The Unlikely Miracle of Trump's Presidency
By David J. Garrow, *The Critic*, 2 October 2020.
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Rage by Bob Woodward--Simon & Schuster, £25

Robert U. "Bob" Woodward has an unparalleled reputation as America's top journalist. Forty-eight years ago, he was one of two *Washington Post* reporters who broke open the "Watergate" scandal that led to President Nixon's resignation from office. Over the intervening years Woodward has authored or co-authored now twenty books, many on the presidencies of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, but also much-lauded volumes on subjects as varied as the US Supreme Court, comedian John Belushi, and the Central Intelligence Agency.

Woodward's signature technique is the "deep background" interview, where high-ranking officials share their thoughts with him, knowing that while he will quote them verbatim, he will never explicitly name them as a source, allowing everyone a chimera of deniability.

In a time when most American journalists have forsaken professionalism for overt political partisanship, Woodward, now aged 77, is an admirable dinosaur from another era. For example, even in early 2017 Woodward had no hesitation in publicly branding the former UK spook Christopher Steele's "dossier" of defamatory third-hand tales about President-elect Trump "a garbage document."

Two years ago, Woodward published *Fear: Trump in the White House*, an unsurprisingly devastating portrait of a president who had never imagined he would win election and who had no idea whatsoever about how to do the job. Trump would rue his

decision not to speak with Woodward for that volume, and thus the centrepiece of *Rage*, Woodward's new pre-election book on Trump, is word-for-word narration of eighteen conversations between Woodward and the president, dating from 5 December 2019 until 21 July 2020.

Long before Trump became nationally known as a reality television performer, he had a long and chequered career as a New York-area real estate developer. In the 1980s, the mutual loathing between Trump and the city's intellectual elites was captured by the satirical magazine *Spy*, which irreverently branded Trump as a "short-fingered vulgarian." Trump hailed from Queens, an outer borough comparable to say Hounslow or Croydon, and Manhattan sophisticates spoke of such ausländers as "B & T," for the bridges or tunnels they had to traverse in order to visit the city's more august precincts.

That history of humiliating social inferiority is essential for appreciating the anger and rage that candidate Trump offered to disaffected American voters in 2016, especially those in the "flyover" states lying between the elite east and west coasts. As the unlikeliest of U. S. presidents awaited inauguration in January 2017, however, many alumni of previous Republican administrations privately advised colleagues that the nation's best interests required that the utterly unprepared Trump deserved the best cabinet members he could be persuaded to appoint. Thus, the new president began his first term with some undeniably first-rate top appointees, such as Defence Secretary James Mattis, a widely respected former Marine general, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the retiring CEO of energy giant Mobil Exxon, and Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, a deeply principled former Indiana Republican Senator.

None of these officials were oblivious to the dangers of working under Donald Trump, for as Woodward writes, in New York the new chief executive "had built a decades-long reputation for disparaging former business and romantic partners." Yet Dan Coats' wife Marsha voiced the wishful optimism of many, saying that "I truly believe the office will change Donald Trump. I believe it will humble him." It did not take long for that hope to be extinguished.

The earliest and most compelling chapters of *Rage* make for depressingly painful reading, for they detail all too richly the horrifically insulting treatment that the deeply insecure new president dished out to Tillerson, Mattis, and Coats, as well as to Attorney General Jeff Sessions, a former Alabama Senator who had been Trump's first prominent political supporter and who gave up his Senate seat to head up the Department of Justice. Tillerson, who had agreed to join the administration after multiple luminaries told him "you must do it," lasted only fourteen months as America's top diplomat. Sessions endured a bit longer, but even Mattis, a relentlessly self-disciplined lifelong Marine, fell short of two years; Coats lasted two and a half.

Well before both men exited, Mattis and Coats repeatedly discussed the president's dire shortcomings. "Coats began to think Trump was impervious to facts," Woodward writes in a classic example of his transparent sourcing. Trump had no ability to compartmentalize, and thus could easily become agitated about some extraneous topic. As a result, "the steady stream of ranting was debilitating" for someone as dedicated as Coats. Mattis told Coats that "the president has no moral compass," and Coats agreed. "To him, a lie is not a lie. It's just what he thinks. He doesn't know the difference between the truth and a lie."

Before departing, Mattis would eventually tell Coats that Trump is "dangerous. He's unfit" for office. But, in what may be the single most perceptive statement in *Rage*, Mattis appreciated a key facet of Trump's enduring popularity among his most devoted supporters: "even the people who believe in him somehow believe in him without believing what he says."

In Woodward's telling, only one single Washington figure could speak honestly to Trump and maintain an amiable relationship with him: South Carolina Republican Senator Lindsay Graham, a congenial bachelor with a droll sense of humour. Again and again, Woodward notes, Graham "provided wise counsel" to Trump, and had the president accepted much more of it than he did, he would be cruising to re-election this November rather than be a decided underdog to 77-year-old former vice-president Joe Biden.

Two important aspects of *Rage* have been all but ignored in early US press coverage of Woodward's book. One is Rex Tillerson's verbatim recounting of a 2014 conversation with Russian president Vladimir Putin in which Putin told him, "I've given up on your President Obama. He doesn't do anything he says he's going to do. I can't deal with someone who won't follow through on his promises." Putin also asserted that he tried to warn Obama away from what would become one of the greatest foreign policy errors of his presidency: US intervention in Libya. "I said to Obama, I understand you don't like Gaddafi, but what comes after him? He couldn't answer that. So I told him, well, until you can answer that, you shouldn't go in." Libya remains a war-wracked failed state today.

The second such topic is how deeply dishonest China's early 2020 handling of the coronavirus pandemic was. Trump repeatedly pressed Chinese president Xi Jinping to be more forthcoming, but

was stonewalled. On 23 January, Trump's CIA briefer, Beth Sanner, told him that the US intelligence community believed that Covid-19 would be "just like the flu," Woodward reports, and as late as 29 February both US virus czar Anthony Fauci and Centres for Disease Control director Robert Redfield publicly declared that, in Redfield's words, "the American public needs to go on with their normal lives." The beginnings of widespread lockdowns would commence just two weeks later.

Yet for all of the sustained excellence of Woodward's resourceful and unbiased reporting, Trump's decision to speak with him at such remarkable length results in long stretches of *Rage* being almost totally unreadable, for Trump's inability to articulate substantive trains of thought renders Woodward's verbatim narrative utterly deadening. Woodward at one point acknowledges "the vague directionless nature of Trump's comments," yet his fair-to-a-fault presentation of Trump's words results in *Rage* being the least compelling book Woodward has ever authored, and by the widest of margins. As *Wall Street Journal* critic Barton Swaim noted in an early review, Trump unintentionally ended up sandbagging Woodward by talking to him at such extensive length. Trump's vacuous logorrhoea "ruins the book" by making it "unbearably boring," Swaim rightly observed. As a result, one feels almost sad that such a superb journalist as Bob Woodward has been so badly undermined by an excess of access to such a profoundly unreflective and deeply miscast president.

Yet, notwithstanding all of the multiple crises of the Trump presidency, Woodward rightly highlights the most important thing of all: "democracy has held." America votes on 3 November, but with many of the most-contested states using widespread mail-in voting for the very first time, the chances of any certain

result being known on 4 November seem slim indeed. Multiple decisive states may well take upwards of a week or more to conclude a comprehensive vote count, and selfish partisans on both sides will likely turn to oftentimes partisan state courts to advance their odds of success. No one should be surprised if the US Supreme Court is required to step in to resolve the resulting mess. It's very likely that democracy will hold, but the process may well be very ugly and very unpleasant.

David J. Garrow's books include *Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama* and *Bearing the Cross*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.