



ALL ACCESS

BY TIMOTHY DUMAS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY LACY KIERNAN

CHRIS WHIPPLE takes us deep inside the institutions of American power. From nearly every living CIA director to presidential chiefs of staff, Washington A-listers open up to the acclaimed author and documentarian. The stories are fascinating and even, occasionally, funny

Three weeks after the 2020 election the land was still in psychic disarray: President Trump was still peddling election fraud conspiracy theories, still mounting dubious legal challenges in several states, still whipping up the passions of his faithful by proclaiming, without evidence, that he had won reelection “in a landslide.”

But suddenly there were signs that, like a bouncy castle after a small-town fair, the Trump Circus was beginning to deflate. On November 23 Trump himself declared that “in the best interest of our country” he’d commence protocols to hand over power to Joe Biden. At last he had bowed to reality. News media duly reported the harmonious development: “Trump Recognizes Transfer of Power,” read the MSNBC headline. “No, he doesn’t. Not for a New York minute,” the political historian Chris Whipple countered on social media, against the tide of the moment. “The only thing Trump has agreed to is to go through the motions of a transition. This is not even close to being over.” Asked how he thought things would play out, Whipple gave a one-word answer: “Painfully.”

DIGGING DEEP

Chris Whipple quietly has become an indispensable observer of American power. “He’s established himself as a premier journalist and historian of the White House as well as the intelligence community,” says Peter Baker, chief White House correspondent for the *New York Times*. “His books are not dense or academic. They’re lively and people-oriented. They’re about how actual people operate the levers of government.”

Whipple has written two books so far. *The Gatekeepers: How the White House Chiefs of Staff Define Every Presidency* (2017), a chronicle of the “worst job in Washington,” put him on the map as a political writer; *The Spymasters: How the CIA Directors Shape History and the Future* (2020), which Tom Brokaw described as “nonfiction le Carré,” cemented his reputation as a persistent digger into inaccessible stories, a slipper behind Washington’s locked doors. “So much of Washington reporting is cloaked in anonymity,” Baker says. “He’s got these people on the record.”

Strange to say, then, that Whipple’s writing career happened accidentally. One day in 2011 Jules Naudet, a French-American documentary filmmaker, called him (at the recommendation of a mutual friend, *Vanity Fair* editor of creative development David Friend) to ask if he’d partner in a film about White House chiefs of staff.

“My brother and I have always been fascinated with politics,” Naudet says, “but we knew we didn’t have the chops to do this kind of interview,” which would require a deep-tissue knowledge of American history and politics. Whipple was then a veteran news producer at ABC, nearing age sixty, looking vaguely for something else to do. All

TV newspeople knew the Naudet brothers, Jules and Gédéon, by reputation. In 2002 they made the extraordinary documentary *9/11*—a film that began when Jules, standing on a street corner with some firemen in downtown Manhattan, heard a jet flying suspiciously low. He aimed his camera upward just in time to capture American Airlines Flight 11 slamming into the North Tower.

Whipple says, “I thought for about thirty seconds and said, ‘I’m in.’” Once they got down to work, the Naudets were astonished by Whipple’s abilities. His research was “unprecedented” in their experience. And then the way he asked questions: “He remembers everything about his interview subjects,” Jules says, so that he can correct them on the spot. Finally, there’s his winning blend of bluntness, humor and charm. “He asks tough questions for sure, but he’s remained incredibly close with a lot of those people—chiefs of staff and CIA directors. It’s a credit to his honesty and integrity,” Baker adds, “People trust him. He’s got opinions, obviously, but he’s not a partisan. He’s not hiding some ulterior motive. He just wants to hear his subjects’ stories, wants to give them a chance to explain Washington as they see it.”

The documentary, titled *The President’s Gatekeepers*, aired on Discovery Channel in 2013. “When we finished the documentary I was proud of it,” Whipple says, “but I thought it barely scratched the surface of this great untold story. I thought it cried out for a book.” (*The Spymasters*, too, had a first life as a documentary, made with the Naudets and CBS producing legend Susan Zirinsky; it debuted on Showtime in 2015. The book deepens and updates the film.) »



With unprecedented access to a long list of CIA directors, Whipple shares candid stories and intel about major world events ranging from JFK’s assassination and Watergate to 9/11 and Afghanistan.

THE OTHER “CHIEF”

Whipple’s book shows how presidencies rise or fall depending on who holds the job of “president’s son-of-a-bitch.” Jimmy Carter, an infamous micromanager, thought he could do without a chief of staff. Two years in he realized he’d erred, but compounded the error by installing the unsuitable Hamilton Jordan.

“Jordan would hide when people came to deal with problems or ask him for help. He would literally hide,” Whipple says. “He wouldn’t return phone calls to Capitol Hill,” a fatal flaw. The eminently capable Jack Watson took over, but too late: the Carter presidency, so promising at the outset, was failing. Perhaps inevitably, given the intractable problems of the day—inflation, stratospheric interest rates, the Iran

hostage crisis. “But I’m convinced that things might have been different if Jack Watson had been chief of staff from day one.” Carter himself stubbornly refused to concede this point to Whipple, “but no one else in his administration would disagree with me.”

Whipple considers James A. Baker III the model White House chief. (Leon Panetta also gets a “gold standard” rank; Panetta went on to comparable success as CIA director.) Not that Baker liked the job; nobody does. The hours are terrible. The velocity is terrible. The infighting is terrible. “It’s brutal on you, it’s brutal on your family. And nothing, nothing, nothing, ever comes easy,” Rahm Emanuel, Obama’s first chief of staff, told Whipple. “It’s the toughest, most pressure-packed job one can have,” said Jim Jones, Lyndon Johnson’s second chief. “I was twenty-nine years old. I felt fifty-nine.”

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— JULES NAUDET, ACCLAIMED DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER



(top row) Whipple with former White House Chief of Staff and CIA Director Leon Panetta, flanked by filmmakers Jules Naudet and Gedeon Naudet • With former White House Chief of Staff James A. Baker III • (bottom row) Speaking at the Gerald Ford Library • With former President George H.W. Bush in Kennebunkport • With former CIA Director John Brennan

Whipple with former President George H.W. Bush and filmmakers Jules Naudet, Gedeon Naudet and Igor Kropotov on the set of the Showtime documentary *The Spymasters: CIA in the Crosshairs*



OPPOSITE PAGE: PANETTA, BAKER AND BRENNAN PHOTOS BY DAVID HUME KENNERLY; GERALD FORD LIBRARY PHOTO BY CARY WHIPPLE; THIS PAGE: DAVID HUME KENNERLY

“Baker tried a couple of times to quit,” Whipple notes. “Reagan wouldn’t let him. Then Baker finally came up with this cockamamie idea of swapping jobs with the treasury secretary, Don Regan. It was a most disastrous job swap in political history. In my view, the Iran-contra scandal never would have happened on Jim Baker’s watch. But it almost immediately bubbled up when Don Regan was in the chair.”

Iran-Contra, in which the United States sold arms to a bellicose Iran in exchange for hostages, then illegally funneled the profits to “freedom” fighters in Nicaragua, nearly resulted in Reagan’s impeachment. “You just can’t overstate the importance of the position,” Whipple says. “It really is true, I think, that a White House chief of staff can define every presidency.”

The public understands the job but dimly. “Without a great chief of staff, a president frankly doesn’t know what he is doing,” Robert Reich, Clinton’s secretary of labor, explained to Whipple. A president knows what he wants to do, but a chief of staff knows how to get it done. Jim Baker was smooth, courtly and iron-fisted. It was Baker who tamed the fractious bunch of ideologues around Ronald Reagan; Baker who performed the vital task of telling Reagan bitter truths: For example, that he would have to raise taxes—against his every instinct—to stem the steep revenue losses caused by the 1981 tax cuts. Baker told Whipple, “I will never forget him taking his glasses off, throwing them on the desk, and saying, ‘OK, dammit, I’m going to do it—but it’s the wrong thing to do.’”

The Whipple prose style is brisk but effervescent. It manages at once to convey political nuance and to entertain (see *The Gatekeepers’* story

of Reagan, the Queen, and the farting horse). Perhaps for this reason the book made both the *New York Times* bestseller list and required reading lists at Yale. Curiously, it also made the New York gossip columns. Richard Johnson, writing in the *Post*: “Dick Cheney and Jim Baker got hold of an advance copy of Chris Whipple’s book, *The Gatekeepers*, which they devoured—along with some unlucky quail—during their annual hunting trip at Baker’s ranch in Texas.”

The Gatekeepers came out two months after Donald Trump took office. It carried this prescient warning: “Trump is likely to have several chiefs... his presidency cannot succeed unless he gives them the authority to do the job.” It didn’t, because he didn’t. Trump burned through four chiefs, none of whom could rein in what an anonymous White House staffer called “his worst inclinations.” Indeed Trump’s last chief, Mark Meadows, couldn’t find a “worst inclination” he didn’t adore.

On January 6, 2021, in an act rich with symbolism, Meadows held Trump’s coat as Trump fired up a crowd itching to march on the Capitol. “Meadows was the chief that Trump wanted all along and could never find, the ultimate sycophant,” Whipple says. “To me, Meadows was not so much a chief of staff as he was a kind of glad-handing maitre’d.” He adds, for good measure, “There used to be a pretty healthy competition for the title of worst chief of staff in history, but Meadows owns it by a country mile. He’s done laps around the opposition.”

Meadows should have read *The Gatekeepers*, as Biden’s chief of staff, Ron Klain, did. Asked recently on Ezra Klein’s podcast for a book



In *The Gatekeepers*, Whipple introduces us to the men who have carried the title Presidential Chief of Staff. A job that when done correctly, can save a presidency. But when done incorrectly, can have catastrophic consequences.



Whipple being interviewed by MSNBC's Katy Tury • Interviewing former White House Chief of Staff Donald Rumsfeld for the documentary *The Presidents' Gatekeepers*



“So much of Washington reporting is cloaked in anonymity.
“He’s got these people on the record.”

— PETER BAKER, *NEW YORK TIMES* CHIEF WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT

recommendation, Klain said, “*The Gatekeepers* by Chris Whipple is the definitive book on White House chiefs of staff ... It’s a book I’ve looked at time and time again—the most important book in this field, as far as I’m concerned.”

HOW TO GET CIA DIRECTORS TO TALK

In early January we were supposed to meet Whipple on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where he lives with his wife, Cary. But Covid’s Omicron variant was raging, so we settled for a Zoom encounter instead.

Ever the honest broker, he peers into the camera and says, “You’re not going to win any awards for your background.” True. We are a dark smudge floating in a fuzz of pale light. Whipple, for his part, cuts a crisp figure, both in terms of lighting and personal presentation. At sixty-eight, he has a full head of chestnut brown hair with dignified filaments of gray, clear green eyes, and sculpted features that have softened only a little with age. He’s dressed in a blue blazer and a dark blue dress shirt open at the collar. The room he’s sitting in is elegant—crown moldings, built-in bookshelves, antique mantelpiece painted Colonial green—and there’s a lamplit reading chair behind him, with a stack of papers on a side table and two huge piles of books on the floor within grasping distance.

We are talking about *The Spymasters*. The book is a miracle of access. Whipple persuaded every living CIA director—Mike Pompeo and Gina Haspel excepted—to unburden themselves to him. Not that it was easy. George Tenet canceled three times, and nearly bolted when Whipple finally did get him seated: “How do I know you aren’t going to screw me?” Whipple said, “Call Leon Panetta. Call Dick Cheney. Ask if I was fair.” Cheney is popularly viewed as dour and dark, but somehow he is revealed by Whipple and the Naudets as (*gasp*) open and witty. Jules Naudet recalls,

“I had friends telling me, ‘I hate you for making me like Dick Cheney.’”

But *The Spymasters* is a disturbing book. We learn about assassination plots, coup orchestrations and oodles of mischief, some of it aimed at our own citizens. Lyndon Johnson hounded the CIA to conduct illegal domestic surveillance on Vietnam war protesters, and director Richard Helms caved to the pressure. Helms, who died in 2002, evolves in Whipple’s hands as a superb character—an old-school spy, dry martini in one hand, cigarette in the other, doing his best to fend off the sketchy demands of presidents. From Helms’ widow, Cynthia, Whipple learns just how badly the Kennedys wanted the CIA to put an end to Fidel Castro. She told him, “Robert Kennedy was out at the agency, and he was obsessed by it. Dick said, ‘You can’t see the lashes on my back, but they are there.’” Helms would nod politely to Kennedy—then drag his feet.

Helms had to be blunter with Richard Nixon. When Watergate began to unravel, Nixon tried to rope the CIA into the cover-up: Couldn’t the agency say the Watergate burglary was a covert operation, and thus block the FBI’s pesky delving? Helms rebuffed the invitation to obstruct. Nixon then had his chief of staff and “lord high executioner,” H.R. Haldeman, threaten Helms with exposing CIA secrets about President Kennedy’s assassination.

What secrets, exactly? Haldeman wrote later that Nixon seemed to be suggesting a CIA connection to JFK’s murder. (This popular conspiracy theory remains just a theory, though no less than RFK suspected it was true.) Helms did not yield to the presidential arm-twisting; soon after, Nixon summoned him to Camp David and fired him. “Helms arguably not only sank the Nixon presidency,” Whipple says, “but saved the CIA by not going along with that order.”

Whipple tells of CIA triumphs: the Cuban missile crisis, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001—a victory tragically annulled, many would argue, by

CONTRIBUTED: RUMSFELD PHOTO BY DAVID HUME KENNERLY

LACY KERNAN



Whipple with the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Pulitzer-Prize winning photographer David Turnley • Interviewing Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos



All in the Family: Whipple with his son, Sam on Shelter Island • With his father, Cal, and Sam in his Lucas Point childhood home in Old Greenwich • With his wife, Cary in Paris



our decision to stay and rebuild. But Whipple does not skimp on the dark deeds: the toppling of democratic governments in Iran and Guatemala—viewed as home runs in their day but as disasters in hindsight; the plot to kill Castro; the alleged plot to kill Patrice Lumumba, prime minister of the Congo; the ouster of Diem in South Vietnam; the Pinochet coup in Chile. These and other shady entanglements came tumbling out in 1975, before the U.S. Senate’s Church Committee on intelligence matters.

Sen. Frank Church, in apparent exasperation, called the CIA “a rogue elephant” while letting presidents completely off the hook. An amused Whipple remarks, “Far from being a rogue elephant—although the CIA has certainly been involved in plenty of bad stuff over the decades—it tends to be more of a check on rogue presidents. Richard Helms was a great example of that.”

Whipple excels at putting flesh and blood on his spymasters. There’s William Casey, known as “Mumbles” because nobody can understand him, using his necktie as a napkin “and running covert wars all over the world.” There’s George H.W. Bush, beloved for rescuing the agency from an era of scandal, asking incoming President Carter to keep him on as director. Carter unwisely declines, and history is altered: Bush runs with Reagan in 1980, defeating Carter and Mondale, and eventually becomes president himself and the father of a president. (Carter’s choice of CIA successor, Stansfield Turner, turns out to be a bust.)

George Tenet, after his initial hesitation, consented to five interviews with Whipple. It’s tough stuff. Tenet presided over the CIA as terrorist chatter reached a deafening pitch before 9/11. His hair famously “on fire,” he tried in vain to jolt awake a complacent White House. Whipple tells this story as no one else has. In the summer of 2001, Richard Blee, head of the CIA’s Bin Laden Unit, began tracking “a cascade of threats.” He thought, “Oh, fuck, it’s coming,” and barged into counterintelligence chief Cofer Black’s office. “Okay, the roof’s falling in,” he told Black.

On July 10, with Tenet, they went to see President Bush’s national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice: “The attacks will be spectacular,” they

said. “They may be multiple. Al Qaeda’s intention is the destruction of the United States.” Whipple recounts, “Cofer Black pounded his fist on the table and said, ‘We have to go on a war footing now!’” After the meeting, in the West Wing parking lot, Black and Blee high-fived, convinced that they’d made their case. So what happened next? Whipple sighs. “Condi Rice didn’t get it. She blew it off.”

Today Tenet wonders what else he might have done. “I asked him at one point, was there ever a moment during all this time, that you blamed yourself for 9/11?” Whipple says. “And, if you could see him, he just practically exploded out of his chair. He was twitching and shifting. ‘Well, look,’ he said finally. ‘I still look at the ceiling at night about a lot of things—and I’ll keep them to myself forever.’”

One of those things might be the CIA’s vastly wrong assessment of Iraq’s WMDs. (Iraq had long since stopped making and stockpiling WMDs.) Bush used that assessment—and Colin Powell, to Powell’s eternal regret—to make his case for war in Iraq. “A slam dunk,” Tenet called it. “A lot of people argue that Bush was hell-bent on invading with or without that,” Whipple says. “But there’s no question that the erroneous CIA assessment of WMDs, and Colin Powell’s presentation of it at the UN, made it possible for Bush to launch that invasion. The argument would have been much more difficult without that assessment.”

Whipple illustrates the moral shakiness inherent in the job of CIA director. In one powerful instance, we see Leon Panetta at Arlington National Cemetery to bury operative Elizabeth Hanson, slain with six colleagues in a 2009 suicide bombing in Afghanistan. At the graveside, word reaches him that a Predator drone has just fixed the bombing’s mastermind in its crosshairs. “Unfortunately,” Panetta tells Whipple, “he had family and wife and children around him.” Panetta is a devout Catholic who carries a rosary with him; *The Spymasters* documentary shows him kneeling in prayer at his church. But he decides to take the shot. “It did involve collateral damage,” he admits somberly. “But we got him.” After excruciating decisions like these, he says, you “just hope that ultimately God agrees with you.”

CARY WHIPPLE, PARIS PHOTO BY DAVID TURNLEY

IT RUNS IN THE FAMILY

As Whipple talks, we are scanning his living room. We spy, in the top nook of an arched bookcase, an Emmy Award, and this reminds us there’s a reason why he arrived so full-blown as a political historian. Three prior careers laid the groundwork—print journalist, network TV producer and filmmaker. But we need to go back further. Whipple grew up in Old Greenwich’s Lucas Point, in a house formerly occupied by the journalist-historian Hendrik van Loon. In the 1930s, from a cluttered desk in that house, the Dutch-born van Loon warned America of the impending fascist threat.

In a neat case of professional symmetry, a Washington correspondent for *Life* magazine with the poetic byline A.B.C. Whipple bought the house in 1955. Cal Whipple, as he was known, made journalism history in 1943 when he pressed wartime censors to reverse their ban on publishing a *Life* photograph taken in New Guinea: it showed three dead American soldiers half-buried in the sands of Buna Beach. The press was not permitted to show our dead. But in this case, President Roosevelt himself made the call, saying the public “ought to be able to see their own boys as they fall in battle”—a decision that put an end to wartime photographic censorship.

Cal Whipple went on to become editor of *Life*’s international editions, executive editor at Time-Life Books, and a historian specializing in maritime books. Did his son have any choice but to follow? “I caught the bug around my father’s dinner table, talking about stories that Dad had just put to bed as an editor at *Life* in its glory days,” Chris says.

A parade of nonfiction legends made its way to Lucas Point: Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring*; Walter Lord, who wrote the definitive *Titanic Chronicle A Night to Remember*; James Morris (later Jan Morris, after gender reassignment surgery), the virtuoso travel writer; Barbara Tuchman, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian; Alfred Eisenstaedt, the photographer who shot the iconic “V-J Day in Times Square”; and close family friend Roy Rowan, a *Life* reporter and editor who covered everything from Mao’s Long March to President Kennedy’s assassination.

CONTRIBUTED

Whipple’s mother, Jane, had her own stories. At Sarah Lawrence, where she would later head Continuing Education, she studied with noted historians Maxwell Geismar (*Mark Twain: An American Prophet*) and Joseph Lash (*Eleanor and Franklin*). “Thanks to her friendship with Lash, she was a regular at Eleanor Roosevelt’s teas at the White House while my dad was *Life*’s Pentagon correspondent during World War II,” Whipple says. “Their Scottie played with [the Roosevelts’ Scottie] Fala on the White House lawn.” Whipple’s sister, Ann Marr, “the smart one in the family,” followed their mother into education. Until her recent retirement, she headed the lower school of Convent of the Sacred Heart in Greenwich.

At Yale, Whipple learned from America’s best. One mentor was William Zinsser, the mortal enemy of verbal “clutter” who wrote the classic guide *On Writing Well*. “Bill Zinsser made me seriously reconsider whether I wanted to do any writing whatsoever,” Whipple says. “He was a ruthless taskmaster. To this day, when I sit down to write, I see him perched on my shoulder, striking every unnecessary word.” Another mentor was Thomas Powers, who’d won a Pulitzer in 1971 for his newspaper coverage of a bomb set off by the Weather Underground in Greenwich Village. Powers went on to nonfiction renown as the author of *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA* (1979), considered one of the best books ever written about the CIA.

When Powers learned Whipple was working on *The Spymasters*, he was surprised and pleased: “Surprised because he had spent so much time doing other things first, and pleased that the subject was going to get serious attention,” he writes us. “As a rule there are very, very few writers and journalists who devote themselves to difficult and factually dense subjects.”

No doubt Powers could see, when he read the book in manuscript, that his student had learned the master’s old lessons: “Don’t bring passionate convictions, but curiosity ... Find out what people are like, what they worry about, how they feel about the task at hand... Remember that every issue of the day has a long history; know everything that can be known ... Do the work of really digging into something important,



Whipple's next project, *The Fight of His Life: The Inside Story of Joe Biden's White House*, will be an eye-opening account of one of the most contentious presidential transitions, the tumultuous withdrawal from Afghanistan and tumbling approval ratings.

like how the Republican Party took over the South, or why Baptists deny climate change, or what command of a drone plane does to the soul.” And above all, “It’s the story, not the facts, that make the point. A story is what you’re after.”

Whipple’s first job out of Yale was writing for *Foreign Policy* magazine under the blustery, combative, egotistical Richard Holbrooke, now remembered as the gifted diplomat who brought peace to the Balkans. “I once said to somebody, ‘Yes, I worked for Dick Holbrooke for ten years, from 1975 to 1976,’” Whipple says. “It was challenging, it was brutal—but he had this contagious enthusiasm for journalism, for politics, for foreign policy, and all of that rubbed off.”

Next Whipple spent eight years reporting for *Life*. He covered wars in El Salvador and Lebanon; famine in Somalia; Desmond Tutu in the final years of South African apartheid; a hunger strike in Northern Ireland in which ten political prisoners died; and mercifully lighter fare, like tennis star Bjorn Borg at his peak.

In 1986 Whipple crossed over to television as a producer for *60 Minutes*. For his first story, he flew to Hawaii to court Imelda Marcos, the newly exiled first lady of the Philippines known for her lavish ways. “Imelda sat down at the piano and started belting out ‘Don’t Fence Me In.’ I picked up the phone and called Diane Sawyer in New York and I said, ‘Diane, listen to this! How soon can you get here?’” Not soon enough; Whipple had to start interviewing without her. Back in New York, Mike Wallace and producer Don Hewitt—towering but notoriously difficult figures at CBS—had read the interview transcript and were waiting for Whipple. “I walked in and said, ‘Don, listen, you probably can’t tell from the transcript, but there’s a moment in that interview where she’s talking about the Philippines and she gets a little misty-eyed. She doesn’t quite lose it, but she’s really emotional.’ He looked at Wallace and looked at me and said, ‘Kid, if you were any good, she woulda cried.’”

In 1991 ABC hired Whipple away from CBS to produce investigative stories for *Primetime Live*, a *60 Minutes* competitor. A 1993 piece, “Morgan Medical,” a hidden camera exposé about physician malfeasance at a medical clinic, won Whipple an Emmy. Team coverage of September 11 won him a second. But when Jules Naudet called, he was ripe for a change. One problem. Whipple’s political Rolodex was thinner than the Naudets might have supposed. How on earth would he get, say, Dick Cheney’s home address? Cheney had been Gerald Ford’s chief of staff long before he was George W. Bush’s sinister “vice.”

“My wife, Cary, who is really indispensable to all of this, went online,” Whipple recalls. “She came back twenty minutes later and said, ‘I’ve got it, Cheney’s address.’ I said, ‘Where’d you find it?’ And she said, ‘Warcriminals.org.’ Even Cheney thought that was funny.”

THE STORY IS FAR FROM OVER

The continuing pain that Whipple predicted after the 2020 election is still very much with us. Trump’s Big Lie led 2,500 rowdies to storm the Capitol on January 6, 2021, an event so grotesque that, for a moment

there, it seemed to spell the end of Donald Trump. A year later the Lie had gained such traction that Republican politicians who rejected it risked the Orwellian fate of being cast out of the fold. Liz Cheney was cast out—stripped of a Congressional leadership role and ejected from the Wyoming Republican Party. More disturbingly, 71 percent of the Republican rank-and-file considered Joe Biden’s presidency illegitimate, leaving Biden to govern a bitterly divided country whose more extreme elements were—are—rumbling about civil war and the need to shed blood.

Ill fares the land, and Whipple is writing a book about it. *The Fight of His Life: The Inside Story of Joe Biden's White House*, due out in October from Scribner, will cover the wild transition and the first year of the Biden presidency. “The 2020 election, in the midst of a lethal pandemic with the country coming apart at the seams, was the most consequential of my lifetime,” Whipple says. “The Trump to Biden transition was the most contentious and dangerous since the Civil War.” (Unlike the previous books, this one will have no foregrounding documentary. The Naudets are off with Whipple’s son, Sam, making a film whose explosive subject remains under wraps for now.)

Peter Baker says Whipple’s Biden project will be difficult. “The advantage he had in *The Gatekeepers* and *The Spymasters* is that he was dealing with people whose time in government had come and gone, and they were willing to be more open about their experiences, without worrying about immediate consequences. People in the Biden White House are going to worry about speaking on the record, about being candid. That’s going to be a real challenge for him. But he’s super talented and super smart, so I have no doubt he’ll find a way to produce a valuable and gripping account.”

Whipple says he has found important untold stories. What concerns him is the news cycle’s headlong rush. Writing a book about fast-moving events, he says, is “like trying to design an airplane in mid-flight.” New revelations geyser up almost daily. As we write, news is breaking of an executive order from December 2020—unsigned—instructing the secretary of defense to “seize, collect, retain and analyze all machines, equipment, electronically stored information and material records” from the election. We are left to wonder how close we came to a total democracy meltdown. Even institutionalist Mike Pence seemed to mull over going along with the insanity—by refusing to certify the election—until Dan Quayle shamed him back from the brink: “Forget it. Put it away.”

Early on, it seemed Biden might escape the Trump-world force field: He’d presided over an impressive vaccine rollout, a popular stimulus plan and strong employment numbers. Then the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan damaged his administration’s aura of competence. Inflation rose, stocks fell. Biden’s approval numbers sank to Trumpian depths. And Trump himself was poised for a comeback, the GOP firmly behind him. “Biden now faces an angry, authoritarian party, in thrall to a cult of personality, that waits for a second chance to wreck democracy,” Whipple says. “How could anyone with a political bone in his body not want to write about this presidency?”

