



WTH is going on in the White House? Authors of “A Very Stable Genius” on Trump’s genius and not so genius qualities

Episode #33 | February 26, 2020 | Danielle Pletka, Marc Thiessen, Carol Leonnig, and Philip Rucker

Danielle Pletka: Hi, I'm Danielle Pletka.

Marc Thiessen: I'm Marc Thiessen.

Danielle Pletka: Welcome to our podcast, What the Hell Is Going On?

Danielle Pletka: Marc, what the hell is going on?

Marc Thiessen: First, you're obviously here because you like our podcast, or you just stumbled across it. But if you like what you hear, please go and subscribe, rate us, and recommend us to your friends. That's number one.

Danielle Pletka: Are there other things the hell going on, Marc?

Marc Thiessen: Yes, actually. We have a really cool podcast today because we are talking to the authors of the New York Times number-one bestseller “A Very Stable Genius.”

Danielle Pletka: Who is that very stable genius?

Marc Thiessen: Donald Trump.

Danielle Pletka: I have to ask you this question just upfront. Well, two questions. Do you think Donald Trump is a very stable genius, Marc?

Marc Thiessen: I think that Donald Trump is, in many ways, a political genius, yes, to get elected and do what he did, without a doubt. Is he the most deeply educated and informed president we have ever had in American history, and does he know a lot of things that you and I and others in Washington take for granted and expect a president to know? Possibly not. In fact, demonstrably not. But he is, without a doubt, a political genius.

Marc Thiessen: The revolution that he launched to get elected, without a doubt, that is an act of genius, and also his ability to see something that none of us here in Washington saw, on the left or the right, which is that there was a segment of the American public that was being ignored by the establishments of both political parties and were looking for leadership, needed representation and a voice, and he found a way to be that voice. Yes, I think in that sense, he is a stable genius.

- Danielle Pletka: For me, actually, I may not use the word genius, but I do agree with you that his sense of the American public and his feeling about this under- and unrepresented part of America that really would rally behind him, I think, was hugely important, and that he actually deserves a ton of credit for it. The word stable just doesn't work out for me. He is just not stable. So-
- Marc Thiessen: To your point, though, I think it also requires a little bit of humility on all of our parts here in Washington because he got it right and we got it wrong. We weren't listening to those people. Look, the reality is there's-
- Danielle Pletka: Those deplorable people.
- Marc Thiessen: Those deplorables, exactly right. The reality is there has not been a lot of humility in response to Donald Trump's presidency. There's not a lot of people running around saying, "You know, he saw something I didn't, and maybe I should give him a little bit more deference and listen and maybe change my thinking a little bit in response to what he uncovered in the American body politic."
- Danielle Pletka: Okay, so this is a perfect segue to talk about this book. I don't think the authors would mind if I say it is a litany of stories that are about the president from soup to nuts. It starts with before his inauguration, and it continues until pretty recently. It is just one pretty horrifying story after another.
- Danielle Pletka: And that's the natural course of things, is that the people who are most eager to speak to you are the people who have something to say, and Donald Trump has done badly by a lot of people in this town. He's fired a lot of people. He's called a lot of people stupid and lazy and morons and dopes and losers. And yeah, dopes and losers and morons and stupid and all those guys, yeah, they've got an ax to grind, so yeah, you kind of get it.
- Danielle Pletka: This book has made a big splash. You guys, if you're not living under a rock, have heard the big, splashy stories about the president being briefed on NATO allies and on what our treaties really mean and getting really mad at all the briefers, and that made big headlines. All in all, he comes across in the book as an incredibly shallow, not very smart, not very nice man, and yet I think he's on track to be reelected right now. I mean, what the heck?
- Marc Thiessen: Because I don't think that's the complete portrait of Donald Trump. The story they tell about the Tank meeting is incredibly well-reported and has a lot of detail that nobody had had before that they unearthed.
- Marc Thiessen: For those who might not have gotten to this point yet, basically what happened is the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary Tillerson and some of the president's adult minders decided that he really wasn't getting how the world worked, and so they needed to have a big briefing for him about how the world works. Phil Rucker, in an interview, called it the "Schoolhouse Rock" version of how the world works. And Donald Trump didn't take very well to that. He said some things that he probably shouldn't have said, but at the same time, it was incredibly condescending-
- Danielle Pletka: Yeah, but this is exactly-

- Marc Thiessen: ... to invite the Commander in Chief into the Tank and give him a Schoolhouse Rock briefing on how the world works.
- Danielle Pletka: Yeah, but this is one of our favorite lines. Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not following you. Right. Just because they're calling you stupid, and it's offensive and condescending, doesn't mean you're not stupid. That's the problem here, is that there is an element of stupid that has shocked people. There's a story in the book about how the president really didn't have an idea what happened at Pearl Harbor. Now, I find that almost impossible to believe, given that he is a living, breathing American-educated person of a certain age, by the way, when actually Pearl Harbor loomed very large in people's lives, but he seems not to have all that much, you know, knowledge.
- Marc Thiessen: Well, you know what, sometimes knowledge is overrated and-
- Danielle Pletka: Marc!
- Marc Thiessen: But sometimes the more you know is not better. Here's the thing. There is a lot of stuff that happens here just because that's how it's done. It's how it's always been done, so we just keep doing it.
- Marc Thiessen: Trump came in. He was not a senator. He was not a congressman. He was not a governor. He had never been elected to public office. He was a businessman who came in to make America great again because the establishments were screwing it up, and so the establishment shouldn't be surprised when he comes in and he's not steeped in the culture of how we've done things, and he starts asking some questions that, quite frankly, ought to be asked.
- Marc Thiessen: Why do we have troops in South Korea? Why aren't we-
- Danielle Pletka: Well, don't you know why we have troops in South Korea-
- Marc Thiessen: I know why we have troops in South Korea, but that's-
- Danielle Pletka: ... and why?
- Marc Thiessen: But it's a fair question to ask these things. Also, why are we not winning after 18 years in Afghanistan?
- Danielle Pletka: I'm not objecting to any of those questions.
- Marc Thiessen: Those are fair questions that millions of Americans ask.
- Danielle Pletka: And why are our NATO allies not paying 2% when they promised to do so in 2014? All of those are fair questions. The issue here is that not terribly fine line between being a disruptor, which I think you rightly say is something Washington has been asking for and really needed for a long time. There is a deep state. People are complacent. Our bureaucracy does believe that presidents come and presidents go, but I'll be here forever. All of that is 100% true. The question is, does that disruption need to have nuclear force?

- Marc Thiessen: Well, that's what the American people voted for. Look, sometimes when you send a disruptor in, when you send a bull into the china shop, you shouldn't be surprised when some china gets broken. The American people made a conscious choice to send a bull into the china shop, and he's breaking china. In some ways, I like the way that he's breaking china. In other ways, I don't like the way he's breaking the china, and I don't agree with everything that he's doing. But people in Washington have responded to the Trump presidency with a mixture... The establishments have responded with a mixture of revulsion and just-
- Danielle Pletka: And contempt.
- Marc Thiessen: And contempt. I'm sorry, but he was elected by 63 million Americans, and they sent him here. That's 63 million votes that either you or I or any of those people in the Tank or anybody who's questioning him got in the election.
- Danielle Pletka: The Washington Post has really owned this genre since "All the President's Men." It was Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward who wrote this incredible blockbuster of a book that brought down Richard Nixon, and it was the inside story that ended up being Watergate and trying to disrupt the 1972 election. These two Washington Post reporters have continued that tradition in a lot of ways by writing, not the insider tell-all, but the expose-
- Marc Thiessen: Behind the scenes.
- Danielle Pletka: The behind-the-scenes expose. One of my real arguments with this genre... Again, I think these are very serious people. This is not a book full of innuendo and baseless rumor. They're very meticulous. They're very serious about their reporting and about their confirmation. But I will say this. Under Donald Trump, Washington has become a maelstrom of unsubstantiated garbage that I hear five, six, seven times a day from different people, because there are so many conspiracy theories that are floating around. There are so much crazy about this-
- Marc Thiessen: Like that Donald Trump conspired with Russia to steal the 2016 election?
- Danielle Pletka: Well, that, among other things. But frankly, lots and lots and lots of other stuff. I do think that it's a challenge for everybody to try to sort out what is just ax-grinding from what are real complaints. Again, without reference to this book in particular, but just in reference to this presidency, it is instructive to look at the Mueller Report and to remind people that a lot of things that everybody believed were true and would've staked their reputation on were not.
- Marc Thiessen: Oh my gosh, if you just look at the... I did a column in the Washington Post called "The Russia Hall of Shame," where I just went through all of the things that were said just by people with security clearances. Members of the Senate Intelligence Committee, members of the House Intelligence Committee, former intelligence officials, who basically told the American people, wink, nod, "You can't see this stuff, but I see it and I've had access to it, and let me tell you, there was a conspiracy." And it wasn't true-
- Danielle Pletka: This is something we want to talk about with them. We don't want any spoilers. You know Marc and I, obviously, have a somewhat different opinion about some of this

stuff.

Marc Thiessen: You don't disagree with what I just said.

Danielle Pletka: I don't disagree with most of it. I think the president, as is always the case, snatches defeat from the jaws-

Marc Thiessen: That's a whole different story, but yes.

Danielle Pletka: ... of victory, and is incapable of saying the right thing in response to these things. Why can't he say the right thing? Because he doesn't think the right thing. His instinct is not to do the right thing. The truth is, of course, that had the Russians been willing to tilt the elections in his favor-

Marc Thiessen: Oh, that's not fair.

Danielle Pletka: ... he probably, as he said, would've been happy to take the help. On that note of disagreement, you guys can't see Marc rolling his eyes at me, we should introduce our guests-

Danielle Pletka: Philip Rucker, he's the White House Bureau Chief for the Washington Post. He leads the coverage of the Trump administration, so he's a hardworking man. He and a team of Post reporters won the Pulitzer Prize and the George Polk Award, the very prestigious journalism award, for their reporting on Russian interference in the 2016 election. He's really got an amazing pedigree. He's also a political analyst for NBC News.

Marc Thiessen: And a good guy.

Danielle Pletka: And a great guy, and a patient guy, as you guys are about to find out. Carol Leonnig-

Marc Thiessen: With my impertinent questions.

Danielle Pletka: Exactly. Carol Leonnig is a national investigative reporter at the Washington Post. She's worked there since 2000, and covered the Trump presidency and other fun topics. She won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for her reporting on security failures and misconduct inside the Secret Service, and was again part of the Post Pulitzer-Prize-winning team for reporting on Russian interference in the 2016 elections.

Marc Thiessen: I think, between them, they have five Pulitzer Prizes. That's amazing.

Danielle Pletka: So, it's great to have them here.

Marc Thiessen: All right. Well, Phil, Carol, welcome to the podcast. This is kind of a reunion for us because back in the day, Dany and I worked on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Carol was covering the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Carol Leonnig: Yeah. Wow. Look how far we've come.

- Marc Thiessen: This is a meticulously researched book. You've gotten so many people to talk to you and tell you stories from behind the scenes. I'm going to ask you two questions. What is the most surprising thing you discovered about President Trump you didn't expect to find, and is there anything about him you expected to find you didn't?
- Carol Leonnig: I like the way you asked that question-
- Marc Thiessen: I could be a good reporter.
- Carol Leonnig: Yeah. Phil and I were surprised by a lot of things. I think probably the one that was the most compelling, and sometimes worrisome, was the president's lack of knowledge about America's story, how we came to be who we are, the principles that founded the country, and also his lack of curiosity about it. Phil and I also noticed one more thing, which is a theme that runs through this book, which is that the president's aides are distraught about that lack of curiosity. The degree to which they're concerned about his impulsive decisions, his rejection of information, the level to which they are concerned worried us.
- Danielle Pletka: What do you think is the best story in the book, Phil?
- Philip Rucker: What do you mean by best, the most compelling and dramatic and cinematic?
- Danielle Pletka: That's a hard one because, of course, everybody will know one of the biggest stories in the book was about Trump calling his military and senior national security advisors dopes and morons... Was it dopes and-
- Philip Rucker: Dopes and babies.
- Danielle Pletka: Dopes and babies. I know Marc has a question he wants to come back to on that one. Really, up to you, what do you think is the best? I'm going to leave that definition to you.
- Philip Rucker: Well, I think the most cinematic moment is the one that you just alluded to, the meeting at the Tank in the Pentagon, but that's been in so many of the excerpts and coverage of the book. I think the best details in there, there are so many of them, are just the small moments that reveal the character and the thinking and the process of this president, who's so unique and extraordinary in every way day to day. There are all these moments, like he's at Trump Tower in residence during the transition trying to plan for his government, but also to plan for the inauguration, and his body man, his assistant, Johnny McEntee, comes up to the residence, the penthouse, to deliver him his sandwich for dinner-
- Danielle Pletka: McEntee is in the administration right now.
- Philip Rucker: McEntee is now in the news because he's the guy running presidential personnel, executing the purge on behalf of the president. But back then, he was a nobody, a 20-something former football player from Connecticut bringing the boss his sandwich for dinner. At that moment, Trump overhears Melania, his wife, in the living room talking about Rick Gates and inauguration planning, and he just loses it and, on the spot, fires Rick Gates as the inauguration director, turns to Johnny

McEntee, the body man, and says, "Johnny, you're the new executive director of the inauguration."

Danielle Pletka: Now, remind us, why was the president so mad about hearing Rick Gates's name?

Philip Rucker: He thought that Gates had basically rigged the campaign, taken money from Trump for polling and for other political operations in an unfair way. Trump was mad about that. He resented Gates. Gates, of course, was the deputy and close associate of Paul Manafort, who during the campaign was the campaign chairman. There was a lot of animosity between Trump and Gates, but Gates was a key figure in those early months of the presidency behind the scenes in a way that the president didn't really fully understand, and had been directing the inaugural planning. It's just one of these moments that, and there are so many of them over the course of these three years in the book, that show the president's impulsive decision-making and the way he creates some of his own chaos.

Carol Leonnig: I love Phil's story. In a sign of things to come with the president, Trump was really upset with Gates because he commissioned a poll that found Trump was doing very poorly in the campaign, and that really outraged the president-

Marc Thiessen: Which also turned out to be wrong.

Carol Leonnig: It did turn out to be wrong, but he-

Danielle Pletka: He was probably right to have fired Rick Gates. Okay, another follow-up, is there a great story that you left out?

Carol Leonnig: There were a lot of times we thought about cutting things because the book was getting so long, but our editor, smartly, Ann Godoff at Penguin Press, she said, "Everything that has to do with the portrait of this person is important and it's history, so let's keep that." Our guiding principle was we didn't keep in stories that didn't relate to him directly. There were other stories where we didn't meet our standard, our burden of proof, which is pretty rigorous. Multiple people had to tell it to us consistently. It had to be backed up in multiple ways.

Carol Leonnig: There was one mystery in all this that I found fascinating, which was Jared Kushner. When the legal team for President Trump is struggling with how to represent the president after Mueller is appointed special counsel, they privately say, "You know what, it seems like Jared Kushner and maybe even Ivanka should be out of the White House. It's a problem. It's potential witness, not tampering, but they're messing up the witnesses because they're floating in and out of meetings, they're chitchatting with other staff, they're matching up stories. We think we should get them out." We never could figure out what happened exactly, but we knew this much, that right after those lawyers began discussing that privately, two of them found really unflattering information about them leaked to the media. We never really figured out who did that, but it was just an intriguing moment.

Marc Thiessen: A lot of the people who you spoke with told you a lot of negative things about the president, but I'm sure you also spoke to people who held the president in high esteem. What are some of the positive things you learned about Donald Trump during the course of writing this book?

- Philip Rucker: There's actually one positive theme throughout the book, which is his incredible power to communicate to the tens of millions of people in this country who follow him, who voted for him in 2016, who are almost certainly going to vote for him again this November. He has this innate ability to understand exactly what they're feeling, what they're wanting to hear, and then channeling it back to them. His rallies are breathtaking in that sense. In talking to his advisors, they really held up the president's command and mastery over communication and messaging with his base in very high esteem. A lot of the political advisors around the president felt like their advice was secondary to what the president would come up with himself in terms of motivating and galvanizing his own supporters.
- Marc Thiessen: Aside from politics, how about him as a leader?
- Philip Rucker: He's decisive. That came through. He had very clear views of what he wanted done. Even as he would hear advice from some of his advisors and counselors, or even the experts inside the government, to persuade him to change course or go in a different direction, the president was pretty convincing at sticking to his guns and doing what he believed was the right thing to do, even though a lot of the people around him disagreed.
- Danielle Pletka: That's fascinating. If Donald Trump is reelected, do you think, based on all of this reporting and all of these conversations, I feel like you know the man really well, at least from a certain perspective, do you feel like he's going to be a different leader once he's in a second term and, to use that Barack Obama term, once he's liberated, or do you think he's been liberated in this second term? Because he wasn't that decisive for the first couple years. He was more intimidated by experienced Washington types. He seems now to be less that guy. What do you think?
- Carol Leonnig: I think you're totally right about the beginning, but the guts of Donald Trump are the same, which is this view of himself, as he describes himself, a game-day player. "I don't need any more information. I got it," rejecting the information of these experts, being really frustrated with the guardrails who tried to advise him, Secretary of State Tillerson, Defense Secretary Mattis, John Kelly, Chief of Staff, people that really tried to guide this president, who they supported, whose agenda they really loved, but who wanted to give a new guy on the block some ropes to work with.
- Carol Leonnig: I think what Phil and I have found in this reporting is past is prologue. As he gets more and more confident in the job, more and more frustrated driving the grown-ups out of the room, second term is going to be even more emboldened and unbound than the last several seasons. He overcame the Mueller investigation, a criminal investigation that found substantial evidence of obstruction of justice. He overcame a House impeachment inquiry, which found some significant evidence of him enlisting a foreign person to investigate an American person. He, in the last two weeks, has shown us, I think, the path for his next term if he wins it.
- Danielle Pletka: You've given us a perfect segue to Marc's questions, but I don't care. That's just the kind of collaborative relationship we have.
- Marc Thiessen: We have. Exactly.

- Danielle Pletka: Phil, one of the things that you said was that Trump is a great communicator. I think even people who disagree firmly with him agree he really does have a finger on the pulse of how a certain segment of the population feels. One of the things that is interesting, though, and it comes through a little bit in the book among the critics, and it got Hillary Clinton into a ton of trouble in her election campaign, is this sense that Donald Trump himself is the litmus test, that basically if you support Trump, you are one of those people to whom he can communicate and somehow a lesser form of life, or let's just use Hillary's word, deplorable. Is that fair that he's become this sort of litmus test for a lot of people?
- Philip Rucker: You guys know this better than most. He's become a litmus test for the Republican Party. You're not a true Republican these days if you're not completely loyal to this president, and he's made it so. That's one of the reasons Jeff Flake is a former senator now, and Bob Corker is a former senator. That's become a test within the Republican Party.
- Philip Rucker: Are Trump and his followers lesser forms of humans? That's not for us to say, certainly. I've been to tons of Trump rallies and talked to a lot of Trump voters, and have found them to be quite insightful and thoughtful about why they support the president and have clear convictions about that. That's certainly not our conclusion in the book. I will say there are some people who are serving this president and have served this president who would not consider themselves part of the MAGA movement, who are not folks you would see at a Trump rally, who are conservative and Republicans and want this president to succeed, and that's why they've joined to work with him and wanted to teach him and school him and advise him and so forth, but they are not of the movement, so to speak. We don't speak for them, but they may, in fact, view aspects of the movement with some contempt.
- Marc Thiessen: Let's talk about the Tank meeting because that's, obviously, the big story from your book.
- Marc Thiessen: You describe in an interview the briefing that they gave Trump as sort of a "Schoolhouse Rock" on how the world works. I think the title of it was the, what is it, the post-war international rules-based order is the greatest gift of the greatest generation. The idea of giving the president of the United States a Schoolhouse Rock treatment is incredibly condescending. He reacted angrily, but was that a good idea? How did they expect him to react? You're being brought into the Tank, you've been elected by 63 million people, you're the President of the United States, Commander in Chief of the armed forces, and you're being talked down to by your Secretary of State, your Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who are treating you like a five-year-old. I would've blown up too.
- Carol Leonnig: Well, Schoolhouse Rock is definitely our way of saying that it's really basic, Marc, but the people who organized that meeting and witnessed it did not view any of the speakers as condescending to the president. Quite the opposite. They just knew that they were having arguments with him all the time. "Why do we have troops here? Why are they forward deployed? Why do we have bases here? Why don't we charge countries for bases?" These were questions that came up and up and up again over and over. "Why do we have this treaty? Why is NATO not paying as much as we are? Why do the other members skate on the contributions?"
- Carol Leonnig: They wanted to have this meeting to explain to him, throw some, literally, countries

on the charts and on the maps around them, and say, "Here's why we're here. This is what keeps us safe at night," and explain it. They didn't view themselves as condescending, but he certainly absorbed it as "You're trying to teach me something? Just so you know, I don't need teaching."

Carol Leonnig: He wanted to teach them a few things, which, to be fair to the president, he wasn't entirely wrong about. We're in Afghanistan a long time. He just used some words that were really vicious, calling it a loser war, as Phil has said so much better than I have in the past, in front of Vice President Pence, whose son has fought there; calling these people dopes and babies, who've risked their lives and given up their children's lives. A woman in the room was crying as he was speaking. It was that ad hominem, the way he reacted.

Marc Thiessen: Yeah. I understand that. Look, I'm the first person to criticize the president's tone, publicly as well as in private, but I think it was condescending, I think, to say... First of all, who thought that it was an effective way to reach the president to say, "Here's how the rules-based international order works"? What a dumb idea to begin with.

Carol Leonnig: Steve Bannon was right. That did not work well.

Marc Thiessen: Then the other thing is... The Post just published this great series called the Afghanistan Papers, basically the theme of which was both the Obama administration and the Bush administration were presiding over failure in Afghanistan and selling it to the American people as success. The president came in and basically started asking them some really tough questions about "Why are we there? Why haven't we won yet? What's wrong with you people? 18 years in a war, and you can't win a war?" Why are those unreasonable questions for the Commander in Chief to ask? Those are actually questions he was elected to ask.

Carol Leonnig: I can take a stab at that, because I'm not in President Trump's head, but as I said, there's nothing wrong with asking that question; it was the manner in which he swatted them all back. Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, tried in a stuttering way to tell the president, "Look, we shouldn't fire Commander Nicholson, because he's running the war we told him to run. He's following a blueprint we've had, and you haven't changed that blueprint. We can change the blueprint, but he's not a loser because he's been doing what we said to do."

Carol Leonnig: There's nothing wrong with shaking up the snow globe of how we've conducted this war. It, again, was his rejection of the information that made people so upset, and his dressing down of the people that he has to rely on to take us into war. For example, if we'd had a skirmish with Iran not so long ago, these are the people he'd have to come to for help.

Danielle Pletka: I think that's fair. I'm always much harder on Donald Trump than my friend Marc, who's more balanced in his approach. And I don't like the language. That's so often what you hear people saying about Donald Trump at the end of the day is "It's not even the policies; it's the language. It's not the policy; it's the Twitter. It's not the policy; it's the..."

Danielle Pletka: On the other hand, and I want to come to this question, do you empathize with him a little bit from this perspective? It seems to me that he has, from the outset, thought that the pointy-headed elite establishment of Washington, and even of his

own party, his own adopted party, I should add, rejected the legitimacy of his election. "You never thought I would win, and I won. You thought my people were losers, and we're winners." I can go on and on, and these will all be reasonably accurate quotes.

Danielle Pletka: But I think he views, especially, the Russia stuff as an assault on his legitimacy, which is why he's taken all of this so personally, and again, mishandled it. I don't think any of us would disagree that there are ways to have handled this and that Donald Trump's way was not a very good one, but that it comes from the insecurity that we're talking about and that Marc just asked about, which is "You think I'm dumb. You're talking down to me. You think I'm an idiot. You think I don't understand the most basic things about everything, and you don't get the fact that I am your boss, and I don't see myself the way you do. Not only that, but now you're trying to make me seem like someone else bought this election for me." I can see that narrative in his head, right? You're nodding.

Danielle Pletka: Everybody has their own narrative and their own explication of things. Doesn't it explain a lot of how he's responded to a variety of things in your mind?

Philip Rucker: Absolutely. You're spot-on. It explains so much. Think back even before he ran for president. He was feeling excluded by the establishment, by the elites. Remember, he was at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, I guess it was 2011, and Obama was up there roasting him and making fun of his hair and making fun of the prospect of a Trump presidency and the gold dome in the South Lawn and all that. That was-

Marc Thiessen: There's speculation that was the night he decided to run.

Philip Rucker: That was humiliating for him in a ballroom full of Washington elites wearing their tuxedos. He's always felt an outcast and excluded from New York society. Even though he was wealthy and had his name on buildings, he was looked down upon by the New York elites. It's something Mayor Bloomberg has been talking about on the campaign trail the last few days, and it comes-

Danielle Pletka: Really, really effectively, I have to say. Not.

Philip Rucker: Not. Yeah. Then he comes to Washington as the new president, and already the intelligence community is presenting to him not only their findings that Russia interfered on his behalf, which in his mind casts doubt on his legitimacy as president, but the salacious material in the dossier that Jim Comey, the FBI director, personally presented to him, which he found embarrassing and humiliating and really angered him and hit a nerve, obviously, personally with him. He's been living with that for three years now, and it's why he continues to talk about the hoax and continues to try to rewrite the history of the Russian interference in 2016, because it has been this cloud over his presidency.

Carol Leonnig: I really liked his description, Phil's, and I also really liked your word, Dany, empathize. I totally can empathize with President Trump's situation. Can we name a president in history who, before they were inaugurated, was told, "It looks like there's some really horrendous dirt about you and that you may not have won the election without the help of a foreign power that's adversarial to us?"

- Danielle Pletka: Imagine.
- Carol Leonnig: I'm trying to think of what that would be like. Now flip it to the other side of the chair. You're Clapper. You're Brennan. You're Comey. You're expecting, when you go into that room on January 6th, the scene we also detail in the book, that tense briefing. We're meeting the nominee and president-elect, and we're going to tell him this crazy stuff. They're expecting for the president-elect to be a normal president-elect who has some gravitas and some cushion. They're expecting that person to say, "Oh my goodness, a foreign adversary has been interfering in the election. This is just horrible. We'll do something about this."
- Carol Leonnig: Instead, the cluster of advisors around the president-elect immediately start talking about the press release they're going to produce to establish that the intelligence community has found, which is not true, has found that it had no impact on the election. Clapper reminds the president-elect and his advisors, "We're not in that business. We don't assess whether or not it had impact." But on T-minus six, Donald Trump is already saying to himself, "This had no impact," and that's the number one story.
- Marc Thiessen: Yeah, but let's keep in mind there's the impact of Russia interfering in the election and then there's the allegation, which was central to the whole Mueller investigation, that Donald Trump colluded with them in that. It wasn't just questioning his legitimacy as president; it was an accusation that he faced that he had committed treason, that he was a Russian agent, and not by cranks. The former CIA director said he had committed treason. Members of the intelligence community who had access to classified information that we didn't, told us that there is evidence of collusion, that there's evidence of a conspiracy between the Trump campaign, and it turned out to be a conspiracy theory. Do you not agree with that, that Trump colluding with Russia to steal the election was proven definitively by Mueller to be untrue?
- Philip Rucker: But here's the thing, Marc. The president has never been able to fully distinguish between the collusion aspect and-
- Marc Thiessen: But we have.
- Philip Rucker: ... the actual Russian interference.
- Marc Thiessen: But we should.
- Philip Rucker: He blends it all together in his public statements. I think in the way he thinks about it, he thinks about it all as personal, as undermining his legitimacy.
- Danielle Pletka: Right. Exactly.
- Philip Rucker: Yeah, and it's all a hoax-
- Marc Thiessen: I don't disagree with that.
- Philip Rucker: ... in his view.

- Marc Thiessen: But we have a responsibility, the rest of us who are following this and reporting on this and commenting on this-
- Philip Rucker: We do, and we have.
- Marc Thiessen: ... to draw a distinction between it.
- Marc Thiessen: I'm not criticizing you. I'm just saying all of us. The reality is when you... You tell a fascinating story of just the chaos inside the White House as he's lashing out, and I think to myself, "How would I react if someone had accused me of treason? How would I react if somebody had said that I had done these terrible things, betrayed my country, was a Russian agent, when I knew it wasn't true?"
- Danielle Pletka: You wouldn't have acted like Donald Trump.
- Marc Thiessen: No, maybe not, but I-
- Danielle Pletka: I know you better.
- Marc Thiessen: But I think it's understandable when you look at the way he's lashing out. It's funny, he never mentions Stormy Daniels, because he did it. But he was mentioning Russia all the time, because he knew he didn't do it. We have a situation in this country where, for two years, the Mueller investigation, we had a cloud over the president and the presidency, and he had to live through this. Every day, stories accusing him of all this stuff, and it turned out it wasn't true. It was a conspiracy theory.-
- Carol Leonnig: I don't disagree with your central point at all. As Phil said, we've made some great efforts at the Post to document that. But there is a little line of nuance here, and the nuance is, as, again, described in our book and in our newspaper, that nuance is that as a candidate, President Trump said, "Russia, if you're listening," and literally people who are operatives at the GRU went back to work that day, as he spoke in Doral, Florida, on the campaign and urged that Russia somehow get involved in finding Hillary Clinton's emails. By the way, I would have liked to see Hillary Clinton's emails. I wasn't going to ask Russia for them, but I would have liked to see them. There is a connection, but not necessarily collusion and treason, which is a horrific word.
- Danielle Pletka: And from somebody who had a lot of weight to say it at the time-
- Marc Thiessen: And who was in the Obama administration in a senior-
- Danielle Pletka: ... and abused that weight.
- Marc Thiessen: ... position at the time.
- Carol Leonnig: Agreed, but the degree of contact between Russians who were trying to make, if you will, the lower-level aides was a good reason to be worried, and then President Trump encouraging a participation, which was real, over in Moscow. That participation was trying to penetrate Hilary Clinton's server that day, that evening in Moscow.

- Danielle Pletka: Right. As Marc himself said, so many of the president's problems are made by the president, not made by outsiders trying to besmirch his good name.
- Philip Rucker: That's correct.
- Danielle Pletka: I think that that was something that he was condemned for.
- Marc Thiessen: It certainly gives them pretext.
- Danielle Pletka: Yeah. They make it easier for him to feel like a victim. When Brennan and Clapper said those things, it made it easier, and they haven't stopped saying them, despite the findings of the Mueller Report. I want to ask you about folks like this, but not people who worked for the Obama administration; people who worked for Trump. I want to give you a chance to defend yourself from a criticism that I'm about to utter.
- Carol Leonnig: We'll take it.
- Danielle Pletka: And you will do a brilliant job, I know. But one of the things in reading the book, and obviously you have named sources, you have unnamed sources, this is a genre that's come in for plenty of criticism. You guys have heard it all, and we're not here to litigate whether it's a good genre or not. The New York Times bestseller list would suggest that it's certainly worked out well.
- Danielle Pletka: But you talked to people like Rex Tillerson. Let me tell you, as somebody who's spent... I'm creeping up on four decades now in foreign policy. I think of him as possibly the worst Secretary of State we've ever had. I say that not as a partisan matter, but as a matter of somebody who actually does care a lot about the institution and values it. We spend a lot of time talking about how much we honor the military and the men who served and the men and women who fight. You know what, the Foreign Service, we may like them a little less, their suits may be a little bit more pinstrippy, but the reality is these are people also serving, and they were treated with contempt, like garbage, by Rex Tillerson and his teeny, weeny little team that he brought with him. I thought he was awful. Yet, in your book, he comes across as a grown-up and a great statesman, and not a guy with an ax to grind, when, really, he has a big ax to grind. Help me work that out.
- Carol Leonnig: I'm happy to take this question. First off, we don't discuss who our sources are.
- Danielle Pletka: Of course not.
- Carol Leonnig: We don't talk about who we've spoken to, but I'll say a couple things. There is no question that Rex Tillerson was reviled in the State Department. I have friends there, to put a fine point on it, who say that to me quite a lot.
- Danielle Pletka: Not political appointees.
- Carol Leonnig: Not political appointees. However, again, our guiding principle in this book was let's take you in the room with Donald Trump. When Rex Tillerson is in a room with Donald Trump, these are the scenes of what you see. Did we want to explain the Foreign Service and their experiences? Yes, if it reflected on what Donald Trump's

portrait and decision-making was.

- Carol Leonnig: I take the criticism... We take any criticisms we like, constructive criticism, but I would just say that, again, this book is the arc of Donald J. Trump. To the degree to which there are moments when Rex Tillerson is in the room, he is the only person who stood up in the Tank and said, "That's not cool, man." He is the only person who tried to step in front of a roar across the faces of all of these officers.
- Danielle Pletka: Fair enough. Again, everybody is going to come at this... Let me put it this way. Any kind of story of this genre is going to elicit plenty of volunteers, and many of them will have an ax to grind, but that doesn't necessarily make their stories untrue.
- Philip Rucker: We so wish that our publisher gave us another 400 pages, and that the Washington Post gave us another year leave. We would write the full history of all of Washington for you. We had to stick to Trump.
- Danielle Pletka: There's another book in here, though, for sure.
- Philip Rucker: Yeah. We'll see.
- Danielle Pletka: Marc?
- Marc Thiessen: There's a point where you describe the confrontation between Rosenstein and Nunes, the Intelligence Committee chairman who released this memo alleging FISA abuses. You write that Nunes was dismissed as a reckless conspiracy theorist by some in the FBI. Nunes was pretty much vindicated in that memo. The Justice Department Inspector General, who was an Obama appointee, basically said that the FBI provided false and falsified and misleading information to the FISA Court. The Justice Department has withdrawn two of the FISA warrants, which means that was unlawful surveillance-
- Danielle Pletka: Surveillance.
- Marc Thiessen: ... of Carter Page. Hasn't Nunes been vindicated?
- Carol Leonnig: I actually think you're partially right. The problem with Nunes's memo was he tried to stretch... This is something journalists have to avoid as well. He tried to stretch a little too far in saying that information was withheld from the FISA judges.
- Carol Leonnig: I actually talked privately to people who've served on that court before, when I saw the material, and I asked them, "What would you have thought if this information had not been brought to you, this specific information about GPS Fusion being a funder, essentially, of this research?" They said, "I would've liked to know, but they pretty much told you in these pages that it was a political entity fighting against Donald Trump." The FISA Court would've been on alert that this was an adverse political group. They just didn't know the full identity.
- Carol Leonnig: I think what Nunes's memo didn't allude to, that the IG did find, which was really damning, was this idea that in the follow-up successor monitoring approvals, the warrants which were the extensions, that they had information that showed Carter Page was completely exonerated, and they didn't share that. That was a bigger

deal.

- Marc Thiessen: But also that the Steele dossier, which was unproven and unverified, was... We wouldn't have been here without the Steele dossier. That's essentially what the inspector general found. Without the Steele dossier, there would've been no FISA warrants. There would have been no Mueller investigation. We wouldn't have had these two years.
- Danielle Pletka: What would those two years have been like? Yeah, oh my God. So you have another book on the... I know the Washington Post will want you back for your day jobs, but you got book planned?
- Philip Rucker: We're back hard at work covering the presidency. I was at a Bernie Sanders rally over the weekend in Texas.
- Danielle Pletka: Oh my God.
- Philip Rucker: We're back at it.
- Philip Rucker: The Bernie story.
- Marc Thiessen: Oh my gosh.
- Carol Leonnig: Behind the scenes with Bernie.
- Danielle Pletka: Oh my goodness me.
- Carol Leonnig: Someone else is going to have to write that, I'm afraid.
- Danielle Pletka: That's a perfect note to end on.
- Philip Rucker: We can't do it.
- Danielle Pletka: Thank you guys so much, really.
- Marc Thiessen: Thank you so much for coming and joining us.
- Philip Rucker: Thanks.
- Danielle Pletka: Great work.
- Marc Thiessen: We really appreciate it.
- Danielle Pletka: This was an amazing book.
- Carol Leonnig: Fun.
- Danielle Pletka: I'm so grateful to those guys for being willing to come in. I said it to them, but I'll say it to you again. It's great to have a really successful book. On the other hand, you

are then condemned to doing nothing but talking about everything in your book again and again and again and again. We tried hard to get a little further afield, and I really appreciated their willingness to answer some tough questions.

Marc Thiessen: Absolutely. They did a great job of it. I was glad to see Phil talk about some of the positive things that they had found about Donald Trump, which include the fact that politically I think he is, he didn't say it quite this way, but he is a stable genius. He did tap in... He has-

Danielle Pletka: That's me sighing, people.

Marc Thiessen: He has a way of communicating with a segment of the American public that no American leader, left, right, or center, has ever had before. That is underrated, and I think the Democrats should be very worried about going into 2020 because he doesn't-

Danielle Pletka: With a socialist? Yes, possibly they should.

Marc Thiessen: Well, that's another problem.

Danielle Pletka: For that, please listen to our last podcast.

Marc Thiessen: Exactly. Right.

Danielle Pletka: Yes. I really appreciated the way both Carol and Phil answered the questions, because they thought about it. It's true, people don't try to balance their coverage of Trump. Look, it's hard for me too. I watch, and all I want to do is tear my hair out and jump up and down and scream. The reality is-

Marc Thiessen: Is that how you felt when he killed Soleimani?

Danielle Pletka: No, that's not how I felt when he-

Marc Thiessen: Thank you.

Danielle Pletka: ...killed Soleimani, Marc.

Marc Thiessen: Is that how you felt when he killed Baghdadi?

Danielle Pletka: No, that wasn't how I felt when he killed Baghdadi.

Marc Thiessen: Is that how you felt when he killed Hamza bin Laden?

Danielle Pletka: I was less excited about Hamza.

Marc Thiessen: When he bombed Syria twice?

Danielle Pletka: Marc, it's how I felt when he said he wanted to withdraw from Afghanistan, and is about to. It's how I felt when he did a deal with the Taliban, which he's about to

sign. It's how I felt when he betrayed our Kurdish allies, Marc.

Marc Thiessen: But this is making the case, which I think we agree on, just that there are... Donald Trump has done some things, quite frankly, that are better than even his Republican predecessors that we support. Three American presidents said we're going to move the embassy to Jerusalem. Only Donald Trump did it. There's a lot of things that he's done that other-

Danielle Pletka: And he's done terrible things too.

Marc Thiessen: I'm agreeing with you. What I don't understand is the inability of people in Washington who are so consumed with Trump derangement, that they can't balance... I'm not talking about our authors now. I'm talking about the commentariat here... that they can't balance the good and the bad, that they can't say, "Donald Trump, you did a great thing there, attaboy. Donald Trump, that was a really bad thing to do. You shouldn't do that." Donald Trump is being-

Danielle Pletka: Calling balls and strikes.

Marc Thiessen: Yeah. "Donald Trump is being attacked unfairly. I'm going to defend him." "Donald Trump is doing something really dumb. I'm going to say it." This shouldn't be so hard.

Danielle Pletka: This is a crisis in the commentariat, and this is a crisis in journalism, and this is a crisis in a lot of our communities.

Danielle Pletka: Carol alluded to the fact that she, as a journalist, covered when you and I worked for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and we were talking about the fact that we did tons of stuff... We were talking about this off-air, guys. We did tons of stuff with the Democrats because that's how you got stuff done. It's become very hard to do that. And basically you're not allowed to exhibit micro-deviationism.

Danielle Pletka: So a lot of the news in Washington over the last couple of days has also been about the fact that Trump has hired this guy to conduct a purge to those who are not loyal to him. It was a great scoop by Jonathan Swan at Axios. And I have no trouble believing it. The problem is the way-

Marc Thiessen: I have no trouble understanding it.

Danielle Pletka: I do.

Marc Thiessen: Why?

Danielle Pletka: Wait a second. Let me finish the thought, then I'll tell you.

Marc Thiessen: No.

Danielle Pletka: Shut up. No but seriously, the problem is these ideological purges are happening on both sides of the aisle. These "you're not allowed to express any support for the president if you are a liberal because you will be defenestrated." And if you're a

Trump person, “you’re not allowed to express any doubt about the stable genius-nature of our president, or you too will be offed.” This is how it has become and that, at the end of the day, is part of the problem for the book too, which is that its audience is largely people... It will be embraced by people who already hate Trump and derided by people who love Trump, and ignored. And that’s the end of national conversation.

Marc Thiessen: Okay, but going back to where-

Danielle Pletka: Going back to where I wanted to abuse you.

Marc Thiessen: Yes, but going back to the issue you raised, which is this purge, so-called. You agree there is a deep state?

Danielle Pletka: There’s a deep state in every country.

Marc Thiessen: Okay, but there are people in the government who are seeking to undermine President Trump’s policies. The President of the United States has the right to have people around him who are executing his policies because he was elected. 63 million people voted for him, not for them. And when you have somebody like Anonymous, who not only writes an op-ed that basically says, “I am trying to undermine Trump’s policies and I’m staying in the administration.” And then publishes a book, making money off of that, and is still in the government, I understand why Donald Trump doesn’t want people...

Marc Thiessen: You know, when I was a speechwriter, the inside scoop about how speechwriting works, the speechwriter spends a lot of time with the president, or with the Secretary of Defense as I did before that in the Pentagon. And I’d have meetings with the president where he’d tell me, “I want to say X.” And then we’d write the speech and it would go into the staffing process and it would come back with comments: “The president would never say X. The president should never say X. And take X out.” And I would not take X out and I would get hell for it from the staffing process, but the president... I’ll tell you a funny story-

Danielle Pletka: Wasn’t that the same story about “Tear Down This Wall?” Didn’t the president-

Marc Thiessen: Yeah, right, exactly. This is a great story. Peter Robinson, who was a speechwriter for Ronald Reagan, wrote the “Tear Down This Wall” speech. And he gave it to Ronald Reagan, and Ronald Reagan loved it because Ronald Reagan had said in a debate with Robert Kennedy in the 1960s, “What could the Soviets do to win our trust? They could tear down the wall.” That was him. And the State Department kept taking it out and Ronald Reagan kept putting it back in. There’s a long history of this going on.

Danielle Pletka: Yeah, except for the fact Marc, Ronald Reagan put it back in, Donald Trump would want to find those people and then fire them.

Marc Thiessen: Okay, fair enough-

Danielle Pletka: That’s ridiculous.

- Marc Thiessen: No, I don't think so. It depends on what the offense is.
- Danielle Pletka: You've got to be a stable enough genius in order to have people who respectfully disagree with you. You do not want him to be a version of Stalin-
- Marc Thiessen: That's not what they are doing-
- Danielle Pletka: ...in which people are afraid to tell him he's wrong.
- Marc Thiessen: That is very different.
- Danielle Pletka: I don't think so.
- Marc Thiessen: I'll tell you why it's different. Because it's one thing to walk into the Oval Office and say to the president, "I think this is a mistake. We're having a meeting over the speech, you shouldn't say this." "Why shouldn't I say that?" "Because X." "Okay, well I disagree with you." Done. It's an entirely different thing to not take it out of the speech, but try to undermine the policy from your position when the president has given the speech and executed the policy and given you orders and you don't follow them. And that's what's happened in this administration and I don't blame him for... Look, he had two years of the Mueller probe, another year of the impeachment inquiry and impeachment trial. And now he's finally beyond that, and I understand why he wants to have people around him who are loyal and who are going to carry out his orders because he was elected, we weren't.
- Danielle Pletka: All I'm saying is, Stalin didn't have much to recommend him. Trying to emulate his leadership qualities is possibly not a great idea.
- Marc Thiessen: Oh, that's too far. He's not Stalin.
- Danielle Pletka: But remember, if people are afraid to speak out, in any way, it's wrong. And I think Donald Trump has gone too far.
- Marc Thiessen: I think it's one thing to speak truth to power behind closed doors, and quite frankly I'll give Jim Mattis credit for this. Mattis gave the president advice, I didn't always agree with the advice he gave, but he wrote a book and he didn't expose all that stuff and he didn't attack the president.
- Danielle Pletka: Although I expect he may have talked to Phil and Carol. But that's a story for another day.
- Marc Thiessen: Thanks everybody.
- Danielle Pletka: Thanks for listening.