

Author David Baldacci's power over the pen is absolute

By Carol Memmott, USA TODAY



Stirring the pot in Washington, D.C.: David Baldacci novels never stray far from Capitol Hill. His latest, another best seller, is *Stone Cold*, in which a secret group helps hold the government accountable.

RESTON, Va. — David Baldacci's novels — packed with Secret Service agents, CIA sharpshooters and presidents who sometimes commit crimes — are catnip to the power elite of Washington, D.C.

Two former presidents, Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush, are fans. So are former House speaker Newt Gingrich and former Defense secretary William Cohen.

"I'm always appreciative of the fact that people still have time to read, particularly busy people like that," says Baldacci, who doesn't miss the irony that those we hold to the highest standards like to read about people who break the rules. "Sometimes you think they're just reading for pleasure, but maybe they're reading for some of the concepts in the book, too. I have no way of knowing."

In 1999, then-President Clinton named Baldacci's *The Simple Truth* his favorite book of the year. In a recent e-mail to USA TODAY, Clinton wrote: "I love David Baldacci's books, the dizzying plot twists, the evocative scenes, the compelling characters. His books are riveting thrillers that also enable readers to learn something about important subjects."

Says former president and ex-CIA director Bush in an e-mail: "David Baldacci is a valued friend. I read every book he writes and love them all. He is the master of the suspenseful plot."

Baldacci, 47, hit it big in 1996 with *Absolute Power*, a debut novel that probes a massive cover-up after a jewel thief witnesses Secret Service agents killing the president's mistress.

It's not your typical political-thriller plot, but that's the point.

"I'd read a lot of thrillers about politicians and presidents," Baldacci says, "but never one where you flip the stereotypes and make good people bad and bad people good."

Fourteen best sellers later, Baldacci remains a publishing powerhouse. Fifty million copies of his books are in print worldwide. *Stone Cold* (Grand Central, \$26.99), his newest thriller, and *Simple Genius*, published in April, entered USA TODAY's Best-Selling Books list at No. 2, his highest debuts. (*Stone Cold* is now No. 21.)

He knows his material well

The research for his novels is as fascinating as the scenarios he creates. He's rich enough to hire an office building full of researchers, but he does it all himself.

Baldacci has nurtured sources he's too discreet to name and who have shared with him information he would never reveal. "People who have expertise just love to share it. That's human nature."

He counts former and active Secret Service agents, ex-Marines, a former member of the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team, a former attorney general, a former Homeland Security chief and several former presidents among his sources.

"Once you gain their confidence and trust, they're pretty open about how they do their job or how their agency functions or doesn't function, the constraints they feel. I've never asked for classified information," Baldacci says. "People have given me classified information, but always with the disclaimer 'This can never end up in a book.' And it never does."

Margaret Moore, a retired agent for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and co-founder of WIFLE (Women in Federal Law Enforcement), says she finds Baldacci's novels realistic. In fact, a recurring character in some of his books is a member of WIFLE.

"Law-enforcement people, in general, are highly critical," Moore says. "If something is off in a book or movie, it may deter them from finishing it. The level of detail in his books seems to indicate he has good sources for his information."

Through the years, his reputation and popularity have made research much easier. "Now I have agencies call me up," he says. "They want me to come in and talk to them and write about them in my books."

Recently, he met with representatives of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, which runs the U.S. spy satellite network.

The NGA, Baldacci says, didn't like that the National Security Agency got the credit for being the "bad guys" who controlled the satellite surveillance system in the 1998 Will Smith movie *Enemy of the State*. The NGA hopes Baldacci can set the record straight in a future novel. He might. "I never set out thinking, 'How can I work an agency into a book?'" he says. "But if I have an interesting idea that could include them, I would."

He's also among a handful of authors and screenwriters — including Brad Meltzer (*The Book of Fate*) and David DeBatto (co-author with Pete Nelson of *CI:Homeland Threat*) — who have been asked to develop doomsday scenarios for government analysis.

Three years ago, he was contacted by a contractor working for Homeland Security. "I was asked, 'How would you blow up the Super Bowl?' and my task was to come up with a way to do it, send it to them and they would reverse-engineer it. They would figure out a way to make sure it could never happen."

At the time *Absolute Power* was published, Baldacci was a Washington lawyer — he did corporate and trial work — who never thought he could support himself as a writer. But as soon as he sold *Absolute Power*, Hollywood bought the movie rights.

Clint Eastwood directed, produced and starred in the 1997 film. Baldacci talks about the powerful influence Eastwood had over the screenplay, particularly the ending. Eastwood's character, cat burglar Luther Whitney, dies in the novel but not in the film. Baldacci says he was told that "Eastwood doesn't die in any of his movies."

Family helps his empire run

A native Virginian and a graduate of the University of Virginia School of Law, Baldacci and his wife, Michelle, live in Vienna, Va., with their daughter, Spencer, 14, and son, Collin, 11. The Baldacci empire is a family affair. Michelle is active in the family's Wish You Well Foundation, which fosters reading and literacy programs, and Michelle's mother, Lynette, is the receptionist at Baldacci's Reston office in a business park 20 miles from Washington, D.C. It's here (his neighbors include Lockheed Martin, Homeland Security and other federal agencies) that he does most of his writing.

Stone Cold is the third in Baldacci's Camel Club series. Like most of his novels, it takes place in and around Washington and involves corruption at high government levels. The Camel Club, led by ex-CIA assassin Oliver Stone, is a "ragtag regiment" of conspiracy theorists who covertly work to keep the government accountable.

Baldacci named his character for film director Oliver Stone, whose controversial movies include *JFK*. "It was a perfect name for him to take," Baldacci says. "My Oliver Stone is a big-time conspiracy theorist who doesn't trust anybody. So I thought it would be a tip of the hat." Baldacci says he admires Stone's movies because "they take a position, they're courageous and they stir up controversy. And that's never a bad thing."

The prosperous-looking Baldacci appears to be the antithesis of the jaded Stone in his novels, whose tattered wardrobe makes people assume he's homeless.

"Someone asked me one time, 'How cynical are you about the U.S. government on a scale of 1 to 10?' I think my answer was 8.5 to 9.3," Baldacci says. "I have given it a lot of thought. I don't have a low opinion of all politics or all politicians, but of the substantial majority of them and how they do their business and go about their work."

In 2005's *The Camel Club*, the book that kicked off the series, Stone and followers try to stop a terrorist plot that could lead to a nuclear attack in the Middle East.

Baldacci says he received about 100 negative e-mails and several death threats from people (he never pursued their identities) who didn't like the way his novel tried to understand the roots of terrorism.

"In *The Camel Club*, I had the audacity to make a complex issue complicated instead of very simple, black and white," he says. "I posed the question, 'Wouldn't it be smart to understand why a normal person in the Middle East might become a terrorist?' I was exploring things some people didn't want explored. They wanted John Wayne."

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The roots of terrorism he explores in the novel include economic and social pressures faced by young Muslims.

Because of early criticism, Baldacci was convinced *The Camel Club* would not be popular with the reading public, but it turned out to be his biggest seller in hardcover.

"In every thriller written about Washington, particularly after 9/11, there are good guys and there are bad guys, and there's no gray area at all," Baldacci says. "Good guys kill all the bad guys, and they do it any way they can because that makes the world safer and better. That's total BS, but it plays well to audiences.

"For me, the gray is where I live, and that's the only reason I write books like this." Those who fight for justice in his novels don't always survive or win their battles. But critics and fans appear to like Baldacci's less than black-and-white approach to good and evil.

Publishers Weekly called *Stone Cold* "gripping, chilling and full of surprises." *Library Journal* wrote: "Baldacci's intricately woven plotlines, well-developed characters, fast-paced action and surprise ending will leave readers satisfied and wanting more."

Fans, it seems, don't just crave his books — they want to be in them.

Says former president Bush in the e-mail to USA TODAY: "If I were a younger man, for sheer excitement, I'd try to join the Camel Club."