

Book Review

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Author: Bob Woodward

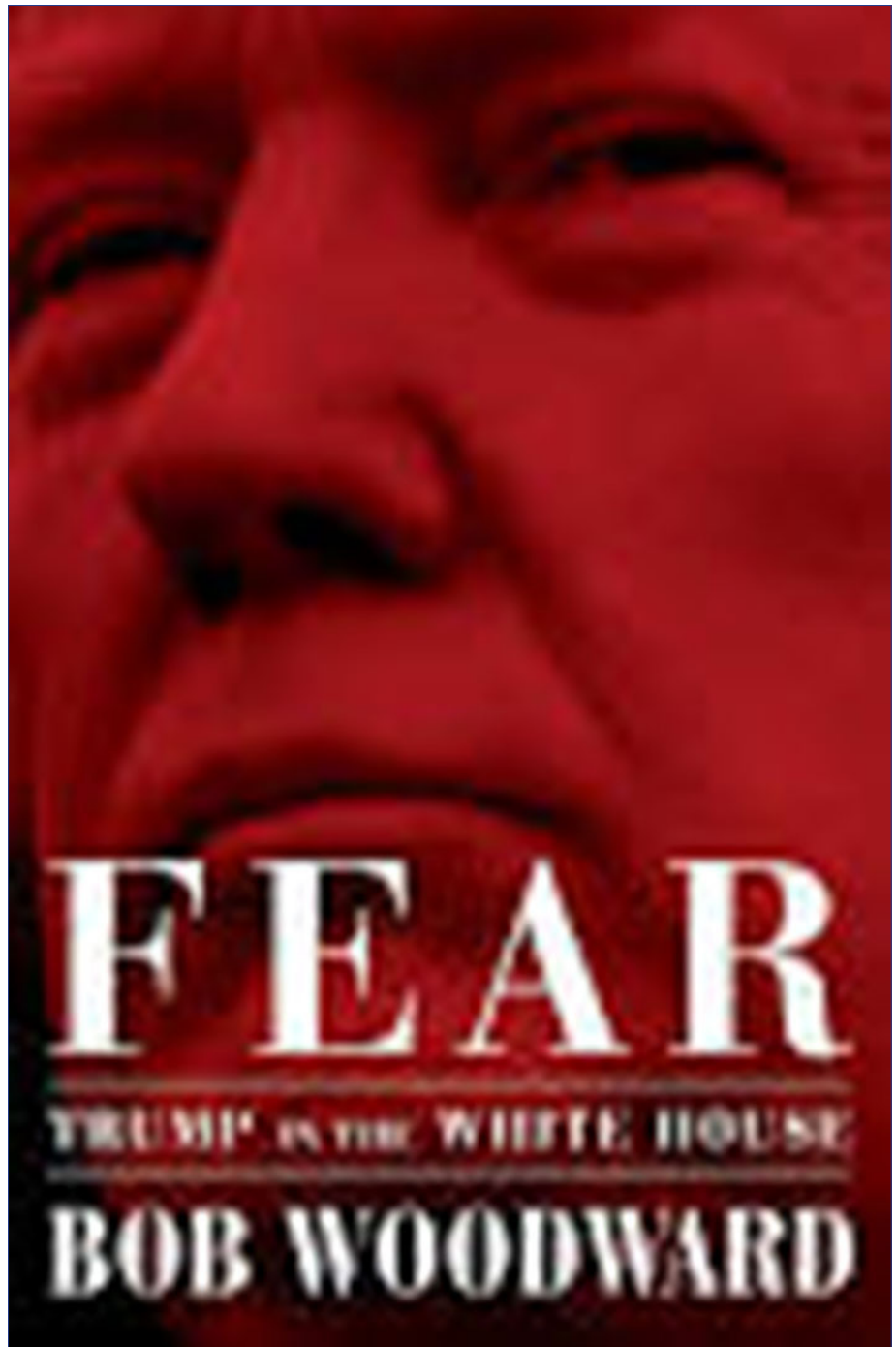
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REVIEW By

Ambassador Moses M. Akol



## Oppositional opposition disorder

Bob Woodward, 71, is no-nonsense writer who does not write about mundane issues. He does not write fiction or books that gather dust on bookshelves. He writes hefty books about weighty issues. Each of the eighteen books that he had authored or coauthored in the past half a century seems to exhibit an undying habit of languishing perennially at the top of bestseller lists. Woodward's books, including the latest release, are accounts of a hodgepodge of events, episodes, and traceable utterances by people in high places, which the writer masterfully contextualizes, synergizes, and narrates in a simple style characterized by short sentences that are devoid of traces of ostentatious verbosity. Written in a language that mimics the natural speech and parlance of the vast majority of the readers, Woodward's books grip readers and transport them to a limbo land where they experience an out-of-body phenomenon that seems to allow them, as if by magic, to listen in real-time to the conversations or see actions of advisors in the White House. Hence, readers cannot help but feel the anger in the voice of Hope Hicks, Trump's favorite director of strategic communications, and see the twitch on her angry face when she angrily chided the president yelling that "You cannot just be a loose cannon like that" after Trump mocked a popular television talk-show presenter in a vicious tweet about her 'real baaad' face-lift surgery. Similarly, readers can also viscerally feel the enormous disdain and contempt with which former Secretary of State Tillerson regarded Trump when Rex muttered under his breath 'what an idiot!' as he left the 'tank' in the Pentagon after a serious disagreement with the president over the latter's determined plan not only to reduce the size of the 28,000 U.S. troops in South Korea but also to withdraw from the United States-Korea Free Trade Agreement, known as KORUS. U.S. maintains 28,000 U.S troops in South Korea at the tune of \$3.5 million annually. ump does not make financial sense. see the valueFurthermore,

Reading Woodward's meticulously transcribed phone conversations among Trump's top advisors makes readers feel as if they are eavesdropping on the phone conversations from a third telephone line in the comfort of their kitchen. That is essentially why whenever Woodward writes, all political wonks and pundits worldwide burn the midnight oil reading the gripping details of how decisions about major existential political, economic and military matters are made in either the Oval Office, or in the rarefied air of the 'tank' at the Pentagon or in the so-called Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility (SCIF), a steel enclosure into which only persons with the highest U.S. security clearance are allowed access. Woodward writes that one of the SCIFs had to be destroyed after Trump, in violation of absolute security rules, invited Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull into it at the G20 summit in Hamburg, Germany, in early July 2017. The other salient reason that lends special gravitas to Woodward books is the fact that each of these books is drawn from hundreds of hours of interviews that Woodward conducts with first-hand participants and witnesses to events. Nearly all interviewees allow Woodward to tape-record the interviews 'so that the story could be told with more precision'. Exact quotations, thoughts or conclusions attributed in the books to the participants come from the person or a colleague with direct knowledge, or from meeting notes, personal diaries, files and government or personal documents

Woodward is wedded to his job as a journalist and has worked for the same newspaper,

The Washington Post, for nearly half a century. His work spans the administrations of nine United States presidents, from Richard Millhouse Nixon to Donald J. Trump. He and his Washington Post colleague Carl Bernstein were thrust into limelight after their dogged investigative journalism exposed the shenanigans of the Nixon White House, unleashing what became known as the Watergate Scandal. The resulting book, *All the President's Men*, was made into a blockbuster motion picture of the same name in 1976, featuring a galaxy of Hollywood mega stars, including Robert Redford, Dustin Hoffman, and Jason Robards.

The veteran journalist is as journalistically fair as he is fastidious and meticulous. For instance, when it became public knowledge that former FBI Director James Comey had briefed president-elect Donald Trump about an intelligence memo alleging the existence of video recording purporting to show Mr. Trump cavorting with women of ill-repute in a Russian hotel in 2015, Woodward appeared on Fox News Sunday on 5 January 2017. He described the memo as a “garbage document” that the FBI should have presented to the outgoing administration instead of presenting it as part of an intelligence briefing to the in-coming president. Woodward faulted the FBI’s handling of the memo, and he further averred that Trump had the right be angered by the FBI’s apparent lapse of judgment. Feeling exonerated in his fight against what he believes is an FBI ‘witch-hunt’ against him, an elated President-elect tweeted to thank Woodward for his support. That was then. Twenty-one months and one damning book later, Woodward remains adamant about the inferiority of the “garbage document” as an intelligence dossier. In the meantime, FEAR is wreaking havoc in the White House. It has so wildly thrown open all the closets and all the front-gates and backdoors in the Trump White House that details of long-rumored ‘leaks’ about an administration gone amok are now revealed, certified, and delivered in a voluminous book by a man whose name is synonymous with Watergate.

FEAR: Trump in the White House is a terrifying account of a hopelessly dysfunctional administration that defies description. “It is a nervous breakdown of the executive power of the most powerful country in the world,” says one former Trump White House advisor. It is a “White House designed to upend any order or routine,” says another (p190). However, Trump’s first chief of staff, Reince Priebus, gave the most bloodcurdling picture of the West Wing of Trump’s White House, which he says is populated by a band of high-roving interlopers who create chaos: “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, things start getting nasty and bloody. That is what happens,” he said shortly after being unceremoniously dismissed from his job in the White House. For his troubles, pain and suffering, Mr. Priebus, having served only 189 days in the White House, has earned the dubious distinction of being the holder of the unflattering record of the shortest time served by any chief of the White House staff in U.S. history.

Whereas the book is heavily populated by hordes of divvy or nefarious characters who freely enter and exit the Trump White House through any of the dozen supposedly secured doors, FEAR is chiefly about both an erratic, ego-centric, loyalty-demanding-demigod, Dr. Strangelove-like president and his coterie of loyalist cabal on one hand pitted against a band of Americans who seem determined to do all they can vociferously, albeit clandestinely, to protect their country and the world from the catastrophic consequences of the president’s unscrupulousness and his spur-of-the-moment decisions and actions. “It is not what we did for the country. It is what we saved him from doing,” said a former top advisor in the Trump White House.

FEAR ‘Trump in the White House’ reveals how some of top aides (Staff Secretary Rob Porter, Secretary of Defense Gen. Mattis, Chief of Staff Gen Kelly, and Economic Advisor Gary Cohen, former White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus) had to resort to extreme measures in order to preempt or stall some of Trump’s most reckless decisions on key policy issues, including international treaties on security, trade and environment as well as immigration and the wall on the southern border with Mexico. “I took the document from the President’s desk so that he would not sign it,” confesses Trump’s former Economic Advisor Gary Cohen about his effort to delay Trump’s obsessive desire to withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Climate Agreement. ‘I wouldn’t let him see the draft.’ KORUS

It is obvious that the Trump White House has now come under the full control of anti-trade protectionists (National Security Advisor Wilbur Ross and the devious Economic Advisor Peter Navarro), anti-immigration hawks (General Kelly, Mike Pompeo, Stephen Miller, Attorney General Jeff Sessions), wanton populists (Trump and company) as well as unabashed propagandists (Anthony Scaramucci and socialite Kellyanne Conway). Keeping his options open for 2020 presidential election, Vice president Mike Pence has stayed on the fence on a number of key issues, and he tends to render his opinion in private. He has consequently been the elephant in the room who has been conspicuous by his near oblivion. In the book Nonetheless, FEAR reveals that the Trump White House is gripped by fear and mistrust of insiders and outsiders whom White House hawks believe that they disparately seek to ‘impeach’ the president and the will of the American people by conducting or abiding a witch hunt that purports to implicate the Trump election campaign in alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 United States presidential election. Driven by its own perception that the rest of the world is fighting against the Trump administration and the ‘America First’ crowd, the Trump White House seems to be riding dangerously on fear of failure; fear of failure to fulfill lofty campaign promises; fear of the on-going Muller investigation into alleged Russian interference in US politics; fear of congressional mid-term elections in November 2018; and fear of FEAR itself.

With most of his original top advisors and lawyers (Gary Cohen, Rex Tillerson, Paul Manafort, Michael Flynn, George Papadopoulos, Reince Priebus, Rob Porter, John Dowd, and Steven Bannon) resigned or indicted, and with the imminent departure of Deputy Attorney General Rob Rosenstein, Mr. Trump’s is in a dire strait. Given the fact that these top advisors have at some point or another talked directly or indirectly to either Mr. Woodward or, worse yet, to some a prosecutor, it would appear that the greatest fear that keeps the 45th president of the United States of America awake at night in the Lincoln room is Bob Woodward’s FEAR itself. Moreover, the eerie howling of the ghosts of the Watergate in moonless nights in nearby Lafayette Park is not particularly helpful either to the chief occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Mr. Trump modus operandi seems to be rule by spreading fear from immigrants and trading partners and allies who ‘want to take away our jobs.’ According to a quote which Woodward attributes to candidate Trump in 2016, Mr. Trump averred that ‘real power is -- I don’t even want to use the word—fear.’ It goes without saying that leading a nation by constantly driving fear into the hearts of the citizens is both wicked and unsustainable, especially in a country with more than two centuries of democratic tradition and transparency. However, whether President Trump, like presidential candidate Trump, believes that power is fear, the fact remains that there is certainly abundant evidence of exploitation of fear and misuse of power in Woodward’s FEAR.

It is said that he who rides a tiger (power) cannot afford to dismount for the FEAR of being eaten by the tiger.

Woodward's book reveals that the Trump White House is suffers from an equally lethal addiction, namely lying at the highest level of power in the most powerful office in the most powerful nation on the face of the earth. For instance, when reminded by a top advisor about the promise he made to the prime minister of Australia that his country will be exempted from the upcoming steel and aluminum tariffs, President Trump emphatically said that he will vehemently deny that promise if he is asked about it. The President also denied that he referred to Haiti and African countries as 'shithole countries.' (p 320) South Carolina Republican Senator Graham and Democratic Senator Dick Durbin, who were present in the Oval Office when President Trump made the derogatory remark on Jan 13, 2018, contradicted the president and confirmed publically that Trump made the insulting remark when they were discussing the admission of 25,000 mostly African refugees into the United States as part of a long immigration policy. According to Woodward, Senator Graham, a close Trump ally in the Republican Party and a pro-legal immigration and trade, was so angered by both the epithet and subsequent denial made by Trump that he made his disappointment known to the President. The Senator told the President on the phone that he likes playing golf with the President. But "if this is the price of admission, count me out. Good luck. Hit 'em (golf balls) good."

Lying by top public servants is bad enough, but lying by a president whose personal credibility and that of his administration's already hang in the balance of Judge Muller investigation team, seems to reinforce the most widespread characterization of President Trump by his detractors and by some of his former associates of late. John Dowd the president's lawyer who resigned because of what he saw as Trump's inability to avoid committing perjury if the president insisted on testifying before Muller investigation has, according to Woodward, seen the tragic flaw of Trump and his presidency. Through Trump's vacillations on major issues, the evasions, the boldface denial of facts, the compulsive tweeting, the obscuring of facts, self-serving cries of 'fake news,' and the feign indignation, Woodward pens off by revealing that even Dowd has concluded that Trump had one overriding problem which Dowd knew but could not bring himself to say to the president; "you are a f..king liar."p357



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