

The Room Where it Happened: John Bolton's account of the "palace coup" opposition to Trump

By Andre Damon
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John Bolton, the longtime Republican foreign policy operative, has published a book narrating his tenure as National Security Advisor at the White House under Donald Trump between April 9, 2018 and September 10, 2019.

Prior to his term in the Trump administration, Bolton was a leading propagandist for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He has publicly advocated military action and regime change against over a half-dozen countries in the last decade alone.

Bolton's book has been hailed by news organizations associated with the Democratic Party as a monumental indictment of Trump. The book is "a scathing and revelatory account" of the president's "stunning ignorance, incompetence, and corruption," according to the *New Yorker*, which called it "indispensable, jaw-dropping." It is a "withering portrait," writes the *New York Times*.

Anyone expecting, based on these responses, a revelation of Donald Trump's conspiracies against democratic rights, his attack on immigrants, or his relations with right-wing extremists, will get nothing of the sort. Bolton either does not care about these questions or agrees with Trump on them.

Rather, the book is a blow-by-blow account of the factional struggles within the White House over how to wage America's global conflicts and wars, dwelling in detail on disagreements about how many missiles to launch and how many people to kill.

It narrates Bolton's vigorous efforts, in his official capacity, to advocate for the United States to attack Syria, North Korea and Iran, and to take a more confrontational posture toward China and Russia.

Bolton writes as a compulsive note-taker, keeping careful watch for what to use to justify the next war or his next career move. The reader is struck above all by the very few passages in the 592-page book containing generalizations of any kind. Bolton never actually argues for any of his preferred policies. Rather, he simply asserts that military action of various sorts is in the national interest, then proceeds to wage a grueling factional struggle of attrition against the "panda huggers" and those seeking "innocuous" solutions to foreign policy problems—meaning those that do not involve mass casualties.

Bolton is a professional advocate of aggressive war, a sort of Dr. Strangelove without the charm. He somehow comes off in his writing as even more icy and detached than he does on camera. Reading this half-deranged bureaucrat's observations is unnerving, recalling Hannah Arendt's observations about the banality of evil.

Throughout the conflicts Bolton narrates, the dominant factor is the utter debacle facing US imperialism on the world stage. The world depicted by Bolton is one of unending and bitter conflict, in which

some choices lead to more corpses, and some lead to less, but none offer anything near the outcome the United States embarked upon when it set out to reorganize the world through military force in the wake of the dissolution of the USSR.

Contemplating withdrawal from Afghanistan, Trump screams at Defense Secretary James Mattis, according to Bolton, "You're losing, you're getting your ass kicked, you failed." He continues, "We've lost everything. It was a total failure."

Bolton's book is of value primarily as an account of the policy differences between Bolton and Donald Trump, which broadly reflect the policy differences between Trump and dominant sections of the American state apparatus that led to the third impeachment of a president in American history in December 2019.

In June 2017, the *World Socialist Web Site* published a statement entitled "Palace coup or class struggle: The political crisis in Washington and the strategy of the working class," which argued, "There are three basic forms of opposition to the Trump administration, representing the interests of different social classes."

The first is "the opposition of powerful sections of the capitalist class," whose differences "with the Trump administration are centered primarily on issues of foreign policy."

This is fundamentally distinct from "the opposition of the working class," which seeks to oppose the Trump administration's social policies and attacks on democratic rights.

Bolton's differences with Trump over foreign policy can be summed up as follows:

- **The 2018 US attack in Syria was not big enough**, and that Trump was incorrect in seeking to withdraw troops from Syria. In Bolton's view, the 2018 strike should have "threatened the regime itself, such as by attacking Assad's palaces." Bolton paints General "Mad Dog" Mattis as an insufferable pacifist who "pushed relentlessly for his innocuous options."

- **The greatest mistake of Trump's presidency was calling off the planned September 2019 attack on Iran.** Bolton, barely able to contain himself in praising the war that got away, listed the various positive aspects of the planned onslaught: "(1) we were hitting functioning military targets, as explained above, not merely symbolic ones; (2) we were hitting inside Iran, crossing an Iranian red line, and were certainly going to test their repeated assertions that such an attack would be met by a full-scale response; and (3) we were hitting targets likely entailing casualties." When Trump, appealing to what he called "my base," abruptly called off the strike, Bolton concluded, "In my government experience, this was the most irrational thing I ever

witnessed any President do.”

• **The Trump administration’s stated efforts to bring the war in Afghanistan to a conclusion were “a complete debacle for US policy and for our credibility worldwide.”**

• **Trump is too willing to see the US-China conflict as a matter of improving the US balance of trade, and not as a struggle to cripple China’s strategic high-tech industry, including the technology firms ZTE and Huawei.** “Trump approached trade and trade deficits as if reading a corporate balance sheet: trade deficits meant we were losing, and trade surpluses meant we were winning.” Trump implied “that Huawei also could be simply another US bargaining chip in the trade negotiations, ignoring” the fact that Huawei “posed enormous national-security issues, many of which we could only allude to in public statements.”

• **While Trump favored dialogue with North Korea, Bolton agitated for a “preemptive” war.** “I explained why and how a preemptive strike against North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic-missile programs would work; how we could use massive conventional bombs against Pyongyang’s artillery north of the DMZ, which threatened Seoul, thereby reducing casualties dramatically.”

Bolton’s chilling positions on these issues are well-known. But an uncanny resemblance emerges upon reviewing the editorial line of the newspapers associated with the Democratic Party, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

On December 19, 2018, the *New York Times* published an editorial entitled, “Trump’s Decision to Withdraw From Syria Is Alarming. Just Ask His Advisers.”

It was less than three months ago that John Bolton, the national security adviser, declared an expanded objective for American troops in Syria.

The goal is not just defeating the Islamic State, but also ensuring that Iranian forces leave the country, he told reporters in what seemed like an authoritative statement of official policy.

Only, as is so often the case with Donald Trump’s chaotic presidency, it apparently wasn’t.

On Wednesday, Mr. Trump summarily overruled Mr. Bolton and the rest of his national security team. He ordered the withdrawal of all 2,000 American ground troops from Syria within 30 days.

That abrupt and dangerous decision, detached from any broader strategic context or any public rationale, sowed new uncertainty about America’s commitment to the Middle East, its willingness to be a global leader and Mr. Trump’s role as commander in chief.

Likewise, Trump’s decision to call off the massive planned 2019 strike against Iran was excoriated in the pages of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. “President Trump must have something in his eye, because he keeps blinking,” declared *Washington Post* columnist Max Boot. *Times* columnist Bret Stephens declared that Trump had the “strategic instincts of Dennis Kucinich,” the anti-war Democrat.

And, in the foreign policy conflict that in recent months has come to dominate all others, the Democrats have sought to paint Trump as “soft” on China—a word used by both Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden. Trump, in the words of the *Times*, wants to trade the United States’ strategic interests in China for “a Hill of Beans.”

The zenith of the palace coup opposition to Trump was the 2019-2020 presidential impeachment, whose first article, “abuse of power,” argued that “Trump used the powers of the Presidency in a manner that compromised the national security of the United States” by withholding \$391 million in weapons to Ukraine to fight what was described as a “hot war” with Russia.

During the course of the impeachment inquiry, Bolton emerged as the principal cabinet official within the administration demanding the release of the weapons to Ukraine. The former national security advisor emerged as a star witness in the impeachment, even though he did not testify because the Democrats, seeking a fast impeachment, did not wait for the courts to compel him to do so.

At the time, the *Times* editorial board declared that Bolton’s comments would be the equivalent of a smoking gun, asserting, “Leaks from John Bolton’s forthcoming book about his time in the White House appeared to confirm the core of the impeachment case against Mr. Trump: his extortion of Ukraine by explicitly conditioning hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid on the announcement of investigations into his political rival.”

Indeed, Bolton’s book implies that Trump held up the aid as part of his overall struggle with his factional opponents over the origins of the Mueller investigation. In a retelling of the July 25 phone call at the center of the impeachment, Trump tells Ukrainian President Zelensky, “There is lots of talk about Biden’s son stopping the prosecution [against those formulating and executing the Russia collusion operation]. He went around bragging that he stopped the prosecution. It sounds horrible.” (Paraphrase in brackets is Bolton’s.)

In Bolton’s view, it was impermissible that Trump’s conflict with his factional rivals would imperil the shipment of weapons to Ukraine for its war against Russia, and Bolton did everything within his power to get Trump to reverse course. Trump ultimately relented.

The Democrats, fearful of mobilizing the broad popular hostility to Trump, impeached the president solely based on differences over foreign policy. As such, Bolton, the notorious war criminal responsible for the Iraq war, became their political ally.

The more one reads Bolton’s book, the more the parallels between the positions of this notorious warmonger and that of the Democrats comes clearly into view. As such, the book provides a stark warning: The Democrats are a pro-war party. The struggle against war, and against the Trump administration, can only proceed in opposition to them.

It is not inconceivable to imagine Bolton playing a prominent role in an upcoming Democratic administration.

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