



VOICE

The Battle for Crazytown

America's newest live-streaming reality show features the foreign-policy establishment fighting for its life against Donald Trump.

BY [STEPHEN M. WALT](#)

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Donald Trump holds up a replica flintlock rifle awarded him by cadets during the Republican Society Patriot Dinner at the Citadel Military College on February 22, 2015 in Charleston, South Carolina.

(Richard Ellis/Getty Images)

One of the more striking features of the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign was the bipartisan opposition to Donald Trump from inside the foreign-policy establishment. Democrats opposed him for obvious partisan reasons, but hostility to Trump was even more vehement on the Republican side. Dozens of experienced GOP foreign-policy mavens signed [open letters](#) denouncing his candidacy, with one of the letters declaring him “[utterly unfitted to the office.](#)”

This struggle between Trump and the foreign-policy establishment (aka [the Blob](#)) has continued since he won the election and took office in January 2017. The Never Trumpers in the GOP were blacklisted from his administration, and they’ve continued to bombard him with criticism ever since. Some of Trump’s initial appointments (e.g., Steve Bannon, Michael Flynn, and the self-styled terrorism expert Sebastian Gorka) were from outside the mainstream, forcing Defense Secretary James Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, and economic advisor Gary Cohn to work overtime to contain Trump’s worst instincts. Trump eventually got frustrated and canned some of them, but the arrival of people such as John Bolton, Mike Pompeo, and others hasn’t stopped the internal war. The Blob has reined Trump in to a considerable extent but by no means entirely.

This ongoing drama hit a new crescendo over the past several weeks, and a good scriptwriter could hardly have done a better job of ratcheting up the tension and throwing in a few plot twists. It’s like a typical Netflix serial: Just when you thought things couldn’t get more bizarre and worrisome, they did. And it’s just the first season!

Here’s the plot so far.

Episode 1: The McCain Funeral

You’ve got to give John McCain credit: He knew how to have the last word (and then some). Knowing his last days were approaching, he managed to orchestrate a bipartisan rebuke to a president he clearly loathed. Not only did McCain make it clear that Trump—the sitting president from his own party—was not welcome, but he also asked for eulogies from Barack Obama and George W. Bush. Neither missed the opportunity to direct thinly veiled zingers at the current resident of the White House.

The Washington establishment turned out in droves to his funeral on Sept. 1. For all his maverick reputation, McCain was in many ways the living embodiment of orthodox foreign-policy thinking. He was a consistent proponent of U.S. military intervention and never saw a quagmire he didn’t want the United States to leap into. He thought that NATO was essential and the United States indispensable and seemed to think it was OK and desirable for America to use force against just about anyone who irritated

it. His opposition to torture was admirable and correct (though one doesn't have to be a moral philosopher to realize that torture is wrong), though he never seemed to learn anything from America's missteps. For all his genuine heroism as a prisoner of war and his unquestioned patriotism, his thinking on foreign policy was conventional to the core.

So his funeral was an opportunity for Washington insiders—including the foreign-policy elite—to celebrate one of their own. As Susan Glasser of the *New Yorker* [put it](#), “It was a meeting of the Resistance, under vaulted ceilings and stained-glass windows.” But that resistance wasn't just Democrats assailing a Republican president; it was the inside-the-Beltway crowd uniting against a president who has rejected its orthodoxies and norms with gleeful abandon.

I think Glasser—who is nothing if not well-connected herself as a former editor of this publication and spouse of *New York Times* reporter Peter Baker—nailed it: “The city is much more bipartisan, in some respects, than it has ever been, more united than it may currently seem, in its hatred of Donald Trump.” GOP leaders and minions may be craven in their deference to Trump, but McCain's funeral was a moment where Democrats and Republicans alike could subtly signal their disdain for an incorrigible president who'd rather be tweeting or golfing than governing responsibly. And if you don't think this event got under the president's skin, you haven't been paying attention.

Episode 2: Enter Woodward

McCain had barely been laid to rest before it was time for Episode 2: the release on Tuesday of [teasers](#) of Bob Woodward's upcoming book, *Fear: Trump in the White House*, the latest in a string of behind-the-scenes accounts of the Trump train wreck. Like all of Woodward's recent books, it is thickly reported, gossipy, and based on numerous interviews with insiders, most of whom remain firmly off the record. While it no doubt contains a few errors (as all works of this sort do), its depiction of an ignorant, stubborn, and impulsive narcissist who has to be actively managed by his staff would still be a damning indictment if only half of what the book says were true.

It gains additional credence from Woodward's well-deserved reputation as a serious reporter who has consistently gotten the big picture right and from its consistency with the other insider-based accounts of the Trump presidency. You may not believe all (or even much) of Michael Wolff's *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*, but Woodward is telling a very similar story, and no one with any credibility has offered a portrait that is substantially different. If Woodward had published a book that depicted Trump as a closet Otto von Bismarck who was in fact a disciplined strategist and brilliant manager—much as Ronald Reagan was once portrayed in

an [infamous *Saturday Night Live* skit](#)—we’d have greater grounds for skepticism. But the portrait he provides is the same one that others have sketched.

I personally think Trump has genuine political gifts that are frequently underestimated, is not suffering from dementia, and even has good instincts about a few issues on occasion. But apart from his own compulsive bouts of self-praise, nobody has ever tried to portray him as a sophisticated and well-informed thinker, a disciplined manager, or someone with a scintilla of integrity. And neither does Woodward.

Lastly, Woodward’s book is also consistent with everything we know about Trump’s career before he got into politics. He was a chaotic businessman who suffered repeated bankruptcies, was better at hoodwinking people than at getting things done, and had to be bailed out with money from sketchy sources. He was famously litigious and burned through former partners, associates, and staff, much as he is doing today. He was a gifted liar (openly indulging in what he liked to call “truthful hyperbole”) and was never averse to breaking rules if he thought he could get away with it. And he clearly had the thinnest of skins: to his core, a wealthy rich kid who craved adulation and still thought of himself as a perennial victim. We’ve known all this *for years*, which gives Woodward’s damning portrait considerable *prima facie* plausibility. Trump can deny it all he wants, but deep down he knows that lots of people are going to believe Woodward.

Episode 3: Who Is Anonymous?

The scriptwriters unexpectedly introduced a new character in this episode: Anonymous. Woodward barely got 24 hours in the spotlight before the next shoe dropped when, on Wednesday, the *New York Times* published a [controversial op-ed](#) by an anonymous senior official in the Trump administration, who identified themselves as part of the resistance on the *inside*. It described the same sort of pathological behavior that Woodward (and Wolff) recounted in their books but insisted that many of Trump’s advisors were stepping up to protect the country from the president’s incompetence.

The inevitable response was the latest Trump-related Twitter frenzy, with online hordes (including yours truly) weighing in to praise, question, condemn, interpret, and ventilate about whom Anonymous might be and whether they should be praised, excoriated, or ignored. Was it a blatant attempt to salvage conservatism from the Trump era? A ploy to insulate current officials from payback later on? A principled effort to warn Americans that the problem is bigger than they think or an attempt to reassure them that the president might be trouble but there are still grown-ups in charge?

My own take, for what it's worth, is that it would have been far better for the author to have resigned and then published the piece under their own name. That said, I am still glad they wrote it and that the *Times* printed it because the inner workings of any administration are in fact a matter of public concern and we are better off knowing when an administration is dysfunctional and when it isn't. (Isn't it interesting that nobody published equally damning accounts of the Obama administration; even somewhat critical memoirs, such as those of Robert Gates (a Republican) and Leon Panetta (a Democrat), offer a mostly flattering portrait of Obama and his genuine efforts to do the right thing.)

Episode 3 also reminded us why so few people resign on principle in the United States (in contrast to countries such as Britain, where it is far more common). In these other places, officials who resign on principle are frequently lauded for their courage and convictions and remain eligible for future service should the political winds change. But in the United States, where personal loyalty takes precedence, resigning on principle can be professional suicide. You may get praised for your integrity and the rightness of your judgment, but politicians don't want integrity—they want subordinates who will be loyal to them no matter what. And if you've resigned from one post because you disagreed with the policy or with the person implementing it, you might resign from another one in the future.

As with any good drama, the first three episodes can be interpreted in many ways. It is become fashionable in recent years to talk about the “deep state” (and some clever wags were quick to dub the writer of the anonymous op-ed “[Deep State Throat](#)”), but to me that label doesn't really fit. Yes, there is a foreign-policy elite, but it is not the sort of shadowy, secretive cabal that some have described in countries such as Turkey or Pakistan or that one might find in a Robert Ludlum novel. As I try to show in [my new book](#) (out next month!), foreign-policy elites in the United States do most of their work in full view: giving speeches; holding conferences; writing task force reports, open letters, policy briefs, and op-eds; and testifying on Capitol Hill. Inside the bureaucracy, they are drawing up budgets, writing standard operating procedures, drafting official speeches, and laying out policy options for the president that leave something out and other things in. And most of what they do becomes public surprisingly quickly. There's no secret conspiracy or deep state running U.S. foreign policy; to the extent that there is a bipartisan foreign-policy elite, it is hiding in plain sight.

The problem, [as I've noted before](#), is that these same elites do not have a lot of street cred these days. Many of them are genuine experts, and most of them are (in my experience, at least) genuine patriots. But they've been marinating in a bipartisan

worldview that sees the United States as the last best hope for mankind and in a political system that rewards conformity and penalizes even relatively mild acts of dissent. And the sad fact is that if these elites had done a better job over the past 25 years or so, Trump would probably not have become president.

But the real question is what's coming up in the rest of the season. I don't know about you, but I'm looking forward to the episode tentatively titled "Robert Mueller Speaks." And I hope the producers and showrunner don't try to get the series renewed for four more years by doing something really big or dramatic in an attempt to juice the ratings. If that happens, what many initially dismissed as farce ("Donald Trump for president? C'mon, be serious!") could turn out to have been a tragedy all along. Stay tuned.

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