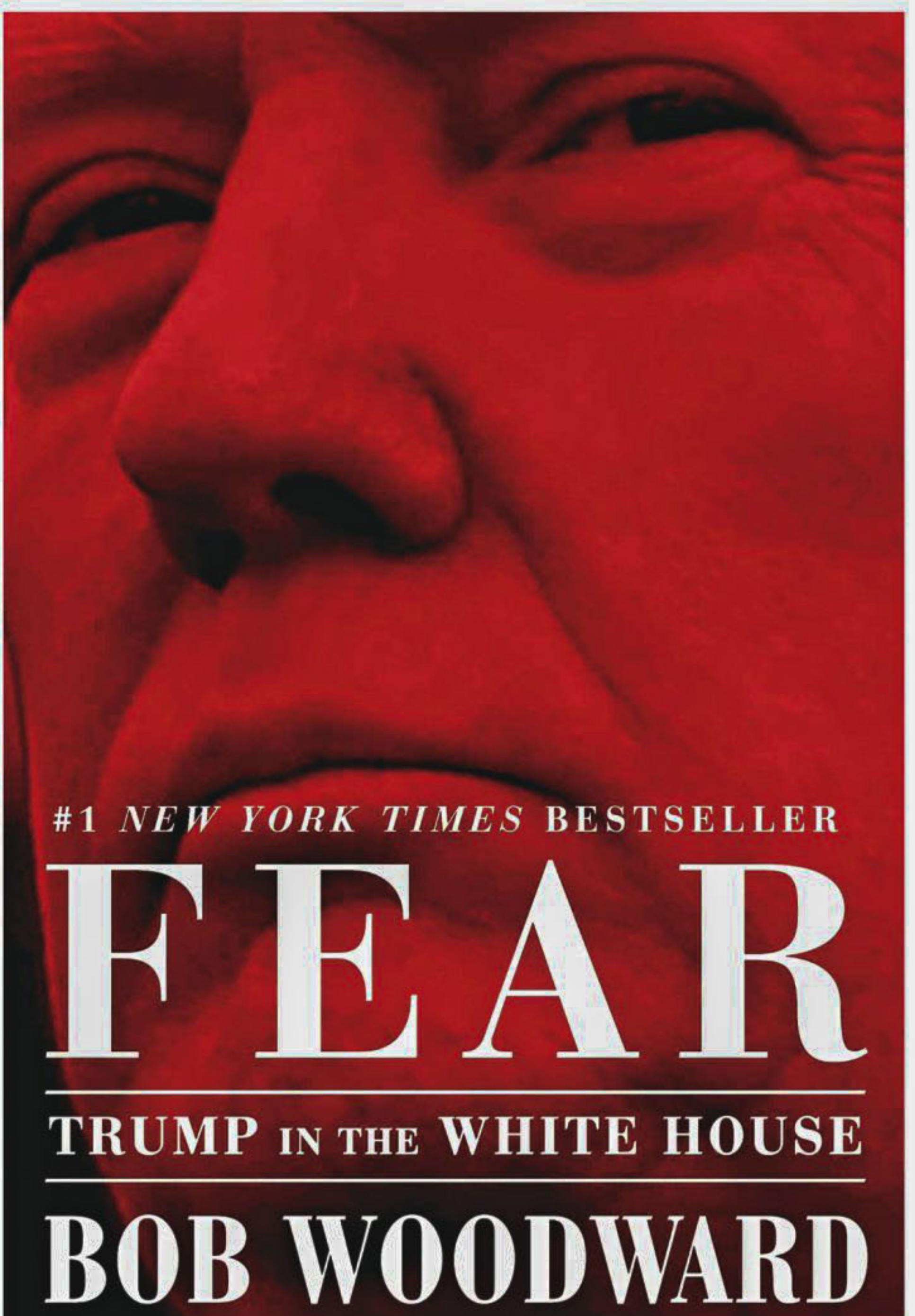


FEAR AND LOATHING IN THE WHITE HOUSE

JAVED AMIR



#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

FEAR

TRUMP IN THE WHITE HOUSE

BOB WOODWARD

"Fear: Trump in the White House" by Bob Woodward is a shocking look inside the Trump presidency led by a man who says the key to power is fear. "The reality in 2017," writes Woodward in his prologue, "is that the USA is tethered to the words and actions of an emotionally overwrought, mercurial and unpredictable leader. Members of his staff had joined to purposefully block some of what they believed were the president's most dangerous impulses. It was a nervous breakdown of the executive power of the most powerful country of the world."

"Fear" is an important book not only because it raises serious questions about the American president's basic fitness for office, but also because of who the author is. Woodward has written or co-authored 18 books—12 of them number one bestsellers—and won two Pulitzer Prizes and his investigative reporting with Carl Bernstein led to former president Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974.

Bob Woodward's latest bestseller, already in its 10th reprint since its release on September 11, has broken a number of publishing records. What it tells us about US President Donald Trump's administration, however, is not pretty.

Recently there has been an avalanche of books revealing how irresponsible, amoral and erratic the current American president is. On the other hand, in this era of "alternative facts" and corrosive tweets about "fake news", Woodward is truth's gold standard; he is not a partisan and his information comes primarily from multiple deep background interviews with first-hand sources which Woodward doggedly taped for the record.

What further distinguishes *"Fear"* from other publications is the process by which Woodward writes his books. "My job is not to take sides," he says. "I think our job is not to love or loathe people we're trying to explain and understand. It is to tell exactly what people have done, what it might mean, what drives them and who they are."

Jeff Shesol, an American reviewer and speech writer for former president Bill Clinton, in writing about Woodward's book *"The Price of Politics"*, described the author's style as the "literary equivalent of C-SPAN3." The authority of relentless matter-of-fact reporting, utterly denuded of opinion, gives Woodward's latest book its credibility. Some of my Pakistani-American friends have expressed the opinion that *"Fear"* is a boring book, almost like a documentary, but obviously that is the key to Woodward's way of reporting the truth; he gives you news not views. It is just plain and simple reporting.

"Why do you think there was a nervous breakdown in the White House?" asked CNN's Anderson Cooper, to which Woodward replied, "Because there was a nervous breakdown." When Judy Woodruff of PBS News Hour asked, "Based on your book where every other page has something jaw-dropping, do you think the president is fit for governing the United States?" Woodward replied, "That is not for me to judge. My goal in this book is to try to understand this person, what kind of president he is, who is advising him and ultimately what this means for the country." When Fareed Zakaria of CNN questioned him about using anonymous sources, Woodward replied that they were not anonymous to him and if they knew he were to reveal their names, they would have given him only a press release version of the truth.

Woodward's 18 books in his 47 years as a journalist have covered, among other subjects, eight former US presidents. According to him, what is unprecedented about the Trump White House is the post-truth world in which it exists. What is chilling in this respect is that to President Trump, a lie or a truth are the same. He has the uncanny ability to say diametrically opposite things in the same sentence and deem both of them true, so long as they serve his purpose. That is an ominous development and the pathology of that is frightening.

While many of the startling incidents reported in *"Fear"* are already well known, there are some new revelations, such as Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis ignoring an order from the American president to assassinate Syria's president Bashar al-Assad. John F. Kelly, Trump's chief of staff, is

quoted as saying about the president, "He's an idiot. It's pointless to try to convince him of anything. He's gone off the rails. We're in crazytown." Meanwhile John M. Dowd, Trump's former lawyer, does not think Trump is mentally capable of testifying to a special counsel. "Don't testify," he is quoted as saying. "It's either that or an orange jumpsuit." Needless to say, the ongoing investigation into collusion with alleged Russian manipulation of the elections is a constant source of anxiety for Trump, and for his lawyers.

Woodward uses many such scenes to bring home the chaos that invariably ensues from capricious governing by tweet. Reince Priebus, Trump's former chief of staff, calls the presidential bedroom, where Trump goes to tweet, "the devil's workshop", and early mornings and Sunday nights, when Trump is at loose ends, "the witching hour."

Among the primary sources for this book are clearly Priebus, Trump's former chief economic adviser Gary D. Cohn, and Trump's former staff secretary Rob Porter. There are mind-boggling scenes in which Cohn and Porter conspire to steal documents from the president's desk to prevent withdrawal of the US from a crucial trade agreement with South Korea which would have abolished the Thaad missile defense system and thus made the US mainland vulnerable to a nuclear attack. In a top-secret meeting in the Pentagon's 'Tank' room, Mattis tells Trump point blank: "That is to prevent a third world war!" Later the exasperated Mattis is reported to have remarked that the president has the "understanding of a fifth or sixth grader."

As a portrait of Trump—his lack of understanding about how government functions and his inability and unwillingness to learn, coupled with the administrative coup d'état that is going on daily in the White House—the book is devastating. Even the most cynical readers will be struck by the numerous examples of his childishness and cruelty: he insults his national security adviser, Lt. Gen. Herbert McMaster, for appearing at an interview wearing a suit that looks like something "a beer salesman" would wear. He imitates Attorney General Jeff Sessions's Southern accent and calls him "mentally retarded." He tells his 79-year-old commerce secretary, Wilbur Ross, that he has "lost it."

Cohn is alarmed that Trump doesn't understand the basics of the economy. As Woodward explains it, "The president clung to an outdated view of America—locomotives, factories with huge smokestacks, workers busy on assembly lines." When Cohn presses Trump on why he clings to such beliefs, the president simply responds: "I just do. I've had those views for 30 years."

With Woodward's bombshell book, one may be tempted to think that this is the end of Trump's presidency. Not so fast, writes Roger Cohen in *The New York Times*: "That the Democratic Party will take the House in the midterm November elections and start impeachment proceedings against Trump is plausible, even likely. It's unlikely, however, that the Democrats will have the required votes in the Senate to convict him." Therefore, the chances of a two-term Trump presidency remain significant.

The Democratic Party is long on anger but short of a winning message. Democrats are still very unpopular in the red states of America. It is imperative that they learn how to communicate with poorly educated white Americans. To take back the White House in 2020, Democrats would be better advised to keep their eye on small-town white America than on Woodward's book.

Javed Amir is a retired diplomat and former editor of *The Pakistan Review*. By arrangement with Dawn, an ANN partner.