'A Very Stable Genius' provides ammunition to Trump's critics

The dysfunction in the Trump White House continues to grow.

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By Glenn C. Altschuler

The memorial for Senator John McCain at Washington National Cathedral on September 1, 2018, reporters Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig remind us, served not only as a tribute to a military and political icon, but as a “stinging rebuke” of President Donald Trump, who was not invited to the service. As they celebrated bipartisanship, compromise, civility, decency and integrity, mourners made clear, without naming names, that Mr. Trump “starkly lacked” these values.

In “A Very Stable Genius: Donald J. Trump’s Testing of America,” Mr. Rucker, the White House Bureau Chief at the Washington Post, and Ms. Leonnig, a national investigative reporter for the Post, adopt this framework in their narrative of the first three years of Mr. Trump’s tenure as president. Drawing on interviews with hundreds of disaffected — and alarmed — members (and former members) of the Trump administration, who spoke on condition of anonymity, Mr. Rucker and Ms. Leonnig (who are also on-air contributors to NBC News and MSNBC) portray a dysfunctional White House struggling to do the bidding of an ignorant, impulsive, self-absorbed, mean-spirited tweeter-in-chief, interested only in the preservation and perpetuation of his power.

With the replacement of seasoned professionals who sought to inform and restrain him (Rex Tillerson, H.R. McMaster, James Mattis, John Kelly) by “yes” men and women, the authors maintain that few if any guardrails remain.

“A Very Stable Genius” is awash in arresting details. In 2017, we learn, Mr. Trump ordered Secretary of State Tillerson (a likely source for this book) to get rid of the provision of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act that prohibited American companies from paying bribes to foreign governments to get business contracts. When Mr. Tillerson explained that only Congress could repeal the law, the president “didn’t miss a beat,” ordering senior policy adviser Stephen Miller to draft an executive order to get the job done.
Surprisingly, perhaps, the authors are quite critical of Special Counsel Robert Mueller. If he believed Congress should consider impeaching the president for obstructing justice, they claim, his lawyerly analysis, adherence to bureaucratic norms in a lengthy report “brimming with damning facts, but stripped of advocacy or judgment, and devoid of a final conclusion,” did precious little to achieve that outcome.

Coverage of the Mueller investigation and Mr. Trump’s attempts to thwart it dominate “A Very Stable Genius.” And Mr. Rucker and Ms. Leonnig focus far more on personnel and personalities than on policy initiatives of the Trump Administration. The authors do not discuss tax cuts, repeal of environmental regulations, or the president’s criticism of Federal Reserve chairman Jerome Powell. They claim, without elaborating, that tariffs on foreign imports are “counterproductive and actually harmful” to the U.S. economy. They ignore Mr. Trump’s repeated efforts to persuade Congress and the courts to get rid of President Obama’s Affordable Care Act.

Mr. Rucker and Ms. Leonnig claim that the statements of the insiders with whom they spoke — “The guy is completely crazy.” “He’s totally ignorant of everything. But he doesn’t care.” — speak for themselves. They leave no doubt, however, about where they stand. Trump officials, they write, “observed a professional code of honor Trump knew little about.” The president “was daily undermining” norms and laws that “promised impartiality, accountability, transparency, and basic fairness.” Mr. Trump blamed everyone but himself for his stumbles, misstatements, mistakes, and failures. Mr. Trump was “willing — eager, really — to belittle the people working for him.” The president, they declare, “obfuscated and lied for sport.”

“A Very Stable Genius” provides a lot of ammunition, some of it new even to political junkies, to confirm a by-now-familiar thesis that Mr. Trump is a danger to democracy and national security and unfit to be president of the United States.

That said, I suspect that in our hyper-partisan, polarized political climate, where information is filtered through silos, the book will be dised by MAGA-hatted men and women who don’t trust a word that appears in the Washington Post. It will be cited by Never Trumpers in the same way a drunk uses a lamppost, more for support than illumination and ignored by millions of Americans who disdain politics and politicians. As one alarmed government aide put it, most Americans are “more worried about who is going to win on ‘America’s Got Talent’ and what the traffic is going to be like on I-95” than about evidence that Mr. Trump tramples on our country’s foundational principles.

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