

A Very Stable Genius: Donald J. Trump's Testing of America

By Philip Rucker and Carol D. Leonnig

Penguin Press. 2020. pp. 465

ISBN: 978-19-84877-49-9

Reviewed by Tendai Chiguware

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8902-840X>

University of Fort Hare, South Africa

tchiguware@ufh.ac.za

Introduction

The book by Rucker and Leonnig (2020) contributes to the growing literature on the presidency of Donald Trump. This book narrates chronologically and in a diary-like style the day-to-day affairs and decisions of President Trump. In the context of the literature on Donald Trump, the book confirms and reaffirms some of the president's traits that have been covered before. Similar to the books *Fear: Trump in the White House* by Bob Woodward (2018) and *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House* by Michael Wolff (2018), the book deals with a few familiar topics such as the impulsiveness of the president, his use of Twitter to announce important decisions that key government officials are not aware of, a vindictive streak that often characterises his decision-making, his obsession with North Korea and Russia, and his unprecedented eulogising of the leaders of these countries. It is important to note that even some of the pro-Donald Trump books, for example, *Liars, Leakers, and Liberals: The Case Against the Anti-Trump Conspiracy* by Jeanine Pirro (2018), while making a solid case for conspiracy against President Trump by the "deep state," at least confirm the behaviour of the president and corroborate his character as described by Wolff and Woodward.

One significant contribution of the book by Rucker and Leonnig (2020) is that it is an exposé of how much influence television has on the life of President Trump, and, by extension, on American politics. While confirming earlier reports that the president spends an inordinate number of hours watching television, the book by Rucker and Leonnig (2020) shows how specific news segments have determined American policy. This evidence has awakened the world to the reality that the president bases his decisions not on the advice of his advisers—whom, as reported in several publications, he often derides—but on the views of talk show hosts (e.g. Sean Hannity from Fox

News) whom he reportedly talks to every day. The other issue discussed in the book is how President Trump sees the world through the media lenses of TV ratings. This is probably a habit he acquired from his days on *The Apprentice* television show. Consequently, he approaches global issues, such as nuclear disarmament by North Korea, not by considering the priorities of global peace, or at least their relative contribution to American interests. Rather, the overriding concern is how good the press in the United States would report on President Trump. For example, looking at the US–North Korea Summit in Singapore, the book details how the whole meeting was designed to cast President Trump in a positive light, give him the bragging rights of having disarmed North Korea, and possibly aid in getting him a Nobel Peace Prize in the process.

The book's other significant contribution is its coverage of the impeachment of President Trump. It looks at the issue through the lenses of Democratic leaders, such as Nancy Pelosi, who was reluctant to impeach the president, and of President Trump himself who, with his typically distorted view of reality, saw the impeachment as yet another assault on him by the “deep state” rather than as the result of an action on his part. The book recounts how Trump's lawyers fretted all the time about the unreliable character of their client as well as how Justice Department officials (e.g. Rod Rosenstein) faced difficult decisions in trying to achieve justice while fending off the efforts of the president to end the investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller. To their credit, from the start, the authors begrudgingly admitted they had known President Trump had been innocent of collusion with Russia. However, this was not because they held President Trump in high moral regard but simply because a clear-cut chance of such collusion had never presented itself.

Most significantly, the book presents a clear explanation of the conclusions of Special Counsel Bob Mueller. In much of the liberal press, as well as some of the conservative media (e.g. *Fox News*), there was speculation about why Mueller had compiled an extensive dossier detailing the wrongdoings of almost all the key players in President Trump's circle but had stopped short of recommending decisive action such as the laying of criminal charges. According to the book, the view of the Mueller team was that although they had extensive evidence of both economic and political impropriety committed by the Trump team, they could not recommend criminal charges to be laid against a sitting president (which is, broadly, not possible under the country's constitution). Even though the Special Counsel could not technically bring criminal charges, any suggestions of criminal proceedings would have painted a picture that President Trump was a criminal and still only running around free because of a technicality which prevented the Justice Department from bringing criminal charges against a sitting president.

In covering the issue of impeachment, the book also inadvertently discusses a few other important matters; for example, matters relating to the American criminal justice system. Specifically, the book discusses the technical modalities of the American justice system and the relevance (and significance) of shielding the president from criminal charges while still in office. It also discusses the American political landscape and how much has changed since the impeachment of former President Richard Nixon decades earlier. In the case of President Nixon, both Democratic and Republican politicians agreed that a crime had been committed. Further, the impeachments of President Nixon and President Clinton are compared, and the conclusion is reached that, because of deeper polarisation in contemporary American politics, there is an even smaller chance of securing a conviction in Senate because of the inclination to close ranks on the part of the Republicans. Therefore, the parties would rather have a wayward politician in the White House and try to resolve the issue in-house than to resort to a public reproach through legal instruments like an impeachment.

One other matter that the book by Rucker and Leonnig (2020) deals with is the role of Jared Kushner. In the book by Michael Wolff, Kushner occupies a prominent position as a modern-day “courtier” who seeks to gain influence within the White House, especially together with Ivanka Trump, President Trump’s daughter. The characterisation of Kushner in Woodward’s book is, broadly speaking, the same; Kushner is characterised as having a destabilising influence in the White House. He directly contributed to the ousting of two chiefs of staff when they had tried to rein in the president’s family members. In the book by Rucker and Leonnig (2020), while Kushner is still cast as one of the destabilising influences in the White House, credit is given to the way he has approached the several and seemingly near impossible tasks given to him, such as trying to broker peace between Israel and Palestine. The book also highlights Kushner’s efforts in reforming the criminal justice system, largely comprising efforts and lobbying campaigns to unite tough-on-crime Republicans and liberal Democrats in reconsidering sentencing laws.

The book, *A Very Stable Genius: Donald J. Trump’s Testing of America*, makes an important contribution in that it throws more light on the presidency of Donald Trump. Through its chronological, day-to-day accounts, it gives deeper insights into Donald Trump’s motivation for making some seemingly obtuse decisions. Considering the highly polarised and divisive nature of the Trump presidency, the authors nevertheless maintained considerable objectivity. They achieved this by looking at each momentous occasion through the lenses of all parties involved. Granted, more detailed and insightful books on President Trump’s impeachment might still be published. However, the book by Rucker and Leonnig (2020) presents the best account so far of the events leading to the president’s impeachment and of the processes leading to the conclusions reached by key parties such as William Barr and Robert Mueller.

References

Pirro, J. 2018. *Liars, Leakers, and Liberals: The Case against the Anti-Trump Conspiracy*. New York, NY: Center Street.

Rucker, P., and C. Leonnig. 2020. *A Very Stable Genius: Donald J. Trump's Testing of America*. London: Penguin Press.

Wolff, M. 2018. *Fire and Fury. Inside the Trump White House*. Didcot, Oxfordshire: Hachette.

Woodward, B. 2018. *Fear: Trump in the White House*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.