

Victory

How Vladimir Putin Defeated U.S. Democracy

By Andy Ross

Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House

By Michael Wolff. Little, Brown, 321 pages, 2018

A Higher Loyalty: Truth, Lies, and Leadership

By James Comey. Macmillan, 290 pages, 2018

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

By Omarosa Manigault Newman. Simon & Schuster, 334 pages, 2018

House of Trump, House of Putin:

The Untold Story of Donald Trump and the Russian Mafia

By Craig Unger. Bantam, 337 pages, 2018

Fear: Trump in the White House

By Bob Woodward. Simon & Schuster, 420 pages, 2018

President Vladimir Putin of Russia has won a stunning victory over the American superpower that defeated the former Soviet Union. Putin is a nationalist in the totalitarian tradition, and the USSR in its heyday had won a bloody victory alongside the United States against totalitarian nationalists in the Second World War, so perhaps history has turned through a kind of circle here. In any case, his surprise victory over America has troubling implications for all the Western democracies.

President Donald Trump of the United States owes his extraordinary propulsion into the White House, in all probability, to his longtime “friend” and hero Vladimir Putin. Any serious doubts on this score, for example over the extent of the help or the indirections through which it was delivered, pale into insignificance beside the manifest facts of the case. America was ripe for a transition to geostrategic confusion for reasons internal to its trajectory as a liberal superpower, but the key fact is that Putin understood that trajectory and provided terminal guidance to its present sorry state.

In the grander scheme of world history, a subversion of American democracy by covert Russian means may be no great catastrophe, and other events may soon undo the damage, but first we must digest the fact and its implications. Americans, having seen off the Soviets

and watched Europeans organize their affairs within a union of liberal democracies, took their eyes off the old half of the ball and pivoted to East Asia, where the rise of China looked set to become the story of the century. In the process, they lost the plot laid out long ago by Plato, who said that after democracy comes tyranny.

The rise of Trump in America may look less like a classic transition to tyranny than a very modern transition to chaos, and indeed the anarchic vulgarity of political life and debate in Trump America may make even the prospect of a more convincing tyrant seem welcome to impose a new brand of order, but in this case the beast is really no beauty in disguise. Americans today are living through a political tragedy that recalls the sinking of the Titanic, but on a much larger scale.

The iceberg for this ongoing disaster is the geopolitical footprint of post-communist authoritarianism, as represented in China by Xi Jinping and in Russia by Putin. Chinese economic strength threatens the American business model by exploiting a wholesale appropriation of U.S. intellectual property to build an economy from which to undercut U.S. industries with goods produced at low cost using a docile Chinese workforce. Russian military activism threatens American global dominance by exploiting the historic nuclear stalemate to defy U.S. conventional power and undercut that power with unconventional and asymmetric warfare, using new tactics such as cyberwar.

Collision with the iceberg left liberal America struggling to orchestrate an effective response. A swift reply to Chinese competition was hampered by the longstanding U.S. commitment to free trade in both goods and ideas, until Americans could elect as their president a hardened business champion to cut through the liberal fog. A strong front against Russian resistance to the expansion of NATO in Europe was hampered by the longstanding U.S. tolerance of a natural but lazy disinclination by America's European allies to see the issue as one demanding more military spending and a harsher tone in Western political rhetoric.

The disaster for liberals is not merely that U.S. voters, misled by a Russian social media campaign of disinformation and lies, elected a president who was bold enough to adopt that harder line and harsher tone. The winner that no one expected was a president so rash and impulsive, and so deaf to the conventional pieties of the Western tradition, as to seem an incompetent blunderer. Worse, no one expected the new U.S. president to be so entangled by his past dealings in Russia and with Russians as to represent a national security hazard more acute than the hazard with regard to NATO that had in large part triggered his rise to office in the first place.

Trump the Phenomenon

The shocking truth, as it gushes relentlessly from a firehose of breathless news reports, unpresidential tweets, and not even remotely presidential public speeches, is that President Trump is a liar and a bully who is outrageously unqualified for the job. He gives every appearance of lacking not only the knowledge and skills but also the integrity and character that one might expect in the holder of the most powerful executive office on Earth. Five recent books offer ample confirmation of this truth for even the most judicious observers.

Fire and Fury, by Michael Wolff, is an account of the turbulent months from Election Day in November 2016 to the aftermath of the demonstration in Charlottesville in August 2017 when Steve Bannon left the White House staff. A work of extended journalism written in a garrulous and street-smart voice that reads like *Rolling Stone* magazine, the book offers a ringside seat at the proceedings in the White House based on close conversations with many of the main participants, most obviously Bannon. Readers will have their own opinions on the literal truth of this or that assertion in the book, but the cumulative effect of the impressionistic portrait that emerges is utterly dismaying.

The keynote episode in the tale is the climax of Trump's ongoing response to a succession of nuclear tests and missile launches in North Korea, when Trump threatened North Korean leader Kim Jong Un with "fire and fury" like never before if the provocations continued, and the world looked on in horror as the nightmare of an instant megadeath war loomed just a tweet away. A year or so on, after Trump claims he "fell in love" with Kim following their meeting in Singapore, it is temptingly easy to brush off the contrast as two data points on a steep learning curve for the rookie president, but the rest of Wolff's tale should banish the temptation.

The real shocker in the story is the volatility of the chief executive, unchecked by wisdom or caution or any adult constraint except for that provided by the White House staff, who are there at his pleasure and are appointed only to advise and assist him in the performance of his executive duties. This is clearly a recipe for disaster, given Trump's nepotistic preference for the company and counsel of his daughter Ivanka and her young husband Jared Kushner over a wider cohort of amateurs and sycophants. The only saving grace of the setup is Trump's choice of a few seasoned army and marine generals to man his staff, on the evident grounds that their brand of stern military discipline will put some backbone into what would otherwise be a cluelessly dysfunctional crew in an administration teetering on the brink of chaos.

The most egregious actor in Wolff's drama is Steve Bannon, whose alt-right background as a peddler of conspiracy theories and visions of nuclear war should have made him a political no-no for all decent Republicans. Until his exit at the end of Wolff's story with a typically uncouth admonition, "It's going to be wild as shit," Bannon played a consistently baleful role among the staffers as he hung around in shabby dress, looking like shit himself, and shot off reductive or simplistic policy pronouncements in Trump's informal gatherings of principals. Bannon wasn't Putin's fault, true, but he did play into the Putin agenda by reading and admiring precisely the hard-right thinkers in the European tradition who formed the intellectual foundations for the Putin worldview.

A Higher Loyalty, by James Comey, is a quite different essay on the Trump administration. Comey was the director of the FBI until Trump abruptly fired him in May 2017. This was a surprise to Comey, who first saw the news of his "resignation" on TV while he was addressing an audience of FBI employees in Los Angeles and only confirmed later in the day by reading a letter from Trump terminating his employment, effective immediately. The book is his version of the real story of Comey and Trump, from the start.

As several reviewers have said, Comey is clearly concerned to signal his superior virtue and advertise his leadership credentials in an attempt to rise above the personal insult. He had directed his bureau's investigation of Hillary Clinton's insecure handling of departmental emails during her tenure as U.S. Secretary of State, and at first his investigation drew Trump's praise, before that high opinion soured to mistrust and complaints about Comey's ongoing investigation of Trump's murky dealing with Russians during the presidential election campaign. Clearly, Trump was hiding his mounting anxiety over that investigation with angry bluff and bluster against Comey, whom he accused of "showboating" at Trump's expense.

One remarkable take-away from Comey's book is his surprised first personal impression of Trump, which came as a flash of recognition that only confirmed itself over the months, based on Comey's prior years of investigation into the criminal underworld of mafia families, with their hierarchy of "made men" and brutal bosses. Comey saw Trump as just like a mafia don, and this impression only deepened when Trump demanded his loyalty, as if only with Comey as a "made man" could Trump trust him to lead the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election campaign.

Comey had sufficient integrity to avoid falling into Trump's loyalty trap, but both of them paid the price. Trump now has to reckon with the results of an investigation led by former FBI director Robert Mueller, so despite a personal sacrifice Comey appears to have won the greater victory. He presents his own case with dignity and sobriety, and decent Americans can only mourn the loss to public service of a man who appears to have been a credit to the institution he represented.

Unhinged, by Omarosa Manigault Newman, is a quite different book again. Omarosa was a Trump fan who became a White House functionary, where she served with some flair and apparent success until she resigned in December 2017 in a departure that was strongly facilitated, on her account, by White House chief of staff General John Kelly. Curiously, Trump, who had frequently expressed his "love" for Omarosa's work on his behalf, called her soon after her departure to express his regret, and indeed his ignorance of what Kelly had done behind his back, which shows either an artist of dissimulation at work or a candid flash of organizational incompetence. The White House seems to have become a snake pit in which survival depended less on competence or commitment and more on having the most toxic bite.

Omarosa may well be said to have had it coming. She had first risen to prominence thanks to Trump's patronage during his years as host and mastermind of the TV reality show *The Apprentice* and its successor *The Celebrity Apprentice*, which had been the public vehicle of his personal comeback from multiple bankruptcies in the previous century. Omarosa turned out to be one of the stars of the shows, not only for her obvious physical charms but also for her vivid personality and sharp intelligence, and she became an eager follower of Trump and his ambitions to high office.

Omarosa was at the 2011 White House Correspondents' dinner where then-President Barack Obama made fun of Trump, who was sitting near Omarosa in the audience, and she

watched as Trump sat suffering the public humiliation and burning with renewed ambition to run in 2016 and take his revenge on Obama. As a proud woman of color, Omarosa felt her loyalties torn by the confrontation, but she stood by her man and got her due reward after hard months of campaigning in the Trump war room in 2016 when the President-elect gave her a job in the White House.

Trump hired Omarosa as an Assistant to the President, in which post she huddled daily with other senior staffers in the West Wing and enjoyed informal access on a daily basis to the boss, who kept his office door open and was unable, she said, to resist calling her in as she walked by. But, unsurprisingly, the months of public discussion of Trump's alleged sexism and racism slowly took its toll, and Omarosa found herself obsessing over when and how often Trump had used "the N-word" in public in various recordings, all of which fed her mounting distaste after the Charlottesville event and finally led to her departure. At the very least, Trump lost some political cover there.

Trump the Reality

House of Trump, House of Putin, by Craig Unger, presents the results of a deeper dive into the murky waters of the subversion of American democracy by Putin's hired hacks to put Trump into the Oval Office. Unger tells two parallel stories. One recalls the rise of Trump from the shark-infested underworld of New York real estate magnates, as well as the mafia dons who often worked closely with them, and the other recalls the rise of Putin from the Soviet KGB spy agency to the wild post-Soviet years when the notorious oligarchs made off with much of Russia's wealth and left a kleptocrat in charge in the Kremlin.

The parallel-stories approach is formulaic but effective. The shady or criminal deeds that lay behind the world of property deals, flashy hotels and casinos, overpriced luxury condos, clients clearly engaged in money laundering, and brutal paybacks for cheating, not to mention bankruptcies, fraud, conspiracies, and all the other hallmarks of that world, are evident enough from Unger's painstaking and even pedantic investigation; and the more hideously brutal world of Putin's involvement in the chaos through which state assets were sold off at bargain-basement prices during the Yeltsin era comes over convincingly as a fitting frame for the malice and selfishness of the new Kremlin boss. Nevertheless, a fastidious reader might raise a quibble here. Links between the two worlds were there over the years, certainly, and they support a crushing guilty verdict for both Trump and Putin on numerous counts, but they do not prove collusion between them. Unger doesn't say there was, but the parallel-stories approach would be more fitting if there were.

Despite massive financial help from his father Fred Trump that we now know added up to as much as \$400 million, Donald the self-styled artist of the deal was no winner in the money game. Some of his early property deals went well, in part because his friendly relations with a local mafia family gave him the mob protection his competitors often lacked, and his self-promotion of Trump the brand gave his line in luxury living the kiss of bling that blessed Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue, but he soon over-reached himself in the world of casinos, especially with the Trump Taj Mahal in Atlantic City, which cost him almost \$1 billion to build

and which he finally sold at 4 cents on the dollar. On at least four occasions, he declared bankruptcy to escape his debts.

Trump became the artist of the creative comeback. The money kept coming, thanks to his discovery of an inexhaustible well gushing billions of dirty dollars into the U.S. economy. That money was, of course, the looted wealth brought in by the Russian oligarchs and their more criminal compatriots, who lined up eagerly to buy their slice of the Trump dream in multimillion-dollar apartments purchased for cash, no questions asked, in numbers that boggle the imagination. Among them were Russian mobsters, not only in Trump Tower in New York but also from Little Moscow in Miami, who gave their unlauded votes of confidence to Trump's Mar-a-Lago development in Florida.

The Russian mafia network Unger traces in detail, with a naming of names that will exhaust many readers, seems to have taken over much of the American underworld, displacing the Italian mafia in most cases. Trump was soon well in with the Russian mob and used his connections to grease numerous attempts to make big deals in Moscow. Trump's flashiest coming out in Moscow was surely for the 2013 Miss Universe contest, which he organized and sponsored as part of his playboy image, when it seems quite possible that he was compromised yet more deeply in the Russian intelligence underworld than he had been already by that time. Certainly, he and Putin were well aware of each other, and Putin, eager to cultivate intelligence assets in America, saw Trump as a potential pawn, a useful idiot, in his attempts to exert a malign leverage on the U.S. political process.

Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election campaign has been well discussed since then, but Unger adds a dizzying catalog of detailed facts to the story. There is no doubt that Trump received sufficient covert support in various ways, financial as well as via social media, to have swung the balance in the election and to deny Hillary Clinton her expected victory. We can thank Putin for the Trump presidency, despite Trump's protestations and however readily the Republican Party machine swung behind their candidate once they learned to use his presidency as a vehicle for their political agenda.

Fear, by Bob Woodward, comes trailing the clouds of glory that only a hero of the Watergate investigation which led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon in 1974 can trail. Woodward is a supremely professional journalist, and his account of the Trump story, from Steve Bannon's hiring as campaign manager in August 2016 to John Dowd's resignation as Trump's personal attorney for the Russian investigation in March 2018, is as deeply researched and convincingly packaged as one can hope for in a first draft of history. As with Wolff's more impressionistic take on parts of the tale, the portrait that emerges is utterly dismaying.

Woodward cuts deeper into the public face of Trump to expose the person behind the TV image of the playboy billionaire than the other books reviewed here. The early chapters are judicious to the point of generosity, with an acceptance that some of what Trump did in his early turbulent months might well be judged in hindsight to have been good moves. The later chapters appear to have been written in haste, and sometimes the details of who said what to whom and why get confusing, but the thrust of the drama is unmistakable. Here was

a man driven by denial of his Russian connections to an extremity of distraction for which the readiest precedents in literature are among the tortured kings in Shakespeare's dramas.

Woodward wisely abstains from moralizing. The tale itself, from day to day, recorded in reconstructed conversations of cinematic intensity (as well as Tarantino profanity), offer a vivid insight into how affairs are handled in the Trump administration. Woodward keeps his main focus on the affairs of state, which have sufficient gravity to compel due respect, an approach which allows the actors in the drama to betray themselves without further comment. If you recall that during the months under the microscope those affairs included U.S. support for NATO, the U.S. war of annihilation against ISIS, nuclear tensions with North Korea, the war in Afghanistan, trade questions regarding NAFTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the U.S. missile strike on Syria, the Paris Agreement on climate change, U.S. relations with the EU at the G20 summit, controversy over racism in Charlottesville, federal tax reform, "shithole countries" in Africa, and looming trade war with China, you can see the stakes were too high to fuss about personalities.

More to the point of the Putin connection, the legal turbulence surrounding the Russia investigation and the financial entanglements that probably caused Trump to go soft on Putin (most notably during their joint news conference in Helsinki in July 2018, which was too late for Woodward's book) come to the fore in Woodward's telling, as well as the staffing anarchy resulting from Trump's complete lack of transition planning, his off-the-cuff appointments of barely qualified outsiders to key government positions, and the numerous still-unfilled vacancies across the new administration. Here was a presidency in turmoil, as effectively crippling for America the global superpower as a nervous breakdown for a person. It has weakened the U.S. global posture sufficiently to give Russians far more freedom to maneuver in Syria and Ukraine and in numerous European states, such as the United Kingdom. This was Putin's victory, limited and conditional, of course, but quite enough to advance his long-term strategy of softening the world for his brand of ruthless pragmatism to push for a Eurasian Union that might replace the European Union and give Russia a safer place in the world.

National Security

The unsolved problem that led to the downfall of liberal America was the revaluation of previous values following the end of the Cold War. American victory in that war was not the end of history, but it was the end of a perception of the world according to which the proper role of America was to uphold freedom in all things and to remove all obstacles in the way of the relentless advance of global turbo-capitalism. The financial collapse of 2008 was the first major sign that all was not well with that view of the world, but also the rise of China across the Pacific and the rise of populism across the Atlantic made it clear that something had to give. The ritual Western demonization of Russia's fumbling attempts both to stabilize its strategic borders in Europe and to sort out the social and political chaos in the Islamic regions to its south was a further sign, unrecognized at the time but challenging for Putin, that the increasingly stale liberal orthodoxy of the post-1945 era urgently needed to be rethought from the ground up.

Putin's political philosophy is based on an almost mystical conception of the Russian motherland as home to a deeply Christian society, in which patriots still recall with pride both the imperial past that Lenin and Stalin replaced and the achievements of the Soviet Union, which defeated European fascism during the Second World War, resisted U.S. hegemonism during the Cold War, and boldly launched humanity into the Space Age with Sputnik and cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. Russia is not a typical European country, but its identity is recognizably continuous with that of the smaller European states to its west. Germans in particular can often find some sympathy for the new Russian philosophy and recognize reflections of salient themes in earlier German philosophy.

Most Americans are too in thrall to their brand of robust individualism, freewheeling capitalism, and evangelist religion to find much common ground with such views. They see more directly the contempt for human rights and the rule of law that Putin all too readily endorses in his exercise of a power that seems to border on absolute. In fact, like all such rulers, and like Trump in his underworld of mob connections, Putin faces a far more precarious reality than it may seem, where only extreme ruthlessness suffices to keep his hold on power in a state where the rule of law and finer human values have only a tenuous hold on the popular imagination and where far more basic values tend to determine how the people behave and what they expect. For them, a ruler who preached about the rules and failed to fight his corner would be a weak and pitiful man.

From this perspective, what has happened in Trump America is a correction from a liberal fantasy toward a more realistic and grounded conception of human society and the values that should govern it. Going forward, an easing of hostility toward Putin and his regime would pave the way to a proper settlement between America and Russia that would finally end the shallow triumphalism of the "end of history" doctrine and allow the birth of a more nuanced view that would embrace both countries in a shared historical enterprise. Given the challenges of responding constructively to the rise of China as a global superpower and to the struggle in the Islamic world for a workable polity, one might think an accommodation with Russia would find a welcome in America. Trump obviously thinks so, and other Americans might do well to consider how such an acceptance could be accomplished.

Trump's personal path to that accommodation is not one any principled American should wish to follow. Grand larceny, money laundering, mob brutality, tax evasion, systematic fraud, and wholesale lying are not things any civilized person should accept, and so long as such acceptance is part of any deal with Putin's Russia then Americans and others are right to resist. Integral to that resistance must be deployment of strong military defenses against Russian agitation in the Baltic States, Ukraine, the Mideast region, and cyberspace. Otherwise, Russia needs help in consolidating the rule of law more than it needs economic sanctions and all the other levers of traditional U.S. power in the global arena.

American Democracy

Americans have held up their democracy as a model for other states around the globe to follow, but too few U.S. citizens seem troubled by the manifest flaws in their version of

democracy. First and foremost, the corrupting role of money in U.S. politics is disastrous for securing the outcomes in numerous fields of legislation that reason would normally expect. Second, the voting system, with its unevenly applied voter registration requirements, its winner-take-all vote counting, the frequent gerrymandering of voting districts, and the adversarial approach whereby far too many questions are decided along party lines on the Hill, leads to a level of political polarization that can only stoke widespread outrage at perverse results. And third, there is insufficient provision for deeper change in response to changing circumstances, such as for amending the constitution to limit the incidence of tragedies arising from the ready availability of firearms, or for changing the rules regarding free speech to curb hate speech, lies, and fake news on social media. As the social media are presently implemented, malicious subversion of the entire information model behind the ideal of a responsible citizen, who considers the issues and votes in accordance with sound reason rather than blind tribalism, becomes a serious risk.

America is not the only Western country confronting this risk. In Britain, too, during the 2016 referendum campaign that led to a shock result “instructing” the Conservative government that the United Kingdom must leave the European Union, traces of a subversive social media campaign were clear to see, and further traces of illegal campaign financing with money from Russian sources were soon detected. Moreover, since the result of the “Brexit” vote was both so unexpected and so narrowly in favor of leaving the EU, it is plausible that the Russian intervention tipped the balance – with political consequences in Britain that were nothing less than catastrophic, and at the time of writing are still crippling the British political process. Further Russian covert operations in Britain, such as the assassination of the journalist Alexander Litvinenko in 2006 and the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in 2018, make it painfully clear that Putin regards the UK as no less deserving a target for his efforts than the United States.

Other countries across Europe can point to a history of Russian interference in their affairs, suggesting a concerted campaign of destabilization conducted in order to hinder Western attempts to extend yet further eastward the geographic footprint of NATO and the EU. The boldest and most egregious such activities occurred in response to Western attempts to bring Ukraine into the Western camp, but other activities include repeated attempts to subvert the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, all three of which joined both NATO and the EU in 2004 and all of which contain substantial Russian minorities. From Putin’s perspective, these activities are entirely natural responses to the security risk presented by the presence of states with a Western orientation beside Russia’s national borders.

The deeper issue here is that Russians are developing their own version of democracy, which the Kremlin regards as no less genuine than the flawed models on show in America, Britain, and other Western states. Given Russia’s long and unique history, as well as the checkered history of its military clashes with various European states, Western governments might do well to back off a little and let Russians govern themselves as they see fit. Millions of Russians voters show every sign of liking Putin with as much unforced passion as that with which millions of American voters like Trump.

Amid all this geopolitical turbulence, there is a silver lining for perplexed Americans. Not only is the unexpected combination of Putin and Trump on the world stage prompting Europeans to pull themselves together and consider their own defenses more seriously, but also the extraordinary stresses on previously untested views about democracy in the West have led to a long-overdue reappraisal of liberal political theory and practice.

With his subversive meddling, Putin showed Americans the flaws in their democracy when he orchestrated the disinformation campaign that led to the election of President Trump. This was a victory for Russia in its ongoing attempts to regain its self-respect following the end of the Cold War. But it was also a service to Americans, who can now see clearly just how much needs to be done to restore their democracy to its ideal state. Once they have done so, we can hope that American democracy will again become a model for other countries worldwide to emulate. For now, Americans will be busy enough cleaning up the fallout from the Trump presidency.

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