



Presents

# AMERICAN CHAOS

**A film by James D. Stern**

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## **SYNOPSIS**

Starting six months before the 2016 presidential election, director Jim Stern put his life on hold and — driven to understand what seemed incomprehensible at the time — traveled through red states to interview and spend time with Donald Trump supporters from different backgrounds. It was a search for insights and answers, for anything that could explain the billionaire’s surging appeal and why these voters remained untroubled by so many troubling things the candidate had said and done.

This journey became his *Heart of Darkness* into the American body politic at a profoundly critical point in our history. And the film he returned with, AMERICAN CHAOS, sheds unique light on difficult issues roiling the nation — chronicling a cultural divide, still dangerously misunderstood, that continues to tear at the fabric of our democracy.

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

In April of 2016, Donald Trump had, improbably, sewn up the Republican nomination. He had obliterated fifteen other GOP candidates playing by a new set of rules - his rules. The more he made incendiary statements - that in the past would have ended a candidacy - the more popular he grew. As Trump himself said, "I could stand in the middle of Times Square and shoot someone and they'd still vote for me". Who were "they" and why, on this particular point, was Trump telling the truth?

I became more and more obsessed in 2016 with finding out who the "they" was. Who was fervently supporting Trump, who was such a radical departure from past elected presidents (Republicans as well as Democrats)? When I watched cable television, invariably two sides ended up arguing and listening only to their own voices. As a viewer, it became easier and easier to shut out the opposing view and the more I did, the deeper into a comfortable liberal bubble I went and the less I understood.

With this in mind, I felt I had to go on the road and meet his supporters for myself, listen to them and in doing so, perhaps gain an appreciation for the truth under the surface.

The result is "American Chaos", a road movie. A road movie of discovery from Trump's adopted home state of Florida to Cleveland and the Republican National Convention to the coal mines of West Virginia to an Arizona town bordering Mexico and finally, back to Florida for the election. I would sit with members of the religious right who had given Trump's morals a free pass, thousands chanting "build a wall" and "lock her up" in Cleveland; coal miners in West Virginia so angry one wanted Hillary shot for treason; Arizona ranchers on the frontlines of illegal immigration and back to Trump's home for the election. I met the people through Republican parties and as long as the people didn't feel judged and convicted, they were open and, for the most part, eager to share their stories.

Through my liberal prism, I was forced to listen and in some cases, empathize with their plights even as I could not sympathize with their solutions. And with the time to reflect on where we find ourselves now and perhaps the most important midterm elections in the nation's history fast approaching, I believe "American Chaos" has a vital relevance today as we try to understand how, in a country more divided than at any time since the Civil War, people turned to a man less prepared or presidential than any in our history.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

*“The day I started this film, I felt very strongly that people were missing something.”*

Friends and colleagues called it a fool’s errand. A certain waste of time and money.

Hillary Clinton would be elected president and Jim Stern would have no movie.

In retrospect, it’s not that these individuals — all smart, most of them highly accomplished, some major names in their fields — didn’t have their eye on the ball.

They didn’t even think the ball existed.

It was May of 2016. As word of Donald Trump’s lock on the Republican nomination swept across Los Angeles laptops and cell phones, the Tony award-winning Broadway producer, successful Hollywood filmmaker, and lifelong Democrat (with close ties to the party and the Obama administration in particular), found himself surrounded by an enthusiasm he wanted to share — but couldn’t.

“In my social and political circles, the prevailing belief was that we had just lucked into the guy we want to run against because *he can’t win*. America will never elect this guy.”

So why was Stern’s intuition tingling with alarm?

That question was the catalyst, its urgency as undeniable for Jim as its premise was unlikely for everyone else. Where they saw a sure victory, he sensed an iceberg. But for the moment, the director of AMERICAN CHAOS found it “impossible to really pinpoint and argue why.”

The sensation was acutely discomforting. Not only was Jim Stern out of step with the celebratory certitude of friends, family, and peers, there was the overwhelming consensus of veteran political professionals and the mainstream media alike.

Hard to believe given the numbing barrage of subsequent aftershocks and upheaval that this was a mere 24 months ago. For many, that time now feels like a distant era difficult to imagine, much less clearly recall. But before election night, nearly anyone would have been hard-pressed to convincingly explain how, for the first time in American history, an individual with no government or military experience whatsoever could capture the highest office of the land. “Let alone a guy who has basically been a conman his entire life,” Stern adds.

“America can’t be that.”

But his unsettling presentiment persisted. And the more he thought about it, the more Jim Stern worried that accelerated decentralization of media and culture had left people ensconced in their own carefully filtered information comfort zones. “Something that definitely didn’t exist when I was growing up, with just about everyone watching Walter Cronkite each night.” Most alarming, then, was the possibility that a new information chasm could cut both ways. Maybe small, seemingly inconsequential dams downstream, not necessarily visible at the surface, could impact

together to change even the most powerful river's course. Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, there would be a flood — at which point it would be too late.

Such thoughts kept Jim Stern up at night.

Whenever he shared them, however, the response was that he was paranoid. Questions he pondered obsessively — *why was Trump drawing such crowds, what explained his appeal, what did so many supporters see in him (and how could they overlook the rest)* — were considered by most too unpleasant and inconsequential; not worth anything beyond perfunctory examination or offhanded dismissal.

As he has often done in moments of distress and doubt, Jim Stern called the person he looks up to most in the world. In addition to being his big brother, Todd Stern is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute who was then serving as the United States special envoy for climate change. (Only a year earlier, he had made history as President Obama's chief negotiator for the Paris Agreement.) Here was a savvy, well-connected Beltway insider Jim hoped might assuage his nagging if admittedly still nebulous apprehensions.

Not quite.

“My brother's response wasn't as absolute as Trump *couldn't* win,” Stern recalls during a break from rooting on his beloved Michigan Wolverines in the NCAA finals. “But he thought I was overreacting.

“And I just thought, ‘My gut says you're all wrong and I need to find out why.’”

## ALL-IN DESPITE ALL THE ODDS

*“With a documentary, you never really know where you're going to end up.  
You only know where you're going to start.”*

In another sense, the origin of AMERICAN CHOAS really began in November of 2000, when American democracy ground to a halt with Bush versus Gore.

The outcome hanging by a chad, Stern badly wanted to start filming and capture what was surely the decisive election calamity to end all decisive election calamities (however quaint that notion seems now). But word came of two competing documentaries already under way. “And so I sort of talked myself out of it, even though I was already there in Florida at the time.”

The two other projects never happened. “And I was furious with myself.” He was also determined not to make the same mistake again. So when John Kerry challenged George W. in 2004, all Jim Stern needed to hear was “election fraud” and “Ohio.”

“As a die-hard political junkie and sports fan who pours over stats, I'd already done my own analysis, crunching the numbers like I would with investing.” (Before shifting his focus to entertainment, Jim launched the successful hedge fund Stern Joint Venture.) “So I'd already

decided that everything was going to come down to Ohio.” Only two weeks before November 2<sup>nd</sup>, he was returning from China after a screening of his Yao Ming documentary when the news broke that some 1400 “volunteers” were being dispatched to the Buckeye State to prevent any voting “improprieties.”

“So I threw together eleven people and we were on the road three days later, crisscrossing the state. And I never regretted that decision.”

The resulting documentary, ...SO GOES THE NATION (2006), may have started with a breakneck search for voter fraud but, ultimately, it shifted into a broader examination of more salient — if at times equally unseemly — factors behind the bare-knuckled, billion-dollar business of electing a United States president. The L.A. Times called it “arguably the most intelligent, kinetic analysis of the modern election process since THE WAR ROOM”, and despite Jim Stern’s personal leanings, critics including the Boston Globe’s Wesley Morris praised the film’s “nonpartisanship.”

Indeed, Stern and co-director Adam Del Deo zeroed in on Democratic failings as hard as anything else. For Stern, the real value of dissecting John Kerry’s loss was about contributing to a better future for the party he has supported since childhood. So for all the critical acclaim around its release, he truly judged ...SO GOES THE NATION a success when it was screened at the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver with a panel discussion framing it as “a cautionary tale.”

“I mean, to me, that’s about as high as you can get.”

Indeed, many influential Democrats, and one charismatic young candidate in particular, took that documentary’s tough-love lessons to heart and into action — a fact not lost on Jim Stern then, as he watched Obama make history, and definitely not lost on him now, as he releases AMERICAN CHAOS before the 2018 midterm elections in November.

But while both films unpack missteps, missed opportunities, and the ruthless efficiency of a manipulative opponent, ...SO GOES THE NATION was a conventionally structured expository documentary focused tightly on seasoned campaign professionals and their tactics. With AMERICAN CHAOS, Jim Stern makes a very different choice. Instinctively, he sensed that the most critical moving gears of this election would not be visible from the insulated vantage point of the insider.

“I just thought, I want to go and talk to people. Sure, there’s always been a current of guns, God, and country in our political mix — and I get all that. But here I sensed something else, something divergent.”

Stern stresses that he is not at all impulsive by nature. But without a master plan, he opened his own wallet, packed his bags, and — pretty much just as depicted onscreen — dove headfirst into the fray. “And, mind you, at that point, I still have no idea what I’m going to find or if it’s even a movie yet.” The production approach that quickly took shape was all about reaching deeply enthusiastic Trump supporters who were willing to open up to Stern and his small crew. More than just putting these overlooked voters on camera, Stern wanted to spend time in their towns, in their homes, with their families and friends; he wanted, wherever possible, to connect with

their deeper stories and perspectives, however difficult or distressing that could get at times.

And so while the final contours of the film were still months away from being determined, it was clear from the outset that AMERICAN CHAOS would be a cinéma-vérité road movie venturing off the beaten path through critical states with the ticking clock of the election in the background.

## UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

*“All politics is local.”*

Former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill

Looking over footage from the first few days on the road, Stern’s former editor and current producing partner happened to remark how watchable and compelling Jim was on camera. The observation came as a surprise; Stern hadn’t been planning to be in the film at all. But the idea started to resonate. For one: “I didn’t want to write things. I found that I just wanted to talk about what was happening in real time.”

That genuine, unguarded immediacy lent an important center to the CHAOS.

“Look, we needed a juxtaposition point. I felt very strongly that the film wouldn’t work with an omniscient, silent narrator. There had to be a point of view that the audience could follow, whether they agreed with it entirely or not. It had to be *Alice in Wonderland*.”

“This is not the America I thought I knew.”

So in the greatest departure from ...SO GOES THE NATION, Jim Stern made AMERICAN CHAOS a candidly personal, participatory documentary — the first in his filmmaking career. That approach ended up bringing narrative propulsion, and even some elements of suspense, to a story where everyone otherwise already knows the ending.

Throughout filming and all the many miles of traveling, “the driving angst that I’m having is thinking about how all the work my brother has done over the last seven years could be undone virtually overnight.” It’s a point Stern makes onscreen more than once. There was, however, another motivating factor, less fraught, more positive.

“I have two kids and I never want them to sit on their hands. You know, I don’t really care what they do with their lives, but I want them to be able to stand up and be counted. So the fact that I’m in a position where I have the opportunity to set that example, and not just talk about it, that’s a big deal with me.”

Born and raised in Chicago, Stern idolized Bobby Kennedy long before he could vote. His family and seemingly the entire neighborhood were all devout Democrats, passionately engaged with politics from the dinner table to the school yard. They even harbored a sense of local pride over Mayor Daley’s rumored role in helping JFK pull the election out from under Nixon in 1960. Stern shares all that and more in AMERICAN CHAOS, opening up his own American story and context before asking others to do the same. And while there are surely viewers who will not

fully agree with his politics, anyone who sees AMERICAN CHAOS will recognize Jim Stern's fundamental goodwill, generosity of spirit, and purity of purpose. He brought to the film and his subjects a rare level of humility and capacity to listen that proved indispensable in terms of taking viewers to places and insights they would otherwise never reach.

But while Jim Stern is an open book onscreen, during production there were a few moments when he felt just slightly like one of his fictional heroes, John LeCarre's masterful spy George Smiley. This wasn't a sting operation: Stern simply worried that if he was immediately pegged as a California liberal, certain subjects might stand off, shut down, or at least hold back. "What I told everyone was, 'You're going to get an honest and fair hearing.'" And Stern kept his word. Beyond that, he strained before each critical first conversation with a Trump supporter — always shy of dishonesty — to keep his views and background out of the frame.

Of course, a simple Google search would have laid all those personal and political details bare. But to Stern's surprise, no one seemed to bother.

In West Virginia, however, one subject took the matter up directly. Before agreeing to sit for an interview, the gentleman — a proud gun owner virulently opposed to Hillary Clinton — insisted that Jim first reveal who he would be voting for.

"So I said, 'Look, if I were to tell you that I'm supporting Trump, you'd be too comfortable and not dig deep enough to make your case. And if I tell you that I'm supporting Hillary, you'll probably decide off the bat that you don't like me. So how about this: after the interview, I promise to share.'"

The man agreed, eventually relaying his view that Hillary Clinton was a traitor deserving of the death penalty. Hurriedly packing his gear afterwards, Stern stiffened when reminded of their agreement.

"I told him that while I had been planning to vote for Hillary Clinton, he'd given me a lot of information to consider."

A greater test of Stern's espionage-esque mettle came at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, de facto "enemy territory" legitimately buffered by some of the most stringent security anywhere. Officially, the best Stern could do for himself and his director of photography was twenty short minutes inside the convention a full two hours before it actually began.

Eighteen minutes in, Stern spied a section of seats with a prime view. He chatted up a security guard, learning the area was reserved but didn't require physical tickets. Now it was time to hand back his limited credentials. Moving deftly, he ducked with his DP into a bathroom and, after laying low a while, blended in with the arriving crowd, circling back to the reserved section, and bluffing their way in.

Once seated, they didn't dare move for the next seven hours, getting prime footage of the convention — replete with thundering chants of "Lock her up!"

Through the looking glass indeed.

## CHAOS FOUND

*“It was a hard movie to cut, trying to find the right balance between the election part of it and what’s more interesting, which is the personal part.”*

After watching an early cut of AMERICAN CHAOS, Stern’s friend Ira Glass, the veteran radio broadcaster and a filmmaker himself, admitted that, despite loving the film, he would have probably pushed back more with the red state subjects.

Jim gets that. He was sorely tempted at times. “And as the film went on further, it was harder for me, honestly. If I sensed a legitimate issue, that was one thing. But people who just seemed vicious in very half-baked ways made things tough.”

Still, the harder choice, to resist arguing, was the right choice for the film. And when the whirlwind of it all overwhelmed or deflated him, Jim showed that onscreen. “Sure, you can put your head in the sand while shaking your fist. And, yes, often that’s less painful. But it doesn’t get you anywhere.”

While reflecting back on the highs and lows of production, Stern is just as voluble as he appears in AMERICAN CHAOS, though considerably more at ease. Only one question appears to throw him: A week before the election, what did he think the film was going to be?

Long pause.

“I’ll tell you what I *hoped* it was going to be,” he finally says with a laugh. “I hoped it was going to be a cautionary tale about what *almost* happened.”

His smile evaporates. “But I was very, very, very unsettled.”

There’s a phenomenon with deeply-embedded filmmaking, he found, that’s somewhat akin to the Stockholm syndrome. Riding “a personal rollercoaster of overdosing on information” leaves you swayed by whoever you are closest to at the time. Then, finally overwhelmed and exhausted enough, you start to “gravitate to towards the information that makes you feel better.”

With the election drawing near, there was no lack of people and institutions ready to insist it was already over and “she is absolutely going to win.” Stern recalls a sense of relief talking to his daughter, who was studying abroad, composing a blog post from Copenhagen about what America’s first woman president meant to her. All felt right in the world.

The day after the election, despondent, Stern found himself on the phone with his 94-year-old mother. “Well, dear, look at it this way,” she comforted. “Now you have a movie.”

From there, a second wave of pushback among Stern’s friends and colleagues corresponded to the Kübler-Ross stages of grief and loss. Still caught up in the throes of anger over the election, many were disappointed that AMERICAN CHAOS was not, well, a Michael Moore film. Or a John Oliver rant. Or a *Daily Show* rant. Or a Samantha Bee rant. (They’d even settle for a Bill Maher rant.) They couldn’t help but crave the comfort of something that conformed to the now-ubiquitous outrage industry, with its formula of wrapping political commentary in scorched-earth

comedy clickbait. To many, the more eviscerating the better.

And that, as Stern sees it, remains part of the problem.

“First of all, as a practical matter, it’s just not who I am. It’s not in my personality to do that. But in a larger context — while I can enjoy political comedy and sharp skewing as much as anyone when it’s smart — I think the popularity of all that has overflowed through our culture to an extent that is really problematic, seeping into places where it’s profoundly unhelpful.” The endless punching down and gotcha ambushing, Stern feels, has become *de rigueur* to the point of intellectual rigor mortis.

“The idea that you go in, in a kind of haughty way, then twist people around to make a point and snarkily joke about them I think is really, really pernicious. It’s definitely part of the problem on the liberal side as to why people are upset.”

“And,” he adds, “the fact of the matter is, if I personally came away with *one thing* from the experience of making this movie, it is the realization that while you shouldn’t have sympathy with certain views, you need to have empathy for the people harboring them and the difficult circumstances they’re in.”

## THE ROAD AHEAD

*“Yes, it’s a historical record of a painful misstep.  
But, ultimately, this film is really about what happens next.”*

Beyond the prescience of Jim’s Stern’s instincts and the insights they produced, what is most remarkable about AMERICAN CHAOS is how the film manages to be unflinching where it needs to be while still hopeful where it can be.

And to bring this passion project to an audience, Stern knew there could be no better partner than Sony Pictures Classics. Not only did he already have a successful working relationship with Michael Barker, Tom Bernard, and the entire team through previous projects, most of the documentaries he most admires were released by the studio, including his absolute favorite, Errol Morris’ Academy Award-winning THE FOG OF WAR.

“Great documentaries are not always perfectly easy to sit through,” he points out. The best of them often make us face “difficult truths and human struggles.” THE FOG OF WAR, in particular, hammered home that “you have to be able to have a dialog with people.” One could say that AMERICAN CHAOS takes viewers beyond the fog of the 2016 election to see difficult truths and human struggles that were missed at the time in order to foster dialog now. “In the film, we are seeing something *before it happens*,” Stern emphasizes. “There is something incredibly, I think, compelling and important about that. And I think if you want to win in the midterms, if you want to win in 2020, if you want to change our circumstances, you need to understand how it was missed.”

“Meanwhile, Sony Classics has been at the forefront throughout their wonderful history of giving

us those kinds of challenging, important, inspiring films. And that's why I wanted to do this with them."

Stern may have been an American Studies major in college, but his interest in our history, and our future, transcends the academic. "To me, yes, this election went incredibly wrong and all the rest," he explains. "But I still love America and think it's really beautiful that people care this much every four years." And if his drive wasn't so self-evidently heartfelt, AMERICAN CHAOS wouldn't be nearly as emotionally resonant — a foundation that bears the weight of events which still remain unbearable for some viewers.

But they will come around, Stern believes. "People are going to want to watch this film. I hope they are willing to see it *now*, but this is going to be an important film in the long run."

"I have no doubt."

And he also remains unabashed about his aim to rally dismayed moderates, progressives, and conservatives who are eager for a new direction. But especially his fellow Democrats.

"For those who share my hopes for the party and winning, I think it's critical that we listen in a way where we're truly listening to the other side so that, in the process of that listening, we can actually adopt points of view which will help us govern and help us win," Stern notes. "And on the conservative side, the film is an opportunity to be heard in a documentary that allowed them to express what they feel the liberal media suppresses, and reach people they believe don't see or care about them."

"So I think both sides have a strong incentive to experience and support this film."

Still, he must be worried that some viewers will resist reengaging with events that continue to feel like raw wounds, no?

"Look, you can't win elections unless you actually understand who you're trying to win elections *from* and *with*," Stern replies. "You just can't." That was true when his AMERICAN CHAOS journey began, and maybe even more so today. "America is a complicated and large place. It's diverse geographically, it's diverse racially, and I think if you close yourself off and say 'We hate them. These people have fucked us and we hate them,' then all that's going to happen is we're going to be locked in this crazy two-step where every eight years, possibly, our side screws them, and the rest of the time their side screws us."

Jim Stern found the story that virtually everyone else missed, despite more cameras aimed at the presidential election than ever before in history, by sidestepping "social media and the blogosphere" where "too many people just wanted to dismiss and scream at each other." And, in his view, Democrats repeatedly make the mistake of letting their focus lapse when it comes to the realities of the playing field — particularly the deep yards between New York and Los Angeles.

"And so if you want to try and actually win elections, you better forget about Nancy Pelosi and you better get your ass out the door and start trying to do a little bit of what we did in the movie," he insists. "Because in my mind, there's no nobility in losing. Not when you end up with the

worst administration in our history, *by far*.”

And so, as with ...SO GOES THE NATION, AMERICAN CHAOS holds up a rearview mirror to some of his beloved party’s most self-defeating blind spots. And it’s perhaps worth recalling that in the wake of that prior film’s tough-love came the antidotal ascent of his fellow Chicagoan, Barack Obama, who ran to the populist left of the party establishment wing that clumsily advanced Mr. Kerry. (In fact, Stern publicly declared his desire for an Obama presidency on C-SPAN a full *two years* before the 2008 election.)

So, naturally, the director-producer hopes that his filmmaking can once again contribute to resetting calibrations and clearing the deck for an even stronger leap forward. AMERICAN CHAOS is a film about listening, about picking up fateful tremors that were not registering where they should have been — but now, as the time arrives to share that work, Citizen Stern is not hesitant about expressing his own views. He is an advocate and an activist, and wants to see a change in government that can only begin with a change in tactics.

“As someone famously said, Democrats’ goal is to govern, Republicans’ goal is to win. And I think that if you don’t understand *how* you win, *who* you’re trying to win *with* and *from*, you won’t win. And so we have a real risk on our hands of losing ground on issues that could do irrevocable damage to the world and our future.” The issue closest to Jim being climate change.

But, again, he doesn’t think the film’s appeal or perspective is narrowly partisan, and took pains to craft it accordingly. “Ultimately, this is a movie about America and the threat to America, and to all Americans, of losing our future potential and what we can accomplish only by being a united America.”

And so AMERICAN CHAOS vividly demonstrates how a commitment to the difficult, sometimes painful, but ultimately redemptive process of searching for connections and insights can bring light to electoral darkness. “Simple as it may sound, we all need to have an open mind and an open heart. *That’s* what this movie is about, and I’m really proud that I was able to take that journey, and listen to those people, and try to put it all in a context which I think will have real significance and actually make an appreciable difference on our politics and on our society.”

It is an unlikely cinematic accomplishment turned indispensable historical document — particularly for the next generation of leaders.

As President Obama says in a clip, “We learn from our mistakes, we do some reflection, we lick our wounds, we brush ourselves off, we get back in the arena, we go at it.”

“And we try even harder the next time.”

## **James D. Stern Biography**

Director, writer, and producer of AMERICAN CHAOS James D. Stern is also the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Endgame Entertainment. He founded Endgame as a private entertainment financing and production fund in 2003.

Stern has financed and co-financed more than 30 films, several Broadway shows, and various other entertainment properties. His company, Endgame Entertainment, is now one of the fastest-climbing companies in Hollywood.

He is currently in post-production on David Lowery's THE OLD MAN AND THE GUN, starring Casey Affleck, Robert Redford and Sissy Spacek. He's also in post-production on Josh Marston's COME SUNDAY, starring Chiwetel Ejiofor and Martin Sheen. Netflix recently released THE DISCOVERY, directed by Charlie McDowell and starring Robert Redford, Jason Segel, and Rooney Mara.

His past feature films have included Rian Johnson's sleeper hit LOOPER; Lone Scherfig's AN EDUCATION, which earned three Academy Award nominations including Best Picture and Best Actress (Carey Mulligan); Oliver Stone's SNOWDEN; Steven Soderbergh's acclaimed SIDE EFFECTS; and the popular documentary EVERY LITTLE STEP, exploring the creation and revival of Broadway's beloved musical *A Chorus Line*, which he co-directed and produced. His other notable movies include Todd Haynes' I'M NOT THERE, for which Cate Blanchett won a Golden Globe Award and was an Academy Award nominee; Rian Johnson's THE BROTHERS BLOOM; Danny Leiner's HAROLD & KUMAR GO TO WHITE CASTLE; and Terry George's HOTEL RWANDA, nominated for three Academy Awards including Best Actor (Don Cheadle).

Additionally, Stern produced the Netflix series "Last Chance U" which won this year's International Documentary Award for Best Episodic Series. He is also a two-time Tony Award-winning producer (*The Producers*, *Hairspray*) and has produced many Broadway shows including the international hit, *Stomp*.

## Essay by Mark Hertsgaard

The documentary **American Chaos** does what the big US news outlets should have done, but didn't, during the 2016 presidential election campaign. Six months before Election Day, film and stage producer and lifelong Chicago Democrat Jim Stern was appalled and befuddled that a man like Donald Trump would even be considered a legitimate presidential candidate, much less have just clinched the Republican party nomination. So Stern set off around the country to talk with the voters propelling Trump's improbable rise to power. Talk with, mind you, not talk at. Stern explicitly decided not to argue with Trump supporters but rather to listen—and try to understand why millions of Americans were putting their faith in someone Stern, like many others at home and abroad, viewed as an obvious con man, not to mention a danger to the republic.

The resulting documentary, aptly titled **American Chaos**, not only illuminates the US political landscape in the lead-up to crucial mid-term elections in November 2018. With its deft character profiles and its you-are-there immersions in grassroots electoral activism in such key swing states as Florida and Ohio, **American Chaos** will be of enduring value in years to come as journalists, scholars, students, activists and citizens seek to comprehend how the world's proudest democracy could have elevated a man of Donald Trump's temperament and background to the most powerful office on earth.

You may think you already know this story, but the 90 minutes of **American Chaos** will make you think again. Remarkably, it is a film that should appeal to people on all sides, because it is notably fair to its featured Trump supporters. Stern shrewdly lets them speak, giving them free reign to express exactly what they think.

Some of the testimony is riveting. There's the West Virginia coal miner who explains in a slow, angry drawl why Hillary Clinton deserves the death penalty for treason before adding, "99 percent of the people around here are well armed." There's the evangelical preacher who rationalizes supporting the philandering Trump by saying, "We're not electing him pastor" and "God can use good kings and bad kings." And there is Stern's own conclusion that Clinton's deriding of Trump voters as "deplorables" was the decisive gaffe of her campaign: "How does she not know that that will be an absolute battle cry for his supporters?"

It may seem an obvious point that Trump triumphed by telling people what they wanted to hear, but **American Chaos** takes the crucial next step of showing—in the kind of human terms Hillary Clinton and mainstream Democrats never embraced—why people were desperate enough to believe Trump's blarney: because America's working and middle classes had been losing jobs and income for decades and were convinced the system was rigged against them. "Where do we go?" one workingman plaintively asks. "How do we get work?"

Sometimes the truth is right in front of us, if we only dare to see it. That is the accomplishment of **American Chaos**. Stern's final words in the film should be etched into every candidate's electoral playbook in 2018 and 2020, whatever their party affiliation: "I found people who felt like they weren't being heard. So, really, was it surprising that they listened to a man who told them they would no longer be forgotten?"