Twitter Thread by Russ Burgos



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1/ Republicans and Reactionaries, a thread.

There will be post-mortems ad infinitum on how Trumpism rose and fell, but those narratives will always be incompete or deliberately evasive if they don't reckon w/the fact that the GOP itself made Trump possible.

2/ It's undeniably true that we have always had fringe, extremist movements in the USA, whether Know-Nothings or Birchers. What kept them on the fringe was their comparative *political* irrelevance.

3/ Since the Goldwater campaign in 1964, however, the Republican Party began adopting elements of extremist/fringe ideations, slowly at first and then with gusto.

4/ It started with Goldwater's paeans to "State's Rights," which have always been a stalking horse for institutionalized racism. After Buckley's pro forma denunciation of the JBS, it then accelerated with incorporation of anti-UN ("anti-globalist") notions.

5/ Well-documented in the literature, the craven Southern Strategy of the late '60s through mid '70s -- another overt/covert appeal to racism (cf, the notorious Lee Atwater "n****r n****r" interview) -- continued the GOP's embracing of the hard(er) Right...

6/ ... as did its (initially cynical) effort to co-opt the newly emerging Christian Right (which, like Goldwater, Nixon, Reagan, was an artifact of the New West), which openly sought to "Christianize" governance and began promoting the "America is a Christian nation" trope.

7/ With the emergence of the newly radicalized National Rifle Association after its 1977 Cincinnati convention (where the shooting safety organization was transformed into a profoundly anti-government lobbying organization), the stage was set for the 1980 Reagan election.

8/ But Reagan wasn't really an enthusiastic extremist, and we see a pattern emerge where GOP elites pandered to what HL Mencken's colleague George Jean Nathan called "the yokelry" but never really delivered. Reagan talked a good Christian Right game, for example, but did little.

9/ The Bush 41 presidency was a let-down for the increasingly vocal and extremist elements on the Right *below* the level of GOP elites, and from 1989-2000 they began to seize control of the party, in part at local and state levels, in part through the $$ power of mega-donors...

10/ ...like the Kochs and the Mercers who wanted to use the extremist factions as stalking horses for their own self-interest.

11/ At the same time, the emergence of Fox News & the proliferation of niche media pandering to the Right gave the extremists a sense of unity and power and played to another common ideation on the Right, the chimera of so-called "liberal media bias."

12/ At least since Spiro Agnew (and certainly before, else he couldn't have played to it), conservatism as depended on a need to feel oppressed by "liberal elites," and the post-Vietnam/post-Watergate breakdown of bipartisan consensus was "proof" the media was "against them."

13/ After all, it had been the Times and the Post that broke the Pentagon Papers and Watergate, and it had been Walter Cronkite at CBS who tolled the bell on any notion of "victory" in Vietnam.

14/ So starting with Regnery publishing, then with the occupation of the out-of-fashion AM band by right wing talk radio, and accelerated by the end of the Fairness Doctrine...

15/ ... we see the contemporary conservative information bubble emerge. Again, it had always existed on the *political* fringe, whatever its audience reach might have been (cf, Father Coughlin), but now its *market* power was being translated into *political* power...

16/ ... as the GOP was mobilizing the same people who consumed that media. Now as was the case with the GOP itself, for the media mavens this was a strictly rational strategy -- they saw an underserved market and served it to enrich themselves.

17/ But in the process of doing so, they themselves became politically influential, because GOP elites began to depend upon them to mobilize supporters.

18/ But by the end of the Cold War, the rank-and-file were no longer content to be mobilized with no payoff. It's 2000 and there's still gun control, abortion, "illegal immigration;" we're still in the UN, jobs are still off-shoring, non-whites are still getting welfare ...

19/ ... all the things they opposed were still here, despite their loyalty to the GOP. But the times they were a'changing. Bob Dole's '96 presidential run was the last hurrah of the mid-century Republican Party -- the *old* party, the one that had embraced the extreme Right.

20/ The '94 midterms and the "Gingrich Revolution" signalled the rise of a newer, more radicalized, more Southern GOP that explicitly rejected the "RINOism" of the elder Bush's more traditional East Coast Republicanism.

21/ Henceforth, the GOP would be led by elites who'd emerged *from* the radical Right ideology that now controlled the party. Where once the yokelry were hard-right but the elites were center-right (that beloved phrase of Bill O'Reilly)...

22/ ... now there'd be less and less daylight between the ideological center-of-mass of the rank-and-file and that of the party itself. For the Kochs and Mercers and etc., that was well and good because on fiscal & monetary policy the GOP was still pro-business/anti-populist.

23/ For the Hannitys and Limbaughs and etc., it was also well and good because the party elites' embrace of their audience translated into two things of value for them: elite political access and bigger ratings (a $$ enhancing feedback loop).

24/ So it can be no surprise that Trump gave Limbaugh a Medal of Freedom and made Hannity a kind of kitchen cabinet member. It symbolized the ascension of the Limbaugh-Hannity *audience* to the "backbone" of the modern conservative movement.

25/ In effect, modern conservatism has been captured by the ideologues it sought to capture. From there, the emerence of the "tea party" -- a phony, astroturf movement created by the billionaires of the Right for their own purposes -- was inevitable.

26/ People actually took this anti-government stuff seriously. When Reagan said "government is the problem," they believed it. When the new and radical NRA said "The Left" was coming for all the guns and only guns prevent "tyranny," they believed it.

27/ When Obama giving modest health care to working class Americans was said by wealthy elites who didn't want their companies to have to pay for it to be nearly Stalinist in its Communistical tyranny, they believed it.

28/ By the 2016 election, conservatism had become a fundamentally anti-government movement led by people like Ted Cruz who'd been stewed in the extremism of the 90s and early 00s.

29/ So you get this weird situation where people who claim "government is the problem" want desperately to be in government ...

30/ ... and, more problematically, where the range of ideologically acceptable positions on issues becomes ever-narrower the greater the amount of power and influence of the rank-and-file via its elite media enabler. Thus it was Limbaugh who coined the phrase, "RINO hunting."

31/ Trump, therefore, wasn't an aberration. He was the almost inevitable fulfillment of a 50-60 year-long process of, at first gradual and then accelerating, right-wing radicalization -- all of which was led by entrepreneurial elites seeking to increase their own influence...

32/ ... and many of whom found they'd grabbed the proverbial tiger by the tail (or, in another idiom, were hoisted by their own petard). So what does this portend for the stability of American governance post-Trump?

33/ It portends darkly. Today's Republican leadership hasn't the moral fortitude to tell its followers they're wrong and they've been duped, and the information space is now so fragmented that right-wing ideology is a self-licking ice cream cone.

34/ The vandals have tasted power, and they're not going to give it up easily. Whether it's the Ammon Bundy crazies or the "Constitutional Sheriff" crazies or the Q crazies or the Three Percenter crazies...

35/ ... there's an entire ecosystem of right-wing extremism that is self-sustaining and, therefore, a cancer in the body politic. Modern American conservatism *itself* is the problem because, as an ideology, it rejects the basic tenets of American governance.