

Book Review: Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig: A Very Stable Genius:  
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A Very Stable Genius: Donald J. Trump's Testing of America  
Reviewer: Laina Farhat-Holzman

The election of Donald Trump to the presidency has unleashed a flood of books about him. His rise to this position is unprecedented, considering his lack of political experience, his dismissal of norms of behavior observed by his predecessors, and his ignorance of issues that other presidents have mastered, or at least have advisors who can help him.

His political rivals during the 2016 primaries all sized him up accurately. They pronounced him crazy, a con-man, a circus barker, and unfit for the office. Trump demolished them all by getting elected---elected with a strategic manipulation of the Electoral College with help from Vladimir Putin. And upon being elected, his formal rivals, formerly traditional conservative Republicans, rushed to abase themselves and reverse their original assessments.

A Very Stable Genius offers a chronological unfolding of the Trump presidency, from its beginning to the moment of his astonishing phone call to the new young president of Ukraine, holding back military aid money in exchange for finding "dirt" on Trump's most likely political rival in the upcoming 2020 election. Impeachment followed that action, and this is where the narrative ends---for now.

Much has happened since then that has not yet been memorialized in a book, but certainly will be. But there is more than enough here, an account meticulously researched and documented. The book's many reviewers have found nothing to rebut.

The title, A Very Stable Genius, are Trump's own words, repeated several times at his rallies, contradicting others around him such as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who called him "a fucking moron," and others who called him "deranged" or "nuts." The reader of this book will be hard pressed conclude that Trump is a very stable genius.

"Actually, throughout my life, my two greatest assets have been mental stability and being, like, really smart?I went from VERY successful businessman [overlooking numerous bankruptcies], to top T.V. Star to President of the United States (on my first try). I think that could qualify as not smart, but genius?and a very stable genius at that!"

Paul Wehner, who served in the Reagan and both Bush administrations was one of the first Republicans to warn publicly about Trump's psychological unfitnes to be president.

"He is a transgressive personality, so he likes to attack and destroy and unsettle people if he sees an institution that he thinks is not doing his bidding, not protecting him like he wants or is a threat to him, he'll go after it. The intelligence community because they didn't tell him what he wanted to hear. The Justice Department because it wasn't doing what he wanted to do. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization because he doesn't think they pay enough?The press is ?the enemy of the people.? So he doesn't have any regard for institutions, the role they play, why they're important, and he delights in tearing them down."

The press watched in fascination during the transition period before inauguration as what appeared to be a casting call paraded through the lobby of Trump Tower, auditioning for administration jobs. One observer was reminded of the notorious Star Wars bar scene: "You never knew who was going to crawl in." Trump held job interviews not inside the federal office building in Washington, but at Trump Tower, Trump National Golf Club in Bedminster, New Jersey, and Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach, Florida. Trump's assessment focused on how these applicants looked. If they looked like Hollywood versions of the role, they were in.

The book traces Trump's continual boasting, constant lying and exaggerating, and his strange obsession to cozy up to the world's worst dictators. It follows each daily horror, from firing Comey and Sally Yates, for daring to alert him to Russia's malevolent role, to the relentless process of getting rid of every responsible advisor who tried to steer him into proper action.

I have marked up almost every page of this book, far too many things to put in this report. It is a great, stomach-churning read, and a confirmation of everything those of us who follow the serious press have learned.

Just to conclude, I must cite the assessment of Admiral McRaven, who had been a commander of the U.S. Joint Special Operations and led the 2011 raid on a Pakistani compound that killed Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of the 9/11 terror attack. He, like other retired military men, held his tongue until Trump began removing security clearances from America's intelligence officers who dared to criticize the president. John Brennan was the first: McRaven's trusted friend and critical partner in that unique mission. Trump's vindictive attack on Brennan spurred McRaven to write the following op ed, a letter to the President.

"Former CIA Director John Brennan, whose security clearance you revoked on Wednesday, is one of the finest public servants I have ever known. Few Americans have done more to protect this country than John. He is a man of unparalleled integrity, whose honesty and character have never been in question, except by those who don't know him.

Therefore, I would consider it an honor if you would revoke my security clearance as well, so I can add my name to the list of men and women who have spoken up against your presidency.

Like most Americans, I had hoped that when you became president, you would rise to the occasion and become the leader this great nation needs.

A good leader tries to embody the best qualities of his or her organization. A good leader sets the example for others to follow. A good leader always puts the welfare of others before himself or herself.

Your leadership, however, has shown little of these qualities. Through your actions, you have embarrassed us in the eyes of our children, humiliated us on the world stage and, worst of all, divided us as a nation.

If you think for a moment that your McCarthy-era tactics will suppress the voices of criticism, you are sadly mistaken. The criticism will continue until you become the leader we prayed you would be."

If you have no time to read this entire book, Admiral McRaven sums up what we need to know before the next election. If the Republicans in the Senate want to be reelected, they need to ponder McRaven's decency and compare his backbone to theirs. Perhaps reading this book can help you grow a backbone.