China's borders and for undercutting freedom in regions around the world? How exactly do these concerted undertakings serve the "creeping and sometimes casual fascism that"—Rhodes invidiously asserts—"suited Putin and had reshaped the American right wing." In fashioning his narrative, Rhodes seems to have counted on readers who—figuratively speaking—know nothing.

Rhodes confesses that his principal motivation for working in politics and writing his book was "rage"—over 9/11, the Iraq war, hypocrisy and meanness he encountered in government, and Trump and his supporters. Most outrageous to Rhodes, it appears, is the free and democratic decision of American voters to deny Hillary Clinton the chance to entrench the Obama administration's priorities: "Having been spat out by the very system I had served, I had come to believe—rightly or wrongly—that it was, in some intangible way, irredeemable without a more profound overhaul."

Rhodes perfunctorily acknowledges "that rage can at times distort your thinking and lead you down blind alleys," but pride in his rage is decidedly more conspicuous than anxiety that base passions have corrupted his understanding. In any case, mere intellectual error does not begin to capture the sinister delusion involved in believing that a "profound overhaul" of the American political system is warranted because his turn in office ended with voters' rejecting his policies and his candidate. Rhodes's rage corroborates the conservative conviction that today's progressive elites, in their contempt for those who depart from their dogmas, foment acrimony, and sow disorder.

*After the Fall: Being American in the World We've Made*

By Ben Rhodes

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