

Fear - Trump in the White House

*Reviewed by Aizah Azam**

Author: Bob Woodward

ISBN: 978-1-5011-7551-0

Publisher: Simon & Schuster

Release Year: September, 2018

Pages: 420

‘Fear - Trump in the White House’, Bob Woodward’s recent masterpiece is an unconventionally sourced yet meticulously penned account of Trump’s journey to becoming the US President, with glimpses of his personal disbelief in his ability to deliver to the said role and later his incapacity to comprehend the fundamental tenets of what is it like to govern one of the most powerful states in the world. The book takes its name from a conversation that Donald Trump had with the author and Robert Costa (a journalist and national political reporter for Washington Post) back in March, 2016 when he was still a presidential candidate. He is reported to have uttered the following words; ‘Real power is - I do not even want to use the word - Fear’.

‘Fear’ comes from an author who possesses commendable expertise in articulating similar accounts for eight former US presidencies; from Richard Nixon to Barack Obama. It is not the first book of its kind that is based on a distinct version of in-house reporting. Former FBI Director James Comey too, penned down a similar account of reporting, titled ‘A Higher Loyalty: Truth, Lies and Leadership’.

As mentioned earlier, ‘Fear’ is a book unconventionally sourced, deriving basic facts stated throughout the book from an ongoing presidential tenure which makes it easy to assume that the major sources of the book are rooted in personal conversations with people who are in some manner associated

* Aizah Azam is a Research Associate at the Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research. She has done her MS Peace and Conflict Studies from the National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad.

with Trump's White House. Beyond a collection of facts and data derived from long hours of interviews, paperwork and diary writings of notable senators and aides who have or continue to work under Donald Trump, Woodward has also tried to put forth the 'uncertainty' that seemingly engulfed the White House in every facet of decision making ever since Trump's assumption of office. It is also significant to mention at this point that the author explicitly mentions at the beginning of the book that while major sources for the book primarily stem from interviews and personal conversations, President Trump himself did not allow an interview for the pursuit of this book.

The book has been arranged chronologically, beginning from the pre-election campaign, to the culmination of elections and finally to Trump's introduction to the world of decision making and crisis management. In this course, the author also reveals the events which unfolded within the White House premises in response to some of the major global developments. This unfolding of events comes coupled with instances of White House aides on their heels to prevent Trump from making spontaneous decisions capable of jeopardising the US' position globally in most cases, and/or instances that exhibit a deliberate concealment of intelligence by the White House staff in order to avoid Trump's overly infuriated response(s).

Thematically, the book covers a diverse range of subjects ranging from Trump's priorities in terms of administering one of the most powerful states in the world, his rather temperamental decision making skills, his childish proclivities and his disturbingly short attention span, which the author believes triggers his incapacitation in the office. Woodward initiates the book on this very note in the background of Trump's aversion from THAAD missile defence system and South Korea, and refers to him as a man with 'dangerous impulses' contending, 'The reality was that the US in 2017 was tethered to the words and actions of an emotionally overwrought, mercurial and an unpredictable leader. It was a nervous breakdown of executive power of one of the most powerful country in the world'.

The author has also significantly emphasized the White House staff and their tendency to dissolve their personal disagreements over issues just to mutually avert Trump's abrupt responses to situations. This, the author has

reflected using instances from engaging encounters between White House Staff Secretary Rob Porter, Trump's Chief Economic Advisor Garry Cohen and White House Chief of Staff Reince Preibus. Regardless of the strong language during such conversations as it occurs in the book, Woodward makes sure that the readers notice Trump's blatant disregard for expertise and stature of the staff working under him. An intriguing feature in this respect is Woodward's reference to a rather peculiar quest for authority in the White House, quoting the aggressive exchange of remarks between Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner on one hand and the rest of the staff on the other.

Family in Trump's White House does override professionalism. The book quotes similar instances of 'under the radar' meetings between Garry Cohen and Jim Mattis, mostly intended to keep the information from the President's attention, fearing an inappropriate response. In similitude, the author has also mentioned the appointment of major White House aides including that of Jim Mattis which mostly required extraordinary eloquence prowess to convince the President of the individual competence of appointees.

On matters relating to policy and administration, the author quotes a plethora of instances which portray Trump's inability to understand fundamental terms of engagement with major world powers. Woodward writes about Trump's approach towards major US allies and his strange distaste for accords and treaties cinched under previous governments. Especially, in case of nuclearisation of North Korea and Iran, Woodward quotes revealing insights into how a major theme of Trump's way out was always rooted in one trajectory 'escape it or kill it'. From the rise of Islamic State (IS) to the US exit from Afghanistan, Woodward offers an enriched peep inside the White House affairs. The book further offers instances from the US engagement with Russia, particularly the Russian hacking scandal that raised abundant questions on the credibility of the US elections.

As much as it appears to be enriching, the fact that Woodward has based the book on personal interviews and discussions, has played both negatively and positively. As Woodward ends the book with John Dowd's (Trump's attorney) resignation based on his frustration to not fully deliver and represent Trump, several disagreements followed personally from John Dowd himself, defying the quoted fact in the book where Woodward reports that he referred to Trump as

a 'liar'. Aspects such as this, do challenge the quality of reporting in the book. Nonetheless, 'Fear' is an intriguing read for anyone who aims to understand American politics and the current White House scenario.