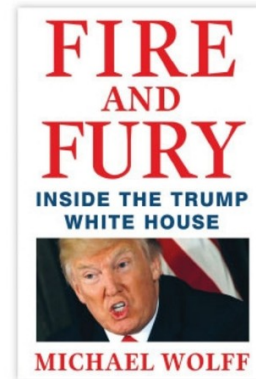




Manufacturing a Madman

From the print edition of *The New American*

***Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*, by Michael Wolff, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2018, 336 pages, hardcover.**



According to Michael Wolff's new best-seller, *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*, Donald Trump did not think he would win the election — but that's okay, because neither did anyone else in his inner circle. In fact, Melania *hoped* he would not win. He promised her he would not. When he did accidentally win, he was shocked, even upset. He only ran in an effort to build up the value of his brand and make himself the most famous man in the world — “a martyr to crooked Hillary” who fought against impossible odds only to have the election stolen from him. His behavior is so bizarre that his inner circle is in a constant state of incredulity. He is paranoid and afraid of being poisoned. He is illiterate. He was unable to have the Constitution explained to him and is ignorant of politics and the key players involved. He is insane. He is unfit for office.

The first thing an attentive reader notices about *Fire and Fury* (besides the cover, which looks like something a fourth-grader would mock up in an introductory Photoshop class) is that the book is filled to overflowing with he-said-she-said, over-the-top, salacious, scathing gossip that Wolff claims he uncovered as a result of “more than two hundred interviews” that he doggedly conducted “over a period of eighteen months.” The biggest problem with that is that Wolff — claiming to have spent all that time and effort collecting gossip — dumps it all on the reader without anything resembling a journalist's skill for fact-checking. The reader is left to sort through it all and decide what to believe — which puts the reader in the exact same spot Wolff claims for himself in the “Author's Note,” where he writes:

Many of the accounts of what has happened in the Trump White House are in conflict with one another; many, in Trumpian fashion, are baldly untrue. Those conflicts, and that looseness with the truth, if not with reality itself, are an elemental thread of the book. Sometimes I have let the players offer their versions, in turn allowing the reader to judge them. In other instances I have, through a consistency in accounts and through sources I have come to trust, settled on a version of events I believe to be true.

With phrases such as “baldly untrue” and “looseness with the truth,” the book is not exactly off to a credible start. In fact, even before that excerpt, Wolff writes that the book is based on “conversations that took place over a period of eighteen months with the president, with most members of his senior staff — some of whom talked to me dozens of times — and with many people who they in turn spoke to.” Just who are these “many people who [Wolff's 'sources'] in turn spoke to” and how is the reader to judge their anonymous credibility? Even more pressing, in what world is reporting on “Well, here's what *I heard*” considered journalism?



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Throughout the book, Wolff shows his penchant for throwing out explosive “facts” — often without giving the reader any benefit of citation or context. The reader is expected to take the claims at face value. After all, it is assumed as common knowledge that Donald Trump is mentally unstable. So there is no need to document the claims that “everyone” knows are true.

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If there is anything true in the book (which is conceivable), the reader is out of luck discovering it amid the rumor, gossip, insinuation, and innuendo that mark the entire style of this book.

Claiming to be an account — in “as contemporaneous a fashion as possible” — the book is broken down into chapters that follow a roughly chronological order. An example of one of Wolff’s explosive “facts” — that no one, including Trump, actually thought he would win — is found in the chapter “Election Day.” Wolff writes:

Almost everybody in the campaign, still an extremely small outfit, thought of themselves as a clear-eyed team, as realistic about their prospects as perhaps any in politics. The unspoken agreement among them: not only would Donald Trump not be president, he should probably not be. Conveniently, the former conviction meant nobody had to deal with the latter issue.

He revisits this idea more than once throughout the book. One notable example is later in that same chapter. Addressing the Trump/Russia collusion angle and attempting to tie it to the nobody-expected-to-win claim, Wolff writes:

Almost everybody on the Trump team came with the kind of messy conflicts bound to bite a president or his staff. Mike Flynn, Trump’s future National Security Advisor, who became Trump’s opening act at campaign rallies and whom Trump loved to hear complain about the CIA and the haplessness of American spies, had been told by his friends that it had not been a good idea to take \$45,000 from the Russians for a speech. “Well, it would only be a problem if we won,” he assured them, knowing that it would therefore not be a problem.

Completely unexplained is why — if he knew that winning would make his Russian connection “a problem” — Flynn would accept a position as national security advisor to President Trump. Furthermore, is the reader really expected to believe that Clinton — who was willing to break campaign finance laws, take over the party ahead of gaining (read: stealing) the nomination, and work as hard as she did to win the election, knowing that if she did not, her many crimes could come to light — lost to a candidate who never intended to win, but was merely running as a publicity stunt? If that is true, it says a great deal more about Clinton and the DNC than it does about Trump and his team, because it would mean that Clinton lost to an accidental victor and therefore could not have won under any conceivable set of circumstances.

Even more to the point, the claim that Trump did not intend to win stands in direct opposition to the claim that he colluded with Russia to assure that he would win. Well, Mr. Wolff, which is it?

As to the assertion (again, unattributed) that “not only would Donald Trump not be president, he should probably not be,” Wolff later attempts to claim that many in Trump’s inner circle felt even more strongly that he was unfit for the office after he became president. In the chapter “General Kelly,” Wolff first introduces the “Twenty-Fifth Amendment” theme. The 25th Amendment allows the president to be removed from office if he is deemed mentally unfit — insane.



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Against the backdrop of the clash between neo-Nazis and Antifa in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 12, 2017, Wolff paints a picture of a president who — because some disagreed with his position — was considered mentally unfit for office. After President Trump said that there was “blame on both sides,” Wolff cites Steve Bannon, senior counselor to the president and co-founder of Breitbart News, as saying, “Virtually the entire senior staff and cabinet of the Trump presidency” had to “confront the very real likelihood” that Trump “didn’t have the wherewithal to adequately function in his job.” Wolff writes, “The debate, as Bannon put it, was not about whether the president’s situation was bad, but whether it was Twenty-Fifth-Amendment bad.”

Wolff was not finished flying that test balloon. In “Epilogue: Bannon and Trump,” Wolff writes:

Steve Bannon was telling people he thought there was a 33.3 percent chance that the Mueller investigation would lead to the impeachment of the president, a 33.3 percent chance that Trump would resign, perhaps in the wake of a threat by the cabinet to act on the Twenty-Fifth Amendment (by which the cabinet can remove the president in the event of his incapacitation), and a 33.3 percent chance that he would limp to the end of his term. In any event, there would certainly not be a second term, or even an attempt at one.

If Bannon really did say that (and again, there is no way to know), it fits nicely with what Trump advisor Roger Stone said in an exclusive interview with *The New American’s* Alex Newman and published online January 1 — well before the release of *Fire and Fury*. In that article, entitled “Deep State ‘Plan C’ Is to Kill Trump, Advisor Roger Stone Warns,” Stone said the Deep State has three plans to get rid of Trump. Plan A is the Mueller probe, Plan B is the 25th Amendment option, and Plan C is to kill the president. Plans A and B match perfectly with Bannon’s alleged first two “33.3 percent” options. Plan C differs in that Trump would not live to continue being a thorn in the side of the Deep State.

As to Trump’s “wide-ranging ignorance” of both politics and the key players involved, Wolff claims in the chapter “Trump Tower” that Trump did not even know who former Speaker of the House John Boehner was, saying that when former Fox News Chairman and CEO Roger Ailes suggested Boehner for chief of staff, Trump only responded by asking, “Who’s that?” Of course, Wolff runs into a problem with the facts here: Trump has golfed with Boehner and had previously tweeted about him, so he knew who Boehner was.

And while the chapter “Election Day” includes the claim — ostensibly uttered by Sam Nunberg — that Trump was unable to understand a basic explanation of the U.S. Constitution (“I got as far as the Fourth Amendment before his finger is pulling down on his lip and his eyes are rolling back in his head”), two things should be noted: (1) The Fourth Amendment comes after Articles I through VII and Amendments I through III, so Trump’s alleged weariness is not necessarily evidence of ignorance, and (2) Nunberg was fired by the Trump campaign for a series of racist Facebook posts (made before he was part of the campaign) — including one in 2007 where he wrote that Al Sharpton’s daughter is a “N—!” — apparently meaning “N****r!” That firing took place before Nunberg — who has made a cottage industry of leaking to the media — was quoted by Wolff.

And that is an important element of taking *Fire and Fury* with a grain of salt: Gossip — especially from disgruntled former (or unfaithful current) staffers — is not always accurate or honest. As Meghan McCain, daughter of Senator John McCain and the token neoconservative hostess of ABC’s *The View*, pointed out during the January 10 segment of the show featuring Wolff, “Traditionally in cases like this,



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it's the disgruntled staffers who aren't loyal to their principle that give interviews like this." No one can accuse Meghan McCain of being a Trumpeteer, but even she is unable to look the other way and pretend that Wolff — or his book — has any credibility.

In fact, before saying the above, McCain pointed out that Wolff's credibility is in question, and when he cut in with, "Remember who my credibility is being questioned by," she was loaded for bear. She responded, listing people who denied words attributed to them: "*New York Times*' Maggie Haberman, *New York Times*' Jon Martin, David Brooks, CNN's Alisyn Camerota, Tony Blair, Tom Barrack, Kate Walsh, Anna Wintour, all denying quotes. *Washington Post* reporter Mark Berman was in the Four Seasons the same time as Ivanka Trump, you admitted to mixing up Mark with Mike Berman, Trump needed the Constitution explained to him, his advisors say Nunberg has fabricated stories in the past. This goes on and on. The age of the White House communications director. There are a lot of factual errors in here."

And it's not just neocon talk-show hostesses who question the veracity of both the book and the author. Even some liberal flagships have been critical, albeit begrudgingly. NPR, which could never be accused of defending Trump, reviewed the book before its release in an article entitled "Trump Exposé Has Plenty of 'Fire and Fury,' Maybe a Little Less Substance," describing the book as "seamy, gossipy, vindictive," and "marrying the slimy and carnivalesque." The review also says, "Wolff misidentifies some facts here and there — titles, years, peripheral people," and criticizes the lack of attribution in the book, saying, "Wolff prevents anyone from evaluating his reporting (as well as the motives of those giving him information), forcing us to trust him completely." It adds, "But why should we be confident in Wolff's unsourced assertions when he makes so many small factual errors with information that is publicly available (even in spite of the fact-checkers he thanks in the acknowledgments)?" There is almost a sense of regret in the review, as if to say, "We know it's all true because it fits our preconceived idea of Trump, but where is the proof?"

And there is the rub: *Fire and Fury* does not miss its mark; it's just that the mark wasn't journalistic accuracy in the first place. The mark was book sales to people already predisposed to believe the salacious rumormongering and gossip-bearing that is the content of Wolff's 336-page screed. To that end, Wolff succeeded; as of January 24 — three weeks after release — the book had already sold 1.7 million copies and is being shopped for a television movie deal. Fake news sells.



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