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Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House

William Gillis

January 12th, 2018

There is no reviewing Michael Wolff's book *Fire and Fury: Inside The Trump White House* without commenting on its questionable canonicity. But there's also no mistaking its appeal as a supplemental to the last season of electoral politics in America. Like any good expanded universe offering it tries to enrich and deepen everything that entertained us on the screen, offering retcons, fleshed in backstory, and world-building. There's a certain kind of minor catharsis to such works, making sense of the sometimes rushed, contradictory and half-assed storyline we were initially presented, but it is also undermined by a sense that anything within could be casually discarded back on the television show.

Wolff, like all good writers seeking to reproduce the appeal of a franchise they didn't personally launch, has to make choices about what the defining themes and tropes are. This is a place where the pull of simplicity, so reassuring and relieving in its reductions, can be dangerous — can strip away other elements that are crucial to the franchise but don't personally resonate with the author. Wolff's perspective is the same as most of those he interviewed: upper class

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— not just in money but in status, in social, cultural, and intellectual capital. And his narrative of the Trump presidency is defined by such affiliations. It's a story of a very stupid and classless man who rose above his station and in so doing caused all the relatively sane people around him to do stupid things in response. What it's not a story of is the political context — the forces that placed Trump on his throne and have kept him suspended.

Wolff's book is a collection of a hundred clamoring voices trying to make sure everyone realizes they get that Trump is an idiot. This leads to just endless brutal quotes and stories from nearly every figure in orbit of Trump, but Wolff's delight in being handed these golden nuggets leads him to just build his narrative entirely from them. In fact, if there is one noteworthy contribution Wolff makes to the industry of commentary on Trump, it's to push harder the notion that Trump has a guileless childlike side that is desperate for approval. "The president fundamentally wants to be liked," Wolff quotes Katie Walsh. "He just fundamentally needs to be liked so badly that it's always . . . everything is a struggle for him."

This Trump is a figure desperately yearning for approval from figures he's decided are powerful and then lashing out when the things he's convinced himself will win them over inevitably don't. Wolff's picture is of a Trump administration not locked in a conservative media bubble, but in fact deeply attentive and hurt by the elite liberal press. Yearning for positive write-ups in the NYTimes or The Guardian.

This picture is, I think, from the vantage-point of early 2018, mostly correct. And it's useful in deciphering the few surprises there were for many of us. Trump has certainly threatened media outlets and of course is suing to prevent the release of Fire and Fury, but he hasn't directly had any major reporters or publishers arrested or raided (ignoring shit like J20). Not even after a whole year. This has honestly surprised the shit out of me.

Trump is an authoritarian creature with almost no sense of restraint or convention to his naked pursuit of power, but I underesti-

mated just how much of a media creature he is. A normal politician might seek power according to the conventional rules of the political game, Trump seeks power according to his notion of the rules of the media game, specifically the rules he's learned over decades of fighting to win the New York tabloids. The takeaway here is that he actually has some sense of propriety and self-constraint! Just as a normal politician will sometimes be willing to violate the rules of the media power game while sticking to the deeper rules of the political game, Trump does the inverse. It somehow, blessedly, never occurs to him to "just use the police" against Mika and Joe. He has an authoritarian's hunger for simple brutal solutions and utter disregard for institutional conventions, but he doesn't have the imagination to grasp the power he now wields, much less its function and how to maximize its impact.

It's been obvious from the start that Trump was an idiot and that his authoritarianism would be — to some very uncertain degree — impeded by his incompetence. But what we've watched over the last year ("the best possible timeline: the maximally incompetent timeline!" as friends keep putting it) hasn't just been incompetence, it's actually shown that Trump is playing a game with boundaries. At least for the moment.

Anarchists like to pretend that we're above the fray of presidential politics, pointing out that either party in office just means different sorts of downsides. Trump shattered this primarily because his disregard for conventions posed an unprecedented existential risk to us. Sure repression of radical movements would continue under any president, but when Trump was elected we suddenly faced the possibility of being wiped off the board in an instant.

The central dynamic of concern in the Trump administration has been basically that the cops will act autonomously when they feel they've been given license by the strongman president. J20 happens and they arrest hundreds for no reason and charge them all with felonies because Trump wants that protest shit dealt with. The Muslim ban happens and cops at airports laugh away lawyers with

injunctions from judges. And so it could conceivably go until liberals realize too late just how paper thin and meaningless their system's checks and balances are.

The apocalypse of the anarchist movement in the US would be a repeat of the Palmer Raids. Gin up a hysteria about the far left as terrorists, get the police to eat out of Trump's hand directly and with the verve to bypass the liberal legal system you could shock and awe America. In the worst version, thousands of arrests, hundreds of homes raided. An entire movement instantaneously jailed or broken beyond capacity to repair in the face of continued repression going forward. Sure you'd get a thousand volunteer lawyers and ACLU full page ads, but you'd raise the conflict to a level that the radical left didn't have the resources to scale to, bogging them down. The liberal masses would get relatively radicalized, but with our radical activist infrastructure and knowledge base crippled they'd be inefficient and make piles of mistakes. They'd become trapped in reactive mode and the right could steamroll over them, happily violating the law and liberal norms.

Almost everyone I know spent early 2017 white-knuckling at the threat of this catastrophe. "*How do we preserve anarchism in the years to come?*" became the immediate topic in a lot of hushed cafe meetings and forest strolls. With the secondary consideration always lurking, "*Alright, what infrastructure should we be preparing if shit turns into an open civil conflict?*" To be fair, most of us thought the more likely repression would be somewhere around the scale of the first Bush administration. But the outside possibility of total and sudden apocalypse was suddenly real like it'd never been before. And if you don't prepare for disastrous escalations, if you don't have responses in place, you make such an escalation more likely.

Get money, get underground networks and technical infrastructure set up, train the shit out of everyone, make endless fall back plans, fight for citizenship in other countries. This was basically 2017 for a lot of anarchist activists.

ever is talking in his ear at a given moment. If the rich centrist democrats all fall to the Russia investigation and the establishment republicans remain paralyzed, the only remaining power base in the white house will be the remnants of Bannon's. One hopes the terrible military men trying to impose order can gatekeep Miller away, but Miller clearly knows that going on TV and embarrassing himself in prostrate defense of the president is the best way to retain control over the president.

It's weird to think that a fascistic weasel like Bannon had his fear of the law check his authoritarian plans at least as much as Ivanka's coalition, just as it's weird to think that Bannon was the one pushing back against the standard Kissinger warmongering and Donald's own "just nuke em" instincts. Reading *Fire and Fury* one is reminded of nothing so much as the classic Simpsons' scene where Mr. Burns is revealed to have dozens of horrific maladies and illnesses at once, but that their competition against one another balances them out, making it impossible for any one terrible tendency to achieve victory. While many of us have been breathing a sigh of relief at surviving to the end of 2017, and Bannon's exile and seeming impending fall of Kushner and co from the Russia investigation may actually herald a new, worse era. I, for one, will continue to tune in to the most fantastical tv show of our era.

But after some initial horrors (that were largely in sequence with past atrocities like those of the Bush administration) Trump never really unleashed the cops. There were overtures and purges to shore up his power within the gun-carrying thug base of american political power, but nothing rapid or truly audacious.

Where was the "I'll pay your legal bills" Trump from the campaign hungering for blood?

We know Trump's a racist thug, sympathetic to neonazis, who sees the world as a zero sum brutal competition of dominance. And Wolff's book even offers a passing bit about him trying to defend the KKK. But why has Trump not killed us all? Why are we *only* defending against absurd evils like the prosecution of J20 and NoDAPL protesters?

Wolff almost entirely disregards Trump's authoritarianism and the hyper authoritarianism/nationalism of Trumpism, his indictment of the Trump administration is idiocy and cultural outsider-ness. Wolff does shit like referring to Nigel Farage as merely "right-wing." All the fascistic — sometimes literally card-carrying — figures like Gorka or Miller are rendered as merely conservatives. Spencer's more prominent neonazi antics on the national stage get a few passing paragraphs (notably without any sort of detail on responses within the white house).

But the other interesting thing in all this is Bannon, the conscious nationalist/authoritarian with a plan. For all of his conscious promotion of unprecedented war on the institutions of liberal democracy, in Wolff's account Bannon actually demonstrates a bit of timidity when it comes to violating the constitution itself. Despite brazenly pushing ahead on a number of fronts, he has limits — he notices parallels to Watergate and sees that as obviously reason for retreat. This is so utterly outside his usual modus operandi it warrants notice. In general Bannon is all about '*get the lefties to riot so we can round them up*' but repeatedly he seems to instinctively draw a line between overturning political convention and overturning the constitution.

This is perhaps the most interesting part of *Fire and Fury* for me. Bannon is clearly pushing a narrative where he's the Cassandra who won Trump the election and then called out every mistake Trump ever made. In Wolff's account, Bannon repeatedly and delightedly forecasted the doom brought by Ivanka and Kushner's Russia dealings. Bannon is ecstatic to have never been in the room with any Russians and brags endlessly about his safety from the coming collapse. But it's worth noting that, in one stark passage, Bannon even brags about how it would never occur to him to invite the Russians to hand over dirt in a Trump building. No, he'd use cheap motels on the edge of town and have dirty lawyers handle the handoff.

This is fascinating because it signals another constraint within the Trump administration. If Trump has an instinctive respect for the media, Bannon has an instinctive respect for the law. Of course he'd break it and fight it, but he wouldn't flagrantly disregard it, he'd be attentive to *The Game*. Of course Trump would castigate the news media as "fake news" and fight with them bitterly, but he wouldn't literally bust up CNN. There are sets of rules, systems, *games*, neither Trump nor Bannon have the imagination to think of entirely violating or discarding. The Trump Presidency is actually, contrary to initial appearances, actually on the rails.

These rails may well be leading us inexorably to a fucking nuclear holocaust in Korea, but there is at least some promise of predictability.

Most of Wolff's account is just juicy confirmation of things anyone watching *The Trump Show* already knew. The triangulation between three power centers of Bannon, the republican establishment, and the rich centrist democrats from New York. While everyone squeals to make their involvement in the Trump catastrophe look better, Bannon clearly squeals the most. *Fire and Fury* is almost entirely a narrative of Bannon's ups and downs. And despite Wolff wanting to talk shit on Bannon as *declassé*, full of him-

self, ugly and unfashionable, these are meaningless critiques which only allow Bannon's self-narrative to dominate *Fire and Fury*.

What's frustrating and horrifying is that while Bannon's wild aspirations of becoming President himself are clearly unhinged, he's demonstrably sharp and wins again and again over the course of 2017 against all the forces and odds aligned against him. If anything *Fire and Fury* becomes an underdog story about how Bannon got put in the doghouse and stripped of all power again and again only to repeatedly rise up from the ashes and beat down all his enemies. This is of course Bannon's self-narrative and Wolff wants to poke fun at its pomposity by just letting him air it, but it's enough of a compelling narrative to start to gel the book together.

Of course *Fire and Fury*'s text is an incomplete entry and you have to turn to the downloadable content available on its release to get the full story. As we all know by now — but spoilers if you haven't been watching — Bannon's cockiness in the book got him fired from Breitbart by the Mercers — the billionaire true-believers who'd ceaselessly invested in wingnut candidates and finally won big with Trump.

Bannon may have lost his alt-right attack dog because of his big mouth, but *Fire and Fury* detailed his ties to conservative media beyond Breitbart and Bannon's not one to let himself be put to pasture. He's now all in on the Russian investigation pulling most of the administration down. And Bannon's evil hyper-nationalist politics remain strongly positioned in the white house. Wolff makes it clear that Stephen Miller has stepped into Bannon's shoes as "the senior political strategist." Miller is clearly less intelligent than Bannon, but he's also clearly better at the raw shameless sucking up that Bannon could never do — so infamously preoccupied with sucking his own cock. And most concerning, Miller is even further down Nazi Lane than Bannon.

Wolff's book is one more piece of evidence on the pile of proof that the president is too stupid to plan or strategize, he's a man of pure immediacy, bounced between emotional reactions to who-