

Red Pill, Blue Pill: How to Counteract the Conspiracy Theories That Are Killing Us (David Neiwert)

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Neiwert, David A. *Red Pill, Blue Pill: How to Counteract the Conspiracy Theories That Are Killing Us*. Guilford, Connecticut: Prometheus Books, 2020.

Based on the famous ‘red pill, blue pill’ dilemma, the book *Red Pill, Blue Pill: How to Counteract the Conspiracy Theories That Are Killing Us* takes a look at what it means to be ‘red-pilled’ in contemporary American society, in light of the growing appeal for conspiracy theories and right wing movements. Authored by investigative journalist, David Neiwert², who has reported on the radical right for decades, has aimed to understand how conspiracy theories are propagated through ‘corporate owned media houses’, the internet and even video games. The book takes a look at the sociological and psychological strategies implemented by alt-right leaders to amass followers, as well as the characteristics of those who lean towards such ideologies. Neiwert presents the ground reality of being sucked into the ‘rabbit hole’ of conspiracy theories and the isolation that follows the process of radicalization for an individual. The book serves as both a warning and a toolkit (rather a ‘blue-pill toolkit’ as stated by the author) for violent right wing ideologies and how to counter it.

Some of the themes that the book centres around are deradicalisation and the obsession of far-right political groups with conspiracy theories, and how this eventually leads to the spread of misinformation and violence. The title for every chapter of the book follows a pattern, as though guiding the reader through the process of being ‘red-pilled’ and ultimately leads them out of the tunnel, by providing a fifteen step framework on how to aid someone who has been radicalized. The first chapter elaborates on the various terminologies associated with conspiracy theories and

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² “David.Neiwert – Netroots Nation.” Accessed November 14, 2021. <https://www.netrootsnation.org/profile/david-neiwert/>.

how some terms are used in mainstream media to propagate certain ideologies. This is followed by chapters that provide extensive case studies of far-right terrorists and the attacks they carried out, along with conservative groups such as the John Birch Society and Proud Boys and their leaders. The concluding chapters of the book focus on the authoritarian nature of the radical right and their disillusioned beliefs along with a specific focus on the psychological traits of individuals who are prone to be radicalized. The last chapter, highlights the need for ‘internet literacy’ and charts out the tell-tale signs of a radicalized individual. By conducting interviews with and drawing upon the works of several Harvard and Yale based psychologists and sociologists, the author has provided a fifteen step guide to deradicalisation at the end. Neiwert has included several snippets of interviews conducted with not only academics but also survivors of the 2017, Mandalay Bay shooting incident, which makes the book a gripping yet a heart-wrenching read.

Neiwert’s career as an investigative journalist is reflected in the wide range of sources he uses for the book. Ranging from research articles, news articles to case studies and interviews, the variety of informed sources is what illustrates the gravity of the surging right wing extremist movements in the US. The coherent, crisp and non-academic writing style combined with the dramatic retelling of some of the worst domestic terrorist attacks in the US, as well as presenting the ground realities of being radicalized, is what creates a sense of urgency among the reader regarding the issues discussed. Furthermore, the author does not shy away from criticizing the systems and institutions that enable or encourage far-right ideologies. By calling out political representatives, media houses and famous internet celebrities to even law enforcement agencies for their biases, the book maintains its journalistic essence.

However, even though the primary focus of the book is counter-terrorism and radicalization, the author fails to consider the other side of the complex argument. He only focuses on far-right extremism, leaving out the conspiracy theories from the other end of the political spectrum. Additionally, the extensive case studies mentioned in the first few chapters of the book tend to get monotonous after a certain point. Despite the fact that the later chapters are slightly more analytical in nature, the continuous presentation of case studies in the first half of the book does not showcase the author’s voice, hence leaving it up to the reader’s imagination to follow the trail. This ambiguity makes the read slightly chaotic as the reader is left to make sense of the multiple arguments being presented and the connections between them.

Nevertheless, by raising the ‘red pill, blue pill’ question, the author has successfully managed to represent the depth and gravity of right wing extremism in the US, especially in contemporary times. He points out the surge in right wing sentiments that were observed during the Trump presidency and presents a scathing critique on the systematic attempts to embolden and support radical right wing groups. This book comes at the right time, bearing in mind the increase in populist and right wing sentiments across the globe. It illustrates all the possible ways in which certain ideologies are propagated via mainstream media and how the process of radicalization

creeps slowly until it completely consumes one's life. The book does an excellent job at presenting the trauma, grief and isolation that causes an individual to be radicalized in the first place and how there is a need to sensitize people against violence and extremist ideologies. The 'blue-pill toolkit' on deradicalisation is a must read for all, as it enables one to look out for the subtle ways in which social media algorithms operate and be aware of the information that surrounds us. It encourages the reader to question every bit of information they consume and ultimately not fall into the rabbit hole of conspiracy theories.