

Tell-all book on Trump White House intensifies US political crisis

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The release Friday of the damning book on Donald Trump and his inner circle, *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*, has brought the political crisis in Washington to a new pitch of intensity. The devastating picture by journalist Michael Wolff, based largely on interviews with Trump's former top aide Stephen Bannon, of chaos, incompetence and ignorance, centered in the figure of the president himself, has escalated the fracturing of the US political establishment.

The publisher, Henry Holt & Co., moved up the date of release to Friday after Trump's attorneys sent cease-and-desist letters to Holt, Wolff and Bannon in an attempt to block the book's release, following the publication of excerpts in the press beginning on Wednesday. Bookstores sold out within minutes of opening, and the book immediately reached the top of national best-seller lists.

The book quotes Bannon and cites other top White House officials who describe Trump as infantile, erratic, barely literate, an "idiot" and a "moron." In a particularly revealing passage, Wolff writes: "He didn't process information in any conventional sense. He didn't read. He didn't really even skim. Some believed that for all practical purposes he was no more than semi-literate."

The book has received nonstop media coverage and provided new ammunition for those factions within the ruling class and the state that are pushing for Trump's removal from office, either by forcing him to resign, invoking the 25th Amendment to the Constitution, which provides for the removal of a president who can no longer serve, or by means of impeachment.

There are two main prongs to this offensive: the claim that Trump is mentally unfit to serve as president and charges that he colluded with Russia in its alleged meddling in the 2016 election and is guilty of obstruction of justice in connection with the Justice Department's Russia investigation.

Fueling the latter charge, Bannon is quoted in the Wolff book as calling the June 2016 Trump Tower meeting between Trump campaign officials, including Jared Kushner, Donald Trump Jr. and then-campaign head Paul Manafort, and various Russians "treasonous" and "unpatriotic." Bannon adds that there is "no chance" Trump did not know of the meeting.

Trump has fiercely denounced Wolff and, above all, Bannon, effectively severing relations with his former top aide, at least for the present, and rallying support from within the Republican establishment, including among former backers of Bannon.

NBC News' "Today Show" featured a friendly interview with Wolff Friday morning, in which the author made the case that Trump is unfit for his office. "I will tell you," he said, "the one description that everyone gave, everyone had in common: They all say he is like a child. And what they mean by that is, he has a need for immediate gratification. It is all about him."

Wolff added that "100 percent of the people around" Trump, "senior advisors, family members, every single one of them, questions his intelligence and fitness for office." He singled out as a sign of mental decline that Trump's habit of repeating statements and phrases has grown noticeably more pronounced in the course of his year in office.

This followed a half-hour interview with former Vice President Joe Biden on Thursday evening's PBS nightly news program, in which Biden was asked directly of Trump: "It's been a year. Is he fit to be president?"

Biden avoided a direct answer, but said that Trump "undermines the office" and "our place in the world."

Asked if he agreed with the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, who said on Sunday that the United States under Trump was closer than ever before to nuclear war, Biden replied, "Yes, I do."

On Friday, the *New York Times* ran as its Republican lead story a report making the case for an obstruction of justice charge against Trump by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, who is investigating Russia's supposed intervention into the 2016 elections in opposition to Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and possible collusion by the Trump campaign.

Featuring the sub-headline, "Obstruction of Justice Is Viewed as Central to Mueller's Scrutiny," the article cites unnamed sources, evidently from within the Mueller investigation, who say Trump ordered his White House counsel to pressure Attorney General Jeff Sessions not to recuse himself in the Justice Department's Russia probe. When Sessions recused himself in March, Trump reacted with fury and threatened to fire him.

The article, also citing the Mueller investigation, claims that former White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus turned over handwritten notes of conversations with Trump that corroborate the testimony of former FBI Director James Comey about improper efforts by Trump to pressure him into publicly declaring that Trump was not a target of his investigation. Trump fired Comey last May after he refused to end his investigation of former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn. The deputy attorney general then appointed former FBI Director Mueller as special counsel to head up the investigation.

The pro-Trump camp, for its part, has launched its own counteroffensive. On Thursday night, Rebekah Mercer, the daughter of hedge fund billionaire and long-time Bannon backer Robert Mercer, released a statement backing Trump and disavowing Bannon. She added, "I have a minority interest in *Breitbart News* and I remain committed to my support for them"—suggesting she might move to push Bannon out. Questioned Thursday at her White House news briefing on the matter, Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said, "I certainly think that's something they should look at and consider."

The *Wall Street Journal* published an editorial Friday praising Trump for breaking with Bannon. Alluding to last month's passage of a multitrillion-dollar tax cut for the rich, the newspaper wrote: "The Trump-Bannon divorce is therefore a political relief ... The president's successes have come when he has bursts of discipline while pursuing the more conventional conservative agenda on judges, tax reform, regulation and foreign policy."

Also on Friday, press reports emerged that the FBI has for months been investigating the Clinton Foundation, in accordance with repeated accusations by Trump and some

Republicans that Hillary Clinton, while secretary of state, granted favors to foreign donors to the foundation.

And two Republican members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Chairman Charles Grassley and Lindsey Graham, sent a referral to the Justice Department requesting that it open up a criminal investigation of Christopher Steele, the former British spy who authored the dossier on alleged Trump campaign collusion with Russia. Steele's dossier was cited in last January's intelligence report claiming, without providing any real evidence, that Russia had hacked Democratic Party emails and otherwise meddled in the election in order to tip the campaign in favor of Trump.

Despite the intensity of the conflict within the political establishment and the state, it has not arisen because of disagreements with the reactionary political agenda of the Trump administration. Rather, it is rooted in a loss of confidence within sections of the ruling class that Trump is capable of carrying the agenda out.

Trump himself is not some alien aberration of an otherwise healthy social and political system. He is the ugly product of American bourgeois politics, the embodiment of all that is corrupt and backward after decades of political reaction, unending war and social counterrevolution. In his narcissism and single-minded concern for his own wealth and power, he personifies the American financial oligarchy, which, along with the military and the CIA, dominates his administration.

The United States in 2018 faces major geopolitical challenges, an extremely unstable financial situation and the prospect of growing opposition in the working class. Under these conditions, there is a sense in significant sections of the ruling class that Trump is neither intellectually nor politically up to the task of defending its interests. Hence the accelerating drive for a palace coup to replace him with a more effective and no less ruthless head of state.



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