

SUMMARY

A VERY STABLE GENIUS

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Summary of “A Very Stable Genius” by Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig

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This sardonically titled analysis examines President Trump’s impact on America.

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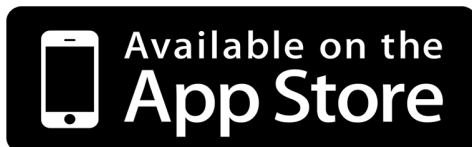


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Introduction

In his 2018 standup comedy special, *Kid Gorgeous at Radio City*, comedian John Mulaney offers his take on Donald Trump's presidency through the following joke. "The way I see it," he explains, "this guy being the president is like there's a horse loose in a hospital. I think eventually everything's going to be okay, but I have no idea what's going to happen next. And neither do any of you, and neither do your parents, because there's a horse loose in the hospital. It's never happened before, no one knows what the horse is going to do next, least of all the horse. He's never been in a hospital before, he's as confused as you are. There's no experts. They try to find experts on the news. They're like, "We're joined now by a man that once saw a bird in the airport." Get out of here with that shit! We've all seen a bird in the airport. This is a horse loose in a hospital!"

He then expands on this analogy to help audiences cope with the constant barrage of alarming news updates that characterizes Trump's presidency. "When a horse is loose in a hospital, you gotta stay updated," Mulaney remarks. "So, all day long you walk around like, "What'd the horse do?" The updates aren't always bad. Sometimes they're just odd. It'll be like, "The horse used the elevator?" I didn't know he knew how to do that! But the creepiest days are when you don't hear from the horse at all. You're down in the hospital operating room like, "Hey, has anyone...Has anyone heard from the horse...?" Those are those quiet days when people are like, "It looks like the horse has finally calmed down." And then ten seconds later the horse is like, "I'm gonna run towards the baby incubators and smash 'em with my hooves. I've got nice hooves and a long tail, I'm a horse!" And we're all sitting here like, "Oh no, that's what I thought you'd say, you dumb fucking horse!"

Mulaney's humorous take on the Trump presidency resonates with a lot of people because it's political satire at its finest. Rather than confining his observations to a single event or commenting on who he perceives to be right or wrong, Mulaney simply pokes fun at the confusion and anxiety that

has overwhelmed us all. And in so doing, he gives us a much-needed chuckle while offering some nuggets of truth. Because, as Mulaney recognizes, Trump's time in office has been a baffling whirlwind, defined by an overwhelming amount of updates that we can't possibly keep up with. The authors recognize that too and that's why this book exists. Because if we want to know what's really going on and put our situation in perspective, we have to take a step back from the scary reality that there's a horse loose in a hospital. So, over the course of this summary, we're going to take a peep behind the scenes and learn about the inner workings of the horse, the hospital, and the people who are supposed to be responsible for the horse.

Trump's Brashness Causes Division

When you think of the president of the United States of America, what sort of person do you envision? What skills would you imagine they need to have? Perhaps you imagine someone who is calm and level-headed, who stays cool under pressure. Maybe you envision a leader who has enough self-awareness to acknowledge their own limitations, ask for advice, or recognize when they need the help of experts. Unfortunately, however, Donald Trump is not that person. And although the authors could cite any number of moments to prove that point, one of the most notable examples comes from a meeting Trump attended in July 2017.

On the day in question, Trump was meeting with America's top military officials to discuss some important strategies for the future of the country's security. They were meeting in the Pentagon, in a top-secret, windowless room known as "The Tank." Under these circumstances, one might imagine that the president would be prepared to listen twice as much as he talked, and that he would approach the meeting with an air of respect for these officials and their experience. But once again, Trump stood as an emblem of stark contrast to anything we might expect from America's leader. Recalling that day, secretary of state Rex Tillerson and secretary of defense Jim Mattis told the authors that they had quickly learned the president had the attention span of a squirrel. As a result, they were concerned about trying to engage him in the complexities of America's national defense systems. They speculated that they would need to simplify everything they said and explain it as though they were speaking to a five-year-old.

To that end, they had prepared a shockingly brief presentation that aimed to pack classified information about the country's national security procedures into just 45 minutes. They had even attempted to make the presentation more engaging by filling it with visual aids, colorful maps, and helpful images to get their point across. Unfortunately, however, even that didn't work. Trump still struggled to pay attention and he was also disinterested, bored, and annoyed. So far from appreciating their efforts to

accommodate him, he behaved as though he resented their approach. And he certainly didn't appreciate what they had to say.

Over the course of their conversation, he offered his own gross misinterpretation of the war in Afghanistan, dismissed NATO and America's other international allies as being "worthless" and-- in a screaming fit-- called America's heads of defense "losers, babies, and dopes." And although it was hardly respectful language to use when referring to America's president, Tillerson was on point when he shared his views with the authors and stated, "That guy's a fucking moron."

Trump Lacks the Basic Qualities Expected of a President

On its own, the example we discussed in the previous chapter might be enough for us to consider Trump a disaster as a president. But unfortunately, his embarrassing outburst in front of America's top military officials can hardly be considered a one-off. Because in addition to alienating his own country's officials, Trump has also wreaked havoc abroad and fostered ill will between America and other countries. One notable example of this can be found in his diplomatic mission to India. Because Tillerson had wisely advised Trump about the threat posed by China, Trump's officials advised him to network with the prime minister of India, Narendra Modi.

As anyone with a basic knowledge of geography already knows, India is situated right on the border of China. But apparently, this was news to Trump, who rudely cut Modi off to tell him not to worry about his own national security, genuinely remarking that, "It's not like you've got China on your border!" Unsurprisingly, Modi was left with the same impression Tillerson formed after his own catastrophic meeting with Trump, and similarly asserted that Trump was a loose canon and a moron. As a result, Modi wisely decided that any alliance with Trump would be unwise. So, although Tillerson had hoped that Modi might be a level-headed ally, one capable of protecting America against Chinese threats, after only one meeting with Trump, it was clear that this was never going to happen. So far from agreeing to help Trump, Modi was so put off by the president's gaffe that the meeting generated significant tension between America and India. After all, you can hardly blame him for not trusting a man who doesn't even know the geography of the country he wants to partner with!

But basic geography isn't the only thing Trump doesn't know. Unfortunately, he has also been found lacking in a number of other subjects that an American president should definitely know, including American history! Surely, if there was any subject the leader of the United States

should be familiar with, that would be it, but that's hardly the case with Donald Trump. This became especially evident during his visit to the Pearl Harbor memorial in Honolulu, Hawaii. Despite the fact that this memorial should be significant to all Americans and inspire respect for the sacrifices of those who gave their lives at Pearl Harbor, Trump appeared to be completely unaware of the monument's relevance. In fact, he was so unaware that he cornered John Kelly, his chief of staff, to ask a question that Kelly has never forgotten and shared freely with the authors. "Hey John," Trump whispered, "what's this all about? What's this tour of?"

After these three strikes occurred very early in his presidency, Trump's advisers were growing concerned, and they knew they had to act quickly. To help him avoid similar faux pas in the future, they drafted presentations similar to those Tillerson and his team put together for the meeting in The Tank. If he could just read their brief summaries of some of America's most important issues and at least appear to be aware of their significance, maybe it wouldn't be so bad! But alas, even this proved impossible; his staff started referring to him as "the two minute man" because they quickly realized that was the length of his attention span. Anything they needed to convey had to be communicated to him within two minutes or he would lose interest completely. Even one page summaries of important issues were ignored!

And, unsurprisingly, Trump's refusal to listen and engage produced even more embarrassing gaffes. As if his ignorance of the Pearl Harbor monument wasn't bad enough, his lack of respect or familiarity for the United States' constitution was appalling when his foible was broadcast on live national TV.

Trump is Unprofessional

If we've learned anything from the experience of watching a metaphorical horse run loose in a hospital, it's that every time we think it can't get worse, it can. This is especially true for Trump's advisers, who are often tasked with putting out multiple fires at the same time, often while knowing that new fires are being lit as they work. This is especially apparent when it comes to Trump's relationships with America's allies. Because although we would expect America's president to foster positive relations with countries who have historically supported America, once again, this is not the case. After all, if one is willing to lambast and belittle his closest advisers from his own country, it can only get worse when that person interacts with foreign powers.

And indeed, this pattern held true. Because Trump's abusive behavior toward his staff didn't end with his belligerence in the Tank meeting. He also appeared to take great delight in targeting any member of his staff who didn't tell him what he wanted to hear. One frequent target was HR McMaster, his first national security adviser. In addition to being a career military expert, McMaster was also highly educated; he holds a PhD in military history. That he would be a highly beneficial asset is almost indisputable, especially given the fact that he refused to sugarcoat any updates he delivered to Trump.

A wise leader might recognize that, when you're in a position of great power, finding anyone who will be honest with you is a rare treasure. But Trump didn't see it that way. Instead, he grew angry with McMaster's bluntness and mocked him by exaggerating McMaster's voice and military stance in a cruel imitation. Every time McMaster arrived to deliver an update, Trump would make a grand show of standing to attention and shouting, "I'm your national security advisor McMaster, sir! I'm here to give you your briefing, sir!" To say that this failed to foster positive relations with his chief national security adviser would be a colossal understatement.

He behaved similarly with Kirstjen Nielsen, his secretary of homeland security. Although Nielsen did an admirable job, Trump couldn't resist mocking her for "not looking the part" (whatever that meant!) or for "being too soft." While the latter accusation might have been a legitimate cause for concern if Nielsen had genuinely done so, in Trump's world, "being too soft" apparently translated to "refusing to take illegal action." For example, in November of 2018, Trump ordered Nielsen to close the border between the United States and Mexico because he thought this would prevent an influx of illegal immigrants. Of course, this action would also prevent the arrival of legal immigrants or refugees, and Nielsen pointed this out to him, observing that it was not only illegal but unwise. In response, Trump castigated Nielsen so viciously that she resigned after only five months of service.

This event occurred only a year after Trump's notable outburst in November 2017 when, on a visit to Mexico, he announced that he would make Mexico pay for a border wall he wanted to erect, and that he would be sending American troops to the US-Mexico border to "keep out the bad dudes." This statement came almost immediately after Tillerson and Kelly had orchestrated their own diplomatic mission to cover for Trump and reassure Mexican officials that Trump wouldn't be so impulsive! And in another shockingly horrific move, Trump almost severed America's ties with Britain in a single phone call on November 9th, 2018. British Prime Minister Theresa May had reached out as a gesture of good will to acknowledge Trump's success in the midterm elections. This, of course, is Basic Networking 101; any good businessman knows that if you want to keep up positive relations with your connections, it's a good idea to call them from time to time, congratulate them, and be nice.

No one could have anticipated that Trump might take offense to her gesture of kindness. And they certainly couldn't have suspected that he would choose this moment to read Theresa May the riot act, screaming at her and telling her everything she was doing wrong in her capacity as Britain's leader. Unsurprisingly, May-- and the British public-- were horrified and baffled. This certainly wasn't their idea of positive foreign relations and it

cemented the international impression of Trump as a loose cannon who attacked all the people he should have supported.

Final Summary

Comedian John Mulaney got it right with his humorous analogy: as a president, Donald Trump is about as much of a shock as a horse running loose in a hospital. So far from exhibiting any of the behavior we would expect from America's leader, Trump actively defies all best practices, abuses his staff, and alienates America's allies both at home and abroad. And in addition to his explosive temper and unprofessional behavior, Trump has also exhibited a two-minute attention span and a lack of willingness to learn about any issues relevant to his position as president. This attitude has often led to some shocking and embarrassing mistakes such as his lack of familiarity with the United States' Constitution, the Pearl Harbor memorial, and the basic geography of India, who he had hoped to gain as an ally.



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