All The President's Menace: 'Fear' is a devastating portrait of White House chaos

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By Glenn C. Altschuler

Following the Charlottesville debacle and President Donald Trump’s comment that some of the white supremacist, neo-Nazi, and KKK marchers were “very fine people,” Sen. Bob Corker told reporters the president had not yet demonstrated “the stability nor some of the competence” he needed to succeed in office. Politico declared that Mr. Trump used anger “to manage staff, express his displeasure or simply as an outlet that soothes him.”

In “Fear: Trump in the White House,” Bob Woodward, associate editor of The Washington Post and author or co-author of 18 books, including, “All the President’s Men,” “Final Days,” “Bush’s War,” “Obama’s Wars,” and “The Price of Politics” draws on in-depth interviews with key White House advisers to depict the “nervous breakdown of the executive power of the most powerful country in the world.”

Mr. Woodward is by no means the first person to document dysfunction in the Trump White House. His reputation as a nonpartisan investigative reporter and two Pulitzer Prizes (for coverage of Watergate and 9/11), however, add credibility to claims that Mr. Trump is unfit to be president.

“Fear” employs Mr. Woodward’s signature style. He relies on an accumulation of anecdotes and verbatim quotations from interviews, rather than his own explicit judgments, to shape his analysis. For this book, which covers Mr. Trump’s first 15 months in office, Mr. Woodward has an abundance of explosive material.

Drawing as he does from the assessments of Mr. Trump’s own appointees, Mr. Woodward’s portrait of the president is devastating. Donald Trump, staff secretary Rob Porter concluded, “did not want to be derailed by forethought.” He did not prepare or listen to advice and had no idea how government functioned. He gave himself high marks for everything he said and did.

After learning he had been fired in a presidential tweet, former White House Chief of Staff Reince

"FEAR: TRUMP IN THE WHITE HOUSE"
By Bob Woodward
Simon & Schuster ($30).
Priebus realized that Mr. Trump “has zero psychological ability to recognize empathy or pity in any way.”

According to former adviser Steve Bannon, grievance was at the core of Mr. Trump’s character; his belittling of Attorney General Jeff Sessions as “mentally retarded” was “very much like a 14-year-old boy who felt he was being picked on unfairly.” John Dowd, Mr. Trump’s former lawyer, Mr. Woodward reveals, could not quite bring himself to tell the president that his tweets, his boasts, his cries of “Fake News,” left little doubt that he was an “[expletive] liar.”

Mr. Trump’s inner circle, Mr. Priebus pointed out, was composed of people — daughter Ivanka, son-in-law Jared Kushner, Kellyanne Conway, and Mr. Bannon — who had little or no experience in government. Worse yet, they were “natural predators.”

“When you put a snake and a rat and a falcon and a rabbit and a shark and a seal in a zoo without walls,” Mr. Priebus added, “things start getting nasty and bloody.”

The adults in the room — Secretary of Defense James Mattis, National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, Chief Economic Adviser Gary Cohn, and Mr. Porter – Mr. Woodward reveals, ultimately felt compelled to take steps to thwart the president’s volatile and dangerous impulses.

Mr. Cohn removed from the president’s desk a letter announcing the withdrawal of the United States from a trade agreement with South Korea. Mr. Mattis ignored Mr. Trump’s order to assassinate Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, Mr. Porter “slow walked” Mr. Trump’s proposed executive orders on tariffs, NAFTA and NATO, relying on the president’s stunningly short attention span to derail them.

“Fear” is not without flaws. Mr. Woodward relies too heavily on the judgment of people, like Mr. Cohn and Mr. Porter, who granted him access. He does not supply the context, to cite two examples, for the Trump Tower meeting and Jeff Sessions’ decision to recuse himself from the Justice Department’s investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 election.

He does not discuss ethics scandals, Mr. Trump’s assaults on the media and his own intelligence agencies and his political opponents. He lets stand (without introducing contrary views) his own comment to “Fox News Sunday” that the Steele dossier was a “garbage document” and Mr. Dowd’s claim that Robert Mueller has no case for either collusion or obstruction of justice.

That said, the publication of “Fear” and, in the same week, the anonymous letter in the New York Times by a senior official in the administration, make it even more difficult to deny that the Trump administration is chaotic — and our president is self-absorbed, uninformed and impulsive.
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