

Trump sees treason from within

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Washington (CNN) — It's impossible to know in the moment when a presidency begins to dissolve. But after a devastating 48 hours, it's already clear that [Donald Trump's](#) will never be the same.

Whatever your view of Trump, his behavior and his presidency, Washington is watching the opening act of a stunning attempt to topple the elected leader of the nation.

Damaging twin portraits of the President [in a New York Times op-ed](#) and [Bob Woodward's new book](#) are using the words of current top officials to fracture the mythology of vanity and bombast, conmanship and intimidation of Trump's personality cult.

In an attack from an enemy within, top officials who see Trump up close, including one calling the band of renegades the "resistance," are finally daring to say -- albeit under Washington's invisibility cloak of anonymity -- what outside critics have long believed.

They warn the President of the United States is not only unfit to be the most powerful man in the world, but is a venal mix of ignorance and ego, pettiness, malignancy and recklessness that is putting the republic and the world itself at risk.

For all his boasts of historic success and self-image as a strongman's strongman, the "adults in the room" want Americans to know: the emperor has no clothes.

"The root of the problem is the President's amorality. Anyone who works with him knows he is not moored to any discernible first principles that guide his decision making," the unnamed official wrote in the [staggering essay published by the Times](#).

The official even revealed there had even been talk among Cabinet officers about invoking the 25th Amendment to remove the President. Washington has seen almost everything under Trump, but a palace coup would be something else.

"There is somebody working for the President of the United States at a very senior level who is trying to destroy him," Michael Caputo, a former Trump campaign aide told CNN's Anderson Cooper.

It's hard to find a parallel in Western political history for a leader to survive such a knifing since the power and fear need to sustain iron rule can slip away especially quickly in a democracy -- as opposed to an autocratic state.

But Trump has long defied predictions of his own demise and survived the kind of blows that would paralyze other presidents. Yet no other commander in chief has faced the staggering personal disavowals and devastating betrayals that he has endured this week.

Like a wounded king's furious wail, Trump tweeted a single word: "TREASON?"

[Woodward was just the start](#)

The White House was already groggy Wednesday from [the fearful blow of Woodward's new book peeling open the West Wing](#), "Fear: Trump in the White House."

The legendary muckraker's deeply reported account exposes profound disdain for the President among senior officials who are said to view him as an "idiot" with a fifth-grade education who the world needs protecting against.

It turns out Woodward was just the appetizer.

The thunderclap of the Times piece laid bare an administration in disarray, a President dangerously off the rails and a nation adrift without the stable hand of an effective leader.

"Many of the senior officials in his own administration are working diligently from within to frustrate parts of his agenda and his worst inclinations," the official wrote.

"It may be cold comfort in this chaotic era, but Americans should know that there are adults in the room ... this isn't the work of the so-called deep state. It's the work of the steady state."

The effect of the op-ed was to validate many of the claims of a President dangerously out of his depth that were made by Woodward, crushing White House efforts to fight back.

Washington is already getting consumed with speculation about who wrote the op-ed, the city's biggest literary whodunit since the 1996 novel "Primary Colors," loosely based on the Clintons, was revealed as the work of Joe Klein.

Then there is a quickening debate over the decision of the author to stay in the shadows and whether the person should demonstrate their courage of convictions by resigning and revealing their name.

Unimaginable questions

But Wednesday's staggering events -- extraordinary even by the convention-blasting standards of Trump, pose questions that would once have been unimaginable.

They include: What will happen if, as it appears, America does not have a stable, functioning President? Will the mutiny among unidentified senior officials build and will they break cover, provoke resignations, or further shred the fabric of the administration?

If talk of the 25th Amendment is renewed, [a true constitutional crisis could be looming](#).

There is of course the perennial question of whether cowed Republicans on Capitol Hill will be moved to even discuss the crisis of competence and temperance raging in the White House. Then there is the issue of whether a crisis-addled and demoralized White House will dampen GOP turnout in midterm elections where a defeat could shatter the bond between Trump and his party.

What must it be like to work in the confines of the West Wing, with a raging President, a cabal of officials working against him and the [destabilizing spectacle of a witch hunt](#) to find the moles?

Will the President, seeing betrayal at every turn, launch a purge of officials he suspects may not be loyal to his political crusade, further thinning the ranks of a threadbare White House?

His darkest hour

Trump responds to op-ed: 'Gutless' 02:01

Trump tried to find his way out of his darkest hour to date by trying to wrest control of his own fate.

He appeared in the East Room of the White House in an extraordinary display of defiance soon after The New York Times op-ed appeared.

His appearance was almost noble, though also steeped in pathos, as a wounded leader fought against unseen forces bent on his demise even as he tasted the bile of betrayal that may always have been the inevitable result of his erratic rule.

"The failing New York Times has an anonymous editorial -- can you believe it?" Trump told a gathering of sheriffs.

"Anonymous -- meaning gutless. A gutless editorial," the President said, in an appearance in which he laid claim to a record of staggering political success, a roaring economy and building military might.

Later, his mood had darkened and he delivered a truly sinister tweet.

Does the so-called "Senior Administration Official" really exist, or is it just the Failing New York Times with another phony source? If the GUTLESS anonymous person does indeed exist, the Times must, for National Security purposes, turn him/her over to government at once!

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [September 5, 2018](#)

"Does the so-called 'Senior Administration Official' really exist, or is it just the Failing New York Times with another phony source? If the GUTLESS anonymous person does indeed exist, the Times must, for National Security purposes, turn him/her over to government at once!" Trump wrote.

The President will step up his counter-attack when he hits the campaign trail in Montana on Thursday night. He is sure of a warm welcome from loyal supporters and the treachery and betrayal of Washington may not resonate so much in Trump country.

As Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham told CNN's Wolf Blitzer: "In my world, where I live in South Carolina, most people are very pleased with what the President is doing," adding that Woodward and The New York Times did not cut much ice among his voters.

But make no mistake, in Washington at least, Trump is fighting for his presidency, against forces trying to tear it down from within.