

'Crazytown'

John Newsinger

Fear: Trump in the White House

Bob Woodward

New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018

Unhinged: An Insider's Account of the Trump White House

Omarosa Manigault Newman

New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018

The Shadow President: The Truth about Mike Pence

Michael D'Antonio and Peter Eisner

New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2018

Bob Woodward's *Fear* was an instant international bestseller, with sales promoted by both his Watergate reputation and by the fascination that the deranged President Trump excites. Could the man who helped bring down the last crook to occupy the White House, help bring down its current crooked occupant? The answer is, unfortunately, a decisive 'no'. Certainly there is great entertainment to be had in discovering just what a low opinion of Trump his courtiers have. Who, after all, can seriously quibble with General Kelly's assessment of the 45th President as 'an idiot [. . .] off the rails [. . .] crazytown' (p. 286); or with Rex Tillerson's description of him as 'a fucking moron' (p. 225); or Reince Priebus' belated recognition that Trump has 'zero psychological ability to recognise empathy or pity' (p. 235). But how much does all this actually tell us about the Trump administration?

Part of the problem is Woodward's very focus on Trump and his court. The book can only tell us what the people around Trump *who have been willing to speak to Woodward* have told him. By its very nature this creates some serious problems. The best example of this an account of Derek Harvey, director for the Middle East on the National Security Council staff, and the way he pushed for the administration to recognise the Iranian threat. Woodward sings the man's praises. Harvey is a 'driven legend' who 'approached intelligence like a homicide detective – sifting through thousands of pages of interrogation reports, communications intercepts, battle reports, enemy documents, raw intelligence data and nontraditional sources such as tribal leaders'. And what does this

intelligence paragon tell Jared Kushner? That Hezbollah was 'an existential threat' to Israel, and, on top of that, maintained a dangerous terrorist network 'worldwide'. They gave Trump 'a *Reader's Digest* version of the Hezbollah briefing' (pp. 108-110). This is so much nonsense, of course. Hezbollah is by no stretch of the imagination an existential threat to Israel, which is the strongest military power by far in the Middle East. Rather, Hezbollah is an obstacle to Israeli domination over Lebanon and to the Israeli Right's ambitions to annex Lebanese territory. The supposed Hezbollah threat is an Israeli fabrication that the Obama administration resisted but that the Trump administration has wholeheartedly embraced. This 'Hisbollah threat' is also part of the demonization of Iran, that is once against Israeli-inspired – with the enthusiastic assistance of Israel's covert allies, the Saudis. Instead of exploring any of this, what Woodward gives us is a chronicle of the proceedings of the Trump court as told to him by a variety of courtiers, far too often taking what they say at face value. This is not to say that there is nothing of interest. His account of Kushner urging the Saudi regime to increase their arms purchases, as a way of persuading Trump to take on board the urgency of the Iranian threat (pp. 113-114), certainly seems wholly credible. This is a matter of detail though, rather than the big picture.

The book presents an overwhelming case for Trump being an ignorant, irrational – indeed stupid – narcissist, whose only concerns are money and self-publicity. Even in the United States, he is wholly unfit to make the life and death decisions required of high political office. When General Mattis was trying to explain the importance of South Korea to US security and that not everything could be reduced to 'How much money do we make on the deal?', he was reduced to warning the President to 'Stop fucking around with this. We're doing this because we've got to prevent World War III. This isn't some business gamble where if you happen to go bankrupt or whatever, it's no big deal' (p. 306). But as far as Trump was concerned, 'The generals 'aren't sufficiently focussed on getting or making money. They don't understand what our objectives should be. . . .' (p. 230).

When it comes to the Trump campaign's collusion with the Putin's gangster state and its proxies, an act of treason that we can safely assume took place, we see another problem with Woodward's approach. It seems clear that neither Robert Mueller nor any of his people spoke to Woodward, so his account of the Mueller investigation comes from the Trump court. Once again there are some interesting details, with Trump's lawyer John Dowd making it clear to Mueller that he will not be allowed close to the President because Trump will come out of it 'looking like an

idiot . . . And I'm not going to . . . let him look like an idiot.' According to Woodward, Dowd was aware that this exchange with Mueller indicated that he (Dowd) thought Trump was 'clearly disabled' (p. 346). But what the book actually closes with is not Dowd's disappointment with Mueller's methods, with his belief that Trump 'had not colluded with Russia or obstructed justice', but with his recognition that Trump did have a 'tragic flaw': he was such 'a fucking liar'. Seriously, this racist, bigoted, sexual predator, con man and bully has a 'tragic flaw'! And this is Woodward's rather pathetic conclusion to a true crime story that makes Watergate look minor league.

Instead of exploring the criminality of the Trump Presidency, the trap that Woodward has fallen into is one of retelling the heroic stories of all the fine men (he does not really deal with any of the women) around Trump who have tried to control him and mitigate his excesses for the good of the country. At least this is the story they have all told him. *Fear* actually opens with Gary Cohn, the former president of Goldman Sachs, removing a draft letter terminating the US-South Korean Free Trade Agreement from Trump's desk, confident that the President would soon forget all about it. 'I stole it off his desk [. . .] I wouldn't let him see it. He's never going to see that document. Got to protect the country.' (pp. XVIII-XIX). Cohn is nearly pushed over the edge by Trump's performance after Charlottesville, outraged by his failure to condemn the Far Right and his apparent lack of concern at the open display of neo-Nazi anti-Semitism. He goes to see the President clutching his letter of resignation but Trump deflects the blame, telling Cohn to his face that his decision had been unduly influenced by his wife. Trump also told him with considerable venom that he was committing 'treason' by resigning . . . and Cohn backed down (pp. 248-249). He eventually resigned over Trump's imposition of tariffs, realising – according to Woodward, not for the first time – that the President was 'a professional liar' (p. 338). Professional does seem a bit excessive here: 'irrational, compulsive liar' seems a more accurate description.

Far from containing Trump and mitigating his excesses, his courtiers can best be seen as enablers, as accessories, and this is surely how they will come to be seen in the fullness of time. But this leaves open the question of why it is that someone as unfit for the Presidency as Trump, someone whose actions actually threaten the interests of American Capitalism, has not been removed from office. Woodward's narrow focus on the Trump court does not really help us here. There seem to be three main factors. One is certainly the support given to Trump by Fox News, systematically lying and distorting on his behalf and denigrating his

opponents. The second is the hate-filled nationalist movement his continual campaigning (and Fox News) has sustained – and that has successfully cowed the Republican establishment. And third is his deal with the Christian Right, giving them free rein to curb gay rights, abortion rights and family planning, women’s rights and to roll back state regulation and begin the dismantling of state school provision. He has promised them, and is indeed delivering into their hands, control of the Supreme Court. The custodian of this deal is Vice President Mike Pence. Woodward does not really engage with any of this.

What of Omarosa Manigault Newman’s memoir, *Unhinged?* She is not even mentioned by Woodward and yet her account is nevertheless of interest for an understanding of the Trump court – or cult as she terms it. What has helped to play down her importance is the obvious contradiction between her clear and determined attempt to benefit herself (like all loyal members of the Trump cult) with a claimed interest in benefiting the African-American community. The contradiction has led to the value of her account being underestimated. She is quite open about how ‘being in Trumpworld was lucrative’ and how from her time on the Apprentice onwards they had a relationship that was ‘symbiotic; we exploited each other’ (p. XXIX). Even back then, though, she still claims to have seen herself as representing ‘my community . . . as a strong black woman’.

When she gets involved in the Trump campaign, she acknowledges that her role was to be there so Trump could point to her and say ‘I’m not a racist misogynist. Look at all I’ve done for Omarosa’ (p. 66). She was there ‘to fix the woman problem’ (p. 78). And, when six former Apprentice contestants came forward to accuse Trump of racism, she ‘knew that it would be up to me to figure out how to combat these accusations’. Her strategy was, as she quite bluntly puts it, to say that ‘He can’t be a racist if he’s been so good to me’ (pp. 107-108). And yet, even after all this, she still purports to be surprised and hurt when the African-American community turns its back on both her and Trump. She is incredulous when the Black Lives Matter campaign rejects her advances and hilariously suggests that, if she could have brought about a meeting between them and Trump, it could have been as momentous as the meeting between Lyndon Johnson and Martin Luther King was for the cause of Civil Rights. And this is from someone who sees Trump’s ‘greatest character flaw’ as being, not his lying, but the fact that ‘he had no empathy for anyone period . . . his complete and total lack of empathy’ (p. 114). What we get from Manigault Newman is continual whining about how her efforts to advance the interests of the African-American community within the Trump administration went

unacknowledged. Instead she got an immense amount of abuse and many of her friends stopped talking to her. She was particularly put out when Spike Lee laid into her (p. 116).

At the same time, she claims to have been becoming increasingly concerned by Trump's 'racial agenda'. (p. 127) To begin with she thought he was 'racial' rather than 'racist' and that he used 'race and racial relations to manipulate people', that his racial statements were, in her words, 'strategically controversial', intended to mobilise 'a subset of the American population, the so-called forgotten man' (pp. 73-74). Over time though, she came to recognise that the distinction that she had made between racial and racist 'was a deception'. 'It hurt to see the truth about him', she writes, but she had gone 'through the pain of witnessing his racism with my own eyes and hearing it with my own ears' (pp. 292-293). She recalls her incredulity when trying to ensure that Obama's intention of putting Harriet Tubman's face on the twenty dollar bill went forward, only for Trump to respond with 'You want to put that face on the twenty-dollar bill?' (p. 295). The problem with all this, of course, is that she did not resign in disgust, but was fired by General Kelly for 'significant integrity issues'. (p. X) Now the very idea of anyone being fired from Trump's White House for 'integrity issues' is hardly plausible and her own account suggests that suspicions of disloyalty seems much more likely. She claims to be increasingly exercised by the imminent likelihood of a tape emerging from her time on the Apprentice, one where Trump repeatedly uses the 'N-word', and it was this that prompted her removal (p. XII). Who knows and, given the enormity of what is going on in the United States, who even cares?

What she does have to say about Trump would have once been enough to seriously damage, if not destroy a politician. Today it is merely commonplace. Writing as an insider, she tells us that Trump's Obama birther scam was merely him 'testing the gullibility of the voting public' (p. 58); that his feelings towards his daughter Ivanka jump 'right over' the line in what is appropriate in a father-daughter relationship: 'I believe he covets his daughter' (p. 44); that everyone in the White House was told that they had 'to back up whatever the president said or tweeted, regardless of its accuracy' (p. 211); that Trump can barely read (p. 226); and that he is undergoing a process of serious 'mental decline' (p. 246). Having seen Trump on the TV news standing in the burned-out ruins of the Californian town of Paradise and consistently referring to it as the town of Pleasure (an interesting Freudian slip!) until some brave soul corrected him, certainly seems to bear out the mental decline thesis. Her revelation that Trump seriously thought he could be

sworn in as President using his *The Art of the Deal* instead of the Bible certainly demonstrates his incredible ignorance and stupidity: 'Just think how many copies I'd sell'. As she points out, he has 'no knowledge of the Bible at all. It might as well be a paper brick to him' (p. 196). Manigault Newman is herself an ordained Baptist minister, although it is worth remembering that in the United States this can well be a business decision rather than a spiritual calling. She takes great exception to Trump's spiritual adviser, Paula White, making clear in a very nudge-nudge sort of way that she 'never heard anything that made me wonder about the nature of their relationship'. In which case, why raise it? Indeed, as she admits, despite never hearing anything, she could still not stop herself wondering whether or not 'her position as his spiritual advisor had ever been missionary' (p. 196). The author very much gives the impression that she saw herself in the role of his spiritual adviser.

Which brings us to Mike Pence: as far as Manigault Newman is concerned 'As bad as you think Trump is, you should be worried about Pence [. . .] We would be begging for the days of Trump back if Pence became president'. He is waiting there with his team, 'biding their time until Trump is impeached or resigns' (p. 325). And so we turn to Michael D'Antonio and Peter Eisner's biography of Mike Pence, *The Shadow President*. Of the three books under review here, *The Shadow President* has had the lowest sales and has attracted the least attention. This is unfortunate because it is by far the best of the three books and, one suspects, is likely to become essential reading in the not too distant future. The Democrat capture of the House of Representatives makes Trump increasingly vulnerable to investigation into his administration's criminality and, given his mental decline, his response is bound to be increasingly unstable. An eventual Pence Presidency looks increasingly possible. But who is Mike Pence?

Pence was Trump's guarantee to the Christian Right that they would be given free rein to implement their cultural counter-revolution agenda. They could safely embrace 'the most profane candidate in modern times' (p. 8), because he would give them control of the Federal judiciary from the Supreme Court down. They would be able fill his administration with their people, and he would support their ambition of rolling-back women's rights, gay rights, abortion and birth control, shrinking the state and dismantling state schooling. With Pence occupying the Vice Presidency, the Christian Right were confident their time had come. His record was impeccable. He had been both a successful radio and TV host in Indiana, advocating the politics of the Christian Right, before being elected to the House of Representatives in 2001. Here he forged close

links with 'admired national figures on the hard-core libertarian Right, including the billionaire DeVos and Koch families' (p. 56). He effortlessly combined Christian morality with advocacy of the interests of the most predatory Capitalism – opposing state regulation, calling for lower taxes for business and the rich and the removal of governmental provision and support for not just the poor but for everyone who was not rich. His religious beliefs involved a rejection of science – evolution obviously – but also any science that interfered with the interests of business. As late as 2000, for example, Pence had denied any link between smoking and cancer: 'despite the hysteria from the political class and media, smoking doesn't kill' (p. 94). Now a cynic might well believe that this particular example of his hostility towards science was somehow informed by the fact that his brother headed up a massive convenience store chain, 'hundreds of convenience stores, including many named Tobacco Road, where cigarettes, cigars, snuff, and chewing tobacco were big revenue producers' (p. 95). Similarly, his rejection of climate change science very much reflected the interests of Koch Industries. In April 2009, at the instigation of the Koch brothers, he had declared his opposition to 'any program that would increase federal revenues in order to combat climate change'. He made it clear that he was opposed to any 'so-called carbon tax on the pollutants that caused climate change, which Koch-owned facilities spewed at a rate of twenty-four million tons per year' (p. 123). He was, of course, a staunch supporter of the Tea Party movement.

In 2013, Pence was elected Governor of Indiana, leaving the House of Representatives, with his political career completely stalled. Even though he had originally backed Ted Cruz for the Republican nomination, he nevertheless became Trump's running mate, 'good cop to his bad – or rather, crazy – cop' (p. 236). Pence, as D'Antonio and Eisner put it, 'weaponized' niceness (p. 142); but this concealed a willingness to do whatever it took to take control of the Federal government. Although he 'presents himself as a deeply moral man, his record indicates both ruthlessness and a comfort with aggression' (p. 17). He went along with all of Trump's lies – never distancing himself from any of Trump's attempts to whip up fear and hatred. When called upon, he defended Trump; privately confident that whatever Trump's character, he was going to carry the Christian Right to power. He showed a 'deft ability to stand with and for a presidential candidate whose life amounted to one long repudiation of the morals Pence promoted' (p. 185). As far as Pence was concerned, the Bible allowed Christians to tell 'so-called righteous lies' (p. 262), something absolutely vital if one was to support Trump. The only time this commitment faltered was when the 'Pussy' tape came out and

he and Reince Priebus, then Republican Party chairman, 'considered ways to force Trump to resign as the presidential candidate, leaving Pence to take his place' (p. 184). This was nothing to do with disgust at Trump's behaviour, but rather with their belief that no candidate could possibly survive such revelations.

Once Trump was elected, Pence came into his own. Trump was totally uninterested in the actual workings of the Federal government. His view of politics was monarchical: he was the King, surrounded by his court, glorying in the exercise of power as spectacle, while the actual mundane tasks of government were left up to others. Pence was left to 'populate' (p. 10) the administration with 'his' people, either because Trump was not interested or because he did not know anyone he could pick. One key appointment was the installation of Nancy DeVos as Education Secretary. Her family were long-time benefactors of both Pence personally and of the Republican Right generally. As an adherent of the Christian Right, she was committed to dismantling state school provision and encouraging the spread of church-controlled schooling. Her performance at her confirmation hearing in the Senate was so bad, she displayed such ignorance of educational issues, that two Republicans actually voted against her. For the first time in the history of the US Senate, the Vice President had to use his casting vote to carry an appointment to the Cabinet. Pence is also close to her brother, Erik Prince – the founder of the notorious Blackwater mercenary company – who is intent on persuading Trump to hand the war in Afghanistan over to a consortium of private military companies.

Even given all that Trump is delivering for the Christian Right, their support for his Presidency still takes one by surprise. They have gone along with every revelation, every excess – although the policy of separating children from their parents at the Mexican border and keeping them in cages was a bit of a strain for some. While Pence supported that policy, many evangelical Christians found it too cruel. Franklin Graham, the son of Billy Graham, was not alone when he described the policy as 'disgraceful' (p. 269). Most, however, continued their support for the administration. A good example is provided by Ralph Drollinger, the minister who heads up the White House Bible Study Group, regularly attended by Pence and some ten cabinet members, including Nancy DeVos, Ben Carson and Mike Pompeo. Drollinger, who considers himself possessed with prophetic abilities, has a vision for America that has many similarities to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. He has called for the United States to be ruled as a 'benevolent dictatorship' (p. 267), a sentiment that apparently really appealed to Trump. But while the

Christian Right still supports Trump, if he does fall, is impeached or forced to resign for whatever reason, Pence is there, patiently waiting to take over. Indeed, according to D'Antonio and Eisner, he is just waiting for the right moment. They argue that it is 'an article of faith' with Pence and his supporters, that 'eventually he would be president of the United States'. This, they insist, is not fantasy. It is worth quoting them at length here:

'As the Christian Right's favourite son, Pence had made the difference in the 2016 election. Millions had voted for the Republicans, believing that God was sending a signal as He put Pence on the ticket. Pence's presence had also reassured GOP donors, including the Koch brothers, who had been reluctant to rally behind the erratic Trump. Pence has also brought to Trump a vast network of Christian Right political activists who had been pulling the party in their direction for decades and were more than ready to assume key positions. The Trump administration was filled with Pence people . . . With high places occupied by his friends, Pence had thus functioned for years as a kind of shadow president' (p. 261).

Indeed, they actually suggest that Pence has more and more been 'acting as a kind of replacement president' (p. 263). Whether or not he will succeed in replacing Trump before 2020 remains to be seen. And if Trump survives in office, will Pence challenge him for the Republican nomination? Certainly the mid-term elections have weakened Trump and his mental deterioration is only likely to accelerate, resulting in increasingly erratic behaviour – if that is possible. So far at least, Trump does not seem to have identified Pence as a possible threat. He might well change his mind if someone tells him about this book (he's hardly going to read it himself). If he does come to see Pence as a potential rival, then it will be interesting to see how political developments unfold and, hopefully, the Republican Party tears itself apart. One suspects the Christian Right will suddenly discover that Trump's excesses are, in all conscience, no longer tolerable.

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