

President Donald Trump delivers his State of the Union address Feb. 4 at the Capitol in Washington. (CNS/Leah Mills, pool via Reuters)

by Don Clemmer

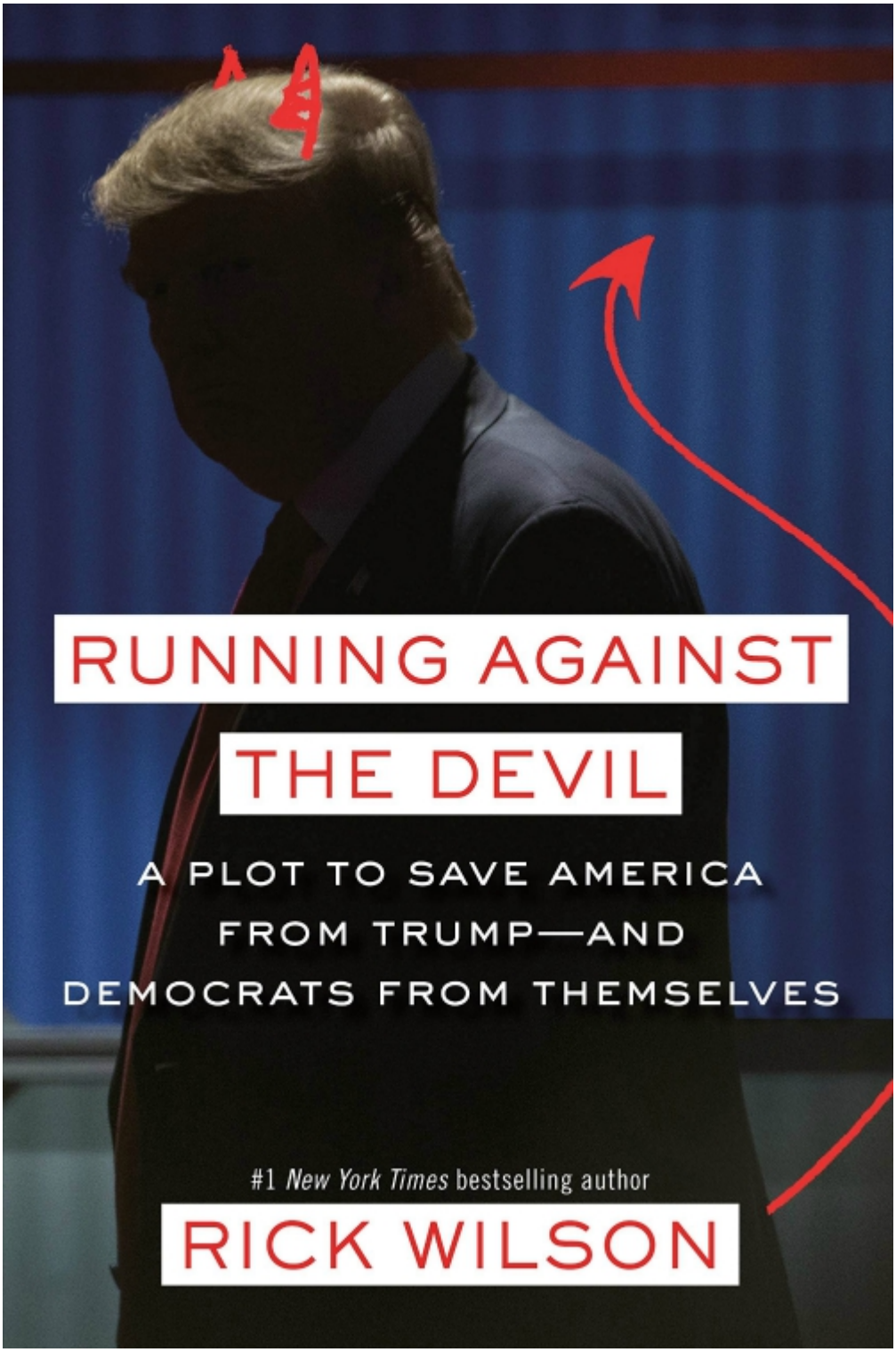
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Running Against the Devil: A Plot to Save America from Trump — and Democrats from Themselves
Rick Wilson
352 pages; Crown Forum
$28.00

When the U.S. bishops issue a document about Catholic participation in public life, they invoke the language of faithful citizenship and political responsibility. When an apostate GOP adman writes a book about the stakes of the 2020 election, he goes right to the prince of darkness.

Or at least the enemy is right there in the title of *Running Against the Devil: A Plot to Save America from Trump — and Democrats from Themselves*, the second book by Rick Wilson, the Florida-based political operative whose decadeslong career as a Republican strategist was upended by the emergence of Donald Trump in the 2016 election cycle.

Now a leader of the "Never Trump" movement, Wilson has built a reputation as an acerbic essayist and news commentator, sharply condemning the misdeeds of the Trump administration and the behaviors of Trump's enablers in Wilson's former party home. As a conservative, Wilson's critique of Trump doesn't come from across the traditional partisan-ideological divide, and yet he still sees Trump as a threat to the American system of government.

Committed to Trump's electoral defeat this fall, Wilson spends the course of the book treating today's Democratic Party as a client, pouring on the tough love and urging them: "Run the campaign you should rather than the one you want."

Wilson maintains that while the deeply awful and unpopular Trump can't win, the Democrats "can sure as hell lose." It's a jolt of a read, one that seeks to shake Democrats out of complacency, dispel myths of the campaign, outline winning and losing approaches and, in one particularly chilling section, outline all of the forces aligned (FOX News, Facebook, an army of party operatives with everything riding on this election) to ensure a second term for Trump.

Wilson has repeatedly referred to Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders as Trump's "re-election insurance," noting that the senator's self-described mantle of Democratic socialism is anathema to swing voters, particularly those in the not especially left-leaning states that will decide the election in the Electoral College. (Sanders' praise for the literacy programs of Cuba's Castro regime — and the aghast reaction of Cuban Americans in Florida — is one example that has emerged since the publication of this book.)

For a Catholic reader, much of Wilson's book is a fascinating glimpse into a world we experience through political messaging and advertising without really stopping to analyze it. For instance, Wilson repeatedly insists that the 2020 election isn't about policy, but is a referendum on Trump. Anyone who's watched a Democratic primary debate knows how excruciatingly this principle hasn't been applied, with candidates quarreling at length over the minutiae of their various policy proposals while neglecting to build a unified, systematic case against Trump.

This, however, doesn't mean specific issues can't be utilized as part of a Trump referendum. Wilson notes the engineered "spectacle of cruelty" of the administration's immigration policy as one area where Democrats can peel away former Republicans in the suburbs and "anyone with a basic scrap of humanity." This descriptor could easily extend to Catholic voters, who are disproportionately represented in places like Pennsylvania, Michigan and Ohio, and this is a moral objection that echoes pronouncements of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Pope Francis.

Catholic readers will also likely appreciate areas of the book where Wilson counsels the Democrats to rein in their worst indulgences. He notes that Trump wants nothing more than to have Democrats constantly defending the most stridently pro-choice positions imaginable, despite only 13% of the electorate sharing such a view.

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But this is not to say Wilson exclusively sides with centrist Democrats out of ideological preference. Despite his repeated warnings against a Bernie nomination, he acknowledges where he sees Elizabeth Warren finding the right way to couch progressive economic proposals for the American electorate: "I think she's closing in on something that resonated with the Trump base the first time around — that the little guy without an army of lobbyists in Washington, D.C., gets f---ed and everyone else gets rich. I hate to admit it, but she's not even wrong." He and Warren both are talking about the need to rebuild solidarity.

What's really striking when one takes a step back from this book is that a man who produced negative ads — what until recent years might have passed for one of the ugliest facets of our politics — has, in his words, grown a soul, while the people who

for decades were arbiters of morality in U.S. culture — evangelical Christians, Catholic bishops — engage in something Wilson and many others simply won't countenance: the moral calculus of allying with Donald Trump for political/policy gains.

When the U.S. bishops made the last-minute addition of calling abortion their "preeminent priority" in this year's edition of the "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" document, the move was widely seen as one faction of that body reminding Catholics how they should vote, despite any personal misgivings about Trump.

Meanwhile, a tart-tongued Floridian with a deep love of guns, aviation and eviscerating Trumpism lays bare the reality that the person who views allegiance to Trump in terms of the tradeoffs, whether for judicial appointments or more favorable regulations, is an American who doesn't see the forest fire for the trees.

Wilson builds this argument — touching on the destruction of everything from democratic norms to the environment — in Part 1 of the book, "The Case Against Trump, or Four More Years in Hell."

The inferno imagery is apt, and it's something Catholics may have to become more assertive in pointing out to our coreligionists in the months ahead. Enabling the corrosive rule of Trump is not something that will create lasting gains for anything that serves the interests of Catholics, the church or the kingdom of heaven; it's Faustian all the way down.

[Don Clemmer is a journalist, communications professional and former staffer of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. He writes from Indiana. Follow him on Twitter: @clemmer_don.]

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