
REVIEW

Bolton Is the Villain of His Own Memoir

The former national security advisor wrote a book about an ignorant president—but refuses to learn anything himself.

BY JEREMI SURI | JUNE 24, 2020, 5:21 PM

At the lowest point in his presidency, after the terribly planned and poorly executed invasion to overthrow Cuban leader Fidel Castro at the Bay of Pigs, John F. Kennedy lamented: “We got a big kick in the leg—and we deserved it. But maybe we’ll learn something from it.”

John Bolton has studied this moment in U.S. history, but he has not learned very much. In April 2019 he spoke, as President Donald Trump’s national security advisor, to the Bay of Pigs Veterans Association. Who knew such a group existed? Mimicking Kennedy’s Cold War bluster more than 50 years later, he promised that his administration would finally overthrow Cuban and Russian influences south of the border, crushing what he called the “troika of tyranny” in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and, of course, Cuba. It was time, at long last, to beat the dead horses.

Those who heard Bolton surely noted the similarities between his “troika of tyranny” and earlier invocations of an “axis of evil,” a “communist monolith,” and “falling dominoes.” These simple phrases seductively flatten the diversity of different regimes, exaggerate a wide range of threats, and grossly overstate U.S. power. Kennedy began to recognize these shortcomings in U.S. strategic thinking after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, replayed, in part, by his less thoughtful successors in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya.

Bolton still hasn’t learned. His memoir, *The Room Where It Happened*, deserves a different title: *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, after the subtitle of Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove*. Even Kubrick’s memorable militarist, Gen.

The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir, John Bolton, Simon & Schuster, 592 pp., \$32.50, June 2020

“Buck” Turgidson, would blush at Bolton’s combination of seriousness, simplicity, and self-centeredness. He seems unable to recognize that his calls for unilateral interventionism have repeatedly failed. His chapter on Latin America closes with the unintentionally ironic promise: “Venezuela will be free.”

Really? Just like Iraq and Afghanistan? And Bolton makes similar promises for unilateral U.S. power in Iran and North Korea. He claims this is the appropriate mode for thinking about new zones of conflict. Cyberspace, Bolton writes, should not be “materially different from the rest of human experience: initially a state of

anarchy from which strength and resolve, backed by substantial offensive weaponry, could create structures of deterrence against potential adversaries that would eventually bring peace.”

Bolton’s vision is Hobbesian, with an overweening U.S. leviathan poised to force all the bad guys back into their caves (and away from their screens). He rejects nation-building and economic development for the exercise of hard power. He also condemns virtually all multilateral agreements that might restrain U.S. prerogative in any way. Of course, Bolton pushed Trump to leave the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action that sought to limit Iranian nuclear capabilities. In a single page, he calls the Paris climate agreement “theology masquerading as policy,” then condemns the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, the Treaty on Open Skies, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. In the same chapter, he celebrates Trump’s withdrawal from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, initially signed by former President Ronald Reagan and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. That was their first step in ending the Cold War—a mistake in Bolton’s flip assessment.

Other reviewers have concentrated on the sensational narrative Bolton spins around Trump’s evident narcissism, disorganization, and corruption. Bolton’s insider account of the president’s repeated appeals to Russian President Vladimir Putin is not entirely new, but it captures how ill-suited Trump is to lead the free world. The president denies that Putin interfered in the 2016 election because it diminishes his victory, he has no patience for efforts to formulate a coordinated allied policy toward Russia, and, most astonishingly, he seeks to profit financially from these

and other diplomatic interactions. Bolton also largely confirms the House of Representatives' impeachment charges against Trump for trying to extort Ukrainian (as well as Chinese) assistance for his reelection, holding congressionally mandated security aid hostage.

Bolton's real revelations, however, are not about Trump, whose grave leadership failures were already evident to anyone who wished to look. Nor is Bolton's militarism surprising to anyone who has followed his career. The most powerful insight from

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The Room Where It Happened is that Bolton and Trump brought out the worst in one another, multiplying the enduring harm to U.S. national interests and the international system. They are co-authors of global destruction. Bolton made Trump even worse.

He tries to depict himself as a brake on the insane emperor, but he doesn't paint a persuasive self-portrait as an Otto von Bismarck. Bolton's calls for permanent aggression egged on the president when his own instincts—in Iran, Afghanistan, and Venezuela—favored restraint. Continuing his bare-fisted tactics from the administration of former President George W. Bush, Bolton kneecapped his peers who tried to salvage multilateral diplomacy. Here Bolton replays the calumnies of former Vice President Dick

Cheney, former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and former Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz against former Secretary of State Colin Powell and other wise, cautionary voices. Bolton's memoir is filled with personal attacks on the alleged feckless behavior of former Defense Secretary James Mattis, former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and Treasury Secretary Stephen Mnuchin. These three flawed figures were confirmed by Congress, but Bolton clearly believes they had no business asking tough questions about the interventionist plans he concocted in his White House office.

Although Bolton condemns Trump's cravenness to please his "base," he acts in similar ways to politicize policy. When Mnuchin resists some of the proposed sanctions on Venezuela, Bolton condemns him as "basically a Democrat." When then Chief of Staff John Kelly presciently worries that Trump could not manage a "real crisis like 9/11," Bolton responds that if they allow this president to fail, Sen. Elizabeth Warren or Sen. Bernie Sanders will be worse. Most jarringly, Bolton repeatedly attacks the credibility of the press—especially the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. He treats them as enemies out to get the administration, rather than journalists seeking to understand a chaotic White House and inform the public about it. Bolton's words encourage the dangerous attacks on the free press that have permeated Trump's presidency. Bolton knows better, and it is ironic that he relied on the press, and its resistance to the White House, to ensure the distribution of his memoir.

The Room Where It Happened is hefty in its details, many of which

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are indeed revealing.

But the barrage of information hides a deeper truth about what Bolton calls

“conservative” foreign-policy ideas in the 21st century. These ideas, it turns out, are not very

conservative or very effective. Bolton recycles the stale language from the Cold War and the old manipulations of fact to justify what amounts to a defense of “endless wars.” He calls for liberating Venezuelans from dictatorship, but defends continued U.S. aid to the Saudi monarchy, even after the assassination of Washington-based journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Somehow, he surmises that Saudi tyranny and foreign murders are better than what exists in Venezuela. The facts just do not support that.

The same is true for Iran. Bolton’s apocalyptic assessment of Iran’s threat to the United States is exaggerated. His repeated assertion that more U.S. force in the region will tame Tehran is, well, the reverse of the historical record. The trillions of dollars and thousands of American lives lost in the Middle East since 2003, with Bolton’s fulsome encouragement, have only increased Iran’s influence, often to the detriment of U.S. allies.

Bolton was the worst kind of national security advisor for a president who mixes militant language with isolationist tendencies. He helped purge the internationalists, the cautious realists, and even the few real conservatives lingering on the fringes of Trump’s court of sycophants. He also helped to alienate

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long-standing international partners and long-serving U.S. civil servants. Bolton raised already scorching partisan temperatures, and he brought that excess heat into the National Security Council, where his predecessor had tried, at least in part, to shield policy from ideological extremism. In all these ways, Bolton did a lot of the dirtiest work for Trump.

Perhaps the president knew what he was doing after all. If everything is personal politics for Trump, Bolton was very useful. He drained a lot of swamps. His memoir exposes his deeply complicit role, despite the author's holier-than-thou protestations.

Kennedy and other foreign-policy thinkers learned a lot after the Bay of Pigs and the Cold War; Bolton and his fans still resist, even as they die a slow death for enabling so much of Trump's disastrous behavior.

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