

Rancho Mirage Writers Fest considers America under Trump

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The Desert Sun's Bruce Fessier gets a tour of the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival venue from festival Chairman Jamie Kabler. *Zoe Meyers/The Desert Sun*



(From the left) Van Gordon Sauter moderates a panel discussion titled "The Next Four Years" that includes Evan Thomas, Richard Reeves, Hon. Gray Davis, Geoff Cowan, Douglas Brinkley, H.W. Brands and Hon. Barbara Boxer during the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival Saturday night, January 28, 2017 at the Omni Rancho Las Palmas Hotel in Rancho Mirage. *Richard Lui/The Desert Sun*

It was inevitable that at least some of the speakers at this weekend's Rancho Mirage Writers Festival would comment on the rise of President Donald Trump. There were scheduled discussions, after all, on the legacy of Andrew Jackson and on China's growing impact on the environment, commerce and cyber-security.

The speakers at Saturday night's main discussions pulled few punches.

For more than 90 minutes, a group of historians, writers and former elected officials were by and large critical of the 45th president of the United States — and not always at the pleasure of the 1,200-person audience inside the Rancho Omni Rancho Las Palmas Resort & Spa.

Journalist Evan Thomas got a smattering of boos when he predicted that Trump would exploit civil unrest to expand his own powers.

"I think our democratic system exists to resist Trump," he said and cited the work of founders James Madison and John Adams. "They created a system to reject prideful people who boast."

The panel had been tasked with envisioning, from a variety of angles, the country four years from now.

Historian H.W. Brands said he found worrisome Trump's war on the news media and his claims — even after Nov. 8 — that the election had lacked integrity. The country, Brands said, has survived this long because of its "culture of democracy" and the unspoken agreement among its inhabitants that when one's party wins, the other accepts it and moves on to the next campaign.

He ticked off major challenges over the past 200 years — Civil War, Great Depression — and the ability to persevere.

"I'm afraid this idea is fraying," Brands said.

For most liberals, progressives and civil libertarians, the past eight days have been frustrating, although not altogether surprising.

During his first week in the White House, Trump ordered a hiring freeze on federal employees and regulations, reinstated a policy preventing foreign non-governmental organizations that receive U.S. aid from performing or promoting abortions, and restarted the Keystone XL and Dakota Access Pipeline. He also formally withdrew American support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership and appointed as chair of the Federal Communications Commission Ajit Pai, who's expressed opposition to net neutrality, as well as the commissions' recent broadband privacy reforms.

Meanwhile, Trump administration officials instructed multiple agencies to stop communicating with the public, leading to a near virtual blackout of social media accounts.



H.W. Brands and Hon. Barbara Boxer take part in a panel discussion titled "The Next Four Years" moderated by Van Gordon Sauter that also includes Evan Thomas, Richard Reeves, Hon. Gray Davis, Geoff Cowan, Douglas Brinkley, during the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival Saturday night, January 28, 2017 at the Omni Rancho Las Palmas Hotel in Rancho Mirage. *Richard Lui/The Desert Sun*



Bret Stephens speaks at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival Saturday night, January 28, 2017 at the Omni Rancho Las Palmas Hotel in Rancho Mirage. *Richard Lui/The Desert Sun*

Yet perhaps the most controversial of Trump's orders last week related to immigration. He laid groundwork for the new border wall along Mexico — a decision that ultimately rests with Congress — expanded detention centers and called for additional officers.

Fulfilling another of his campaign promises, the president suspended refugee arrivals and banned visitors from several Muslim-majority countries, prompting the American Civil Liberties Union to file legal action in New York, which was granted a temporary stay Saturday by a Brooklyn judge.

Former California U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer, who owns a home in Rancho Mirage, encouraged her audience Saturday not to "act out of anger." She even found something nice to say about the new commander in chief for his recognition of the country's hurting over globalization. But she was quick to add: "I honestly don't think he has a good sense of history. If he did he wouldn't say NATO is obsolete and he wouldn't do what he's doing to these refugees," some of whom were translators for soldiers.

Earlier in the evening, Pulitzer Prize-winning Wall Street Journal columnist Bret Stephens gave a talk about the future of America, looking 20 rather than a mere four years ahead, and by glancing backward. He recalled his grandmother's history, as a refugee of Soviet Bolshevism and then Nazi Germany, and his mother, who was born in fascist Italy.

"It behooves us to think about who those refugees were and what their sons and daughters would eventually become," Stephens said. "Right now, there are people waiting at airports to get into this country who are being treated with the utmost suspicion," because they come from the wrong countries and belong to the wrong religion.

The scapegoating of immigrants — deriving from a "Who did this to us?" frame of mind — is a form of conspiracy theory, Stephens said, and one that forgets the dividends of moral leadership in the world. Consider the country's response to West Berlin following World War II. America poured great resources into Germany at military risk with the Soviet Union. But, he said, "We created out of an enemy, one of our greatest allies in the world today."

The country's continued sense of optimism, he said, "will determine where we are in 2037."