

No trumping our sign of the times

In almost every case, Americans I have met and the few I got to know well have been pleasant, grounded, seemingly stable people with whom it was a pleasure to spend time.

Which raises the obvious question: who are the individuals portrayed in the daily news grabs - stories that lead this newspaper's world news pages almost constantly – and who now seem to inhabit the corridors of candle-lit power in the United States of America?

And how far will they go in defending themselves for electing a Saul Goodman-like character as their president? Saul Goodman, in case you didn't know, is the slippery snake oil hustler-cum-bush lawyer featured in an apocalyptic TV portrayal of American life called *Better Call Saul*, a prequel to that renowned examination of the impact of prescription drugs on civilisation, *Breaking Bad*.

The appalling characters in those scary shows have somehow got control of the whole country, if Michael Wolff has it right in his *Fire and Fury* book, as grim and oddly amusing an account of the failure of modern politics as any you'll read.

It seems from what happened in a Marlborough vineyard photo gallery that some Americans will indeed go a long way to defend their image in the wider world. One on a cruise ship tour smashed a photo of a Taranaki farmer's anti-Trump sign, which urged us to be very afraid.

If that is in any way typical behaviour for American cruise ship habitués, let's give thanks such vessels only rarely tie up at Port Taranaki. I can imagine a posse travelling to South Taranaki to tear down the sign, which so far has not even attracted graffiti. I'm not sure what the latter says about us, but one guess is that we don't have a lot of time for the orange-coiffed one.

Having just ploughed through the Wolff book, I have to say I'm surprised to see Trump is still in the White House. He is portrayed as a man who reads nothing, refuses to endure Powerpoint presentations (I'm with him there) and has such a short attention span and so little patience that his hair is orange because he never waits long enough for the colouring agent to turn it to its intended light brown.

Steve Bannon - the man who claims to have got him elected (after Trump and his team had given up) and (before he was fired) was chief political strategist in the calamitous Trump White House – predicts the saga has three equally possible endings: Trump will be impeached over his family/friends' pre-election flirtations with Russia, he'll simply give up and leave, or he will limp to the end of his term, which will be a oncer. A fourth is he will be declared demented.

Bannon, supposedly a key source for Wolff, is now scheming to run for president himself, taking over the ultra-right Trumpian political crusade to drive it to further heights - but without Trump. According to the book, Bannon led one faction in the White House against another comprising the president's family.

Wife Melania doesn't feature in the Wolff story, but daughter Ivanka and her husband, Jared Kushner, certainly do, derisively labelled the Jaranka faction. Their infighting with the so-called Bannonites is bitter, divisive and crippling, though it's debatable whether there has ever been anything of substance to cripple.

Floating above has been President Trump, detached from reality and completely unmanageable, abandoned by the Republican Party organisation, isolated from sound advice by his gut instinct and an alarming absence of knowledge about, well, just about anything.

It's a long read, so just how Trump can condemn it with conviction is a mystery. He won't have read it, if Wolff is right, because his capacity for absorbing anything in print is limited to headlines. Perhaps Siri read it to him.

Some of his critics are just as vacuous, one of them condemning Trump on the strength of the book's revelations, then admitting he hadn't actually read it, only what the reviewers and news media said it said.

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The fundamental problem with Trump, says Wolff, is he just wants to be liked, meaning he wants positive things written and said about him in the liberal news media, from whom he is irrevocably fractured. What we all have to hope is he doesn't decide pushing the big red button on North Korea will be his best way finally to attain Daddy's approval.