

The President and the Blob

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When Defense Secretary Mark Esper announced on October 13 that President Donald Trump would bring home 2,000 U.S. troops deployed in Syria, it ignited a bipartisan firestorm. Pundits—conservatives and liberals alike—savaged Trump for deserting the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), composed largely of Kurds who had fought alongside the United States against the Islamic State (IS). In Congress, even Trump’s most stalwart defenders, including Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell and Senator Lindsey Graham, parted ways with him.

The critics were playing a familiar tune. By announcing his intention to pull out of Syria, Trump was corroding U.S. credibility across the globe, demoralizing U.S. allies, undercutting the campaign against terrorism, throwing a lifeline to a (supposedly) dying IS, opening the door to genocide, and handing unearned victories to Iran, Russia, and by extension to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. The charge sheet was extravagantly comprehensive; dissenters were few and far between.

In fairness to Trump’s critics, the president’s operating style, unique in the annals of U.S. statecraft, does not inspire confidence; and his decision on Syria was of a piece. It owed, seemingly, to id and impulse, not reason, and it was suffused with that dangerous Trumpian amalgam of ignorance and overweening self-confidence. Moreover, the president’s own Syria policy has been all over the map. After being elected, he actually *increased* the number of U.S. troops there, to a total of about 2,000. Then, in late 2018, he surprised his advisers by calling for an immediate reduction on the grounds that IS had been defeated. Then he changed his mind again. Less than a week after last month’s abrupt order for a full withdrawal, he reversed course yet again, decreeing that a small, unspecified number of troops would remain, to guard Syria’s oil fields — never mind that these are dispersed and nowhere near the SDF-controlled northeast.

By going with his gut on this decision, Trump effectively ignored his foreign policy and national security team and the top military brass, all of whom seemed stupefied following Esper’s newflash. These advisers were left to contemplate various what-next questions that had seemingly never occurred to the commander-in-chief. How, for example, would U.S.

troops exit a war zone speedily and safely, especially with angry Kurds flinging trash and invective at them? What, precisely, would limit the advance of Turkish forces once the U.S. troops were gone? What fate would befall the Kurds inhabiting the twenty-mile buffer that Turkey president Recep Tayyip Erdogan planned to create in northern Syria, and then to flood with Syrian Arab refugees? Who would care for Kurdish refugees fleeing the advance of Turkish-backed Syrian opposition fighters and al-Assad's army? What if in the ensuing melee IS prisoners under the SDF's control managed to escape?

Indubitably, then, Trump's Syria decision was hasty and the (non-) process used to decide inept. Yet what his recklessness laced with grandiosity elicited from his critics was the standard Beltway cocktail of bromides, stale thinking, skin-deep historical knowledge, and hypocritical sentimentality. And that, in the end, is the real pity.

American presidents have unique autonomy and latitude when it comes to enacting foreign policy. Apart from conflating U.S. interests with their own personal interests, they can set the agenda and execute their priorities. Given the magnitude of this responsibility and the complexity of decision making involved, they rely on what Stephen Walt calls the "blob" — the amorphous foreign policy establishment that diffuses responsibility and rarely if ever suffers consequences for its mistakes.

To understand how calamitous this partnership between politician and blob has been in recent years, consider the U.S. policy that resulted with troops in Syria in the first place. For starters, recall that it was President Barack Obama, not Trump, who first engineered the U.S. collaboration with the SDF, in 2015 — partly in response to calls, including from some members of his administration, to intervene more forcefully in Syria's civil war. Bipartisan legislation in 2014 had approved \$500 million to extract Syrian Arab rebels out of Syria to train and arm them for the fight against IS. But this program produced little of value: the rebels proved more interested in resisting Syrian president Bashar al-Assad than in fighting IS.

Obama's plan to partner with the SDF was doomed from the start. Insisting on a U.S. presence in Syria sweeps various additional problems under the rug.

Obama sought to project toughness on terrorism. With polls taken in late 2014 and early 2015 revealing that a majority of Americans favored sending ground troops to fight IS in Syria, he terminated the 2014 program and developed a new, measured plan. Yet Obama understood that protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had made Americans wary of military expeditions that began with promises of easy victories and then dragged on for years, with vast expenditure of blood and treasure. So he chose to deploy a limited number of Special Operations Forces — fewer than 50 in October 2015, and then another 450 in April and December of the following year — to train and equip a more clearly defined local partner to do the bulk of the fighting, with air support provided by U.S. warplanes already stationed nearby at Incirlik, Turkey. Enter the SDF, which was already engaged in fighting on the ground and shared the U.S. interest of destroying the sprawling caliphate that IS had by then erected in parts of Syria (and Iraq).

The partnership, while superficially plausible, was doomed from the start. Though the SDF included Syrian Arabs and Assyrians, it was dominated by the People's Protection Units (YPG), the fighting arm of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Syrian Kurdish nationalist organization. The United States and the Syrian Kurds had a common enemy in IS, but they did not share common political objectives. The Syrian Kurds minimal goal, which required the liquidation of IS, was an autonomous Kurdish region in northeastern Syria; what it really coveted was an independent state for Syria's Kurds — an outcome unacceptable to just

about every nation in the region, especially Turkey.

Erdogan — and Turks generally — recognized that the PYD was now essentially masquerading as the SDF. The PYD, while organizationally distinct, is a kindred spirit of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has fought for a Kurdish state in southeastern Turkey for decades. In 1997 and again in 2019, the U.S. State Department had labeled the PKK a terrorist group. Photographs of the jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan abound in PYD-ruled Syrian territories, and some PKK fighters have joined their PYD comrades in battle, as have Iranian Kurds from the Party of Free Life for Kurdistan (PAJAK), which, in 2009, the U.S. Treasury Department also labeled a terrorist group.

One can sympathize with the Kurds, of course. The post-World War I territorial settlement Britain and France devised to carve up much of the Near East eviscerated the Kurds hope for statehood, dispersing them across three countries. The cold historical reality, however, is that no state with the power to prevent the emergence of a separatist state on its flank, to say nothing of one aligned with a homegrown secessionist insurgency it has battled for decades, will allow that to happen. Long before Erdogan was even elected prime minister in 2003 (he became president in 2014), the Turkish state had demonstrated, repeatedly, its determination to wage a pitiless counterinsurgency war against the PKK, which included the burning of over 2,000 Kurdish villages. Between 1984 — when the PKK took up arms — and 2014, more than 65,000 civilians and combatants on both sides died or were injured, with the Kurds getting the worst of it by far.

Yes, Trump is a disastrous president. But U.S. foreign policy has been a disaster for much longer.

States; but you needn't like the man to understand what drives his actions in northern Syria. In 2018 he denounced the SDF as a U.S.-backed "terror army" and most Turks support him — indeed, as opinion polls demonstrate, Turks are turning increasingly hostile toward the United States.

Obama, for his part, seems to have given scant thought in 2015 to how the United States might respond if Turkey moved to crush the SDF. Clearly, he had no intention of sending troops numerous enough to deter, let alone repel, a Turkish offensive against the SDF. His focus was on limiting

U.S. exposure — hence, his resistance to taking bolder steps, such as creating a no-fly zone over Syrian airspace or safe areas inside Syria for refugees fleeing Assad's army. His plan for demolishing IS by relying on the SDF, though successful, was all but certain to give rise to an additional set of problems.

For example, Turkey's interests aside, consider that Assad's forces have been making steady gains since 2015, which is the year Vladimir Putin intervened with Russian airpower and thousands of so-called contract soldiers to prevent the Syrian state's collapse. As Putin sees it, Assad's fall would perpetuate chaos and create further space for the rise of a radical Islamist government. Russia thus remains determined to help Assad retake the lands he has lost to an assortment of armed opponents. So, to those who demand that the United States maintain troops in Syria (or even increase their number), the question Obama swept under the rug remains: would the United States be willing to defend the SDF from a Russian-supported assault by Assad's army in the south while Turkey was also pressing against it in the north?

Critics of Trump's recent withdrawal claim that Trump has handed Russia a big prize. This is absurd. Imagine, for a moment, that Assad routs his opponents soon and once again rules all of Syria. What strategic gain will accrue to Putin? Large parts of Syria have been demolished and resemble a smoldering ruin. No Western country will pony up the cash needed for a serious reconstruction, which the UN estimates will require \$250 billion (Syria's entire GDP before the civil war began in 2011) and other sources estimate at \$400 billion. Whatever the sum, the Russians can't afford it. The Chinese have the money to help rebuild Syria, but why would they when Russia would then reap the benefits?

The proponents of hanging tough in Syria also warn of wily Russian diplomats forging ties with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Turkey. To hear them tell it, you would think that Russia — with a military budget that is less than a tenth of the United States' and a GDP comparable to that of the Benelux countries' — has all but driven the United States out of the Middle East. But Russia's achievements here cannot be blamed on Trump's actions in Syria. Russia's diplomatic successes in the Middle East were evident during Obama's presidency and continued even as Trump beefed up the military deployment in Syria that he inherited following the 2016 election. Indeed, the extensive cooperation between Israel in particular and Russia can be traced at least to the 1990s. Putin has certainly built energetically on that foundation, but his success cannot be ascribed to U.S. policy in Syria, let alone Trump's decision to reduce the number of troops deployed there. Moreover, the question remains of

how substantial and lasting these relationships will prove to be. Each of the countries in question, for example, remains much more closely tied to the United States than to Russia, or indeed any other state.

As for the charge that Trump has betrayed the Kurds, well, he has. Indeed, the United States has forsaken the Kurds repeatedly, on a much grander scale, and long before Trump came on the scene. Consider just a couple of examples. Washington armed Turkey — to the tune of \$800 million a year on average during Bill Clinton's presidency — as Turkey mounted its massive counterinsurgency against the PKK in the 1990s. During the Iran-Iraq War, the Reagan administration supported Saddam Hussein in several ways, including providing Iraq economic credits as well as intelligence information on Iranian troop deployments, even as Hussein set out to retake Kurdish territories in northern Iraq. During their 1988 offensive, called Operation Anfal, Iraqi troops killed thousands of Kurdish civilians, demolished entire villages, and used poison gas in the town of Halabja, taking some 5,000 Kurdish lives. The entire campaign may have killed as many as 100,000 civilians. The White House and State Department uttered nary a word of condemnation after the attack on Halabja and even opposed Congressional resolutions that sought to do so.

There is, then, much amnesia at work in 2019.

From where we sit, Donald Trump has been a disastrous president, and in ways too numerous to recount here. Apart from his policies, his personal comportment — the sexism, the racist dog whistles, the demagoguery, the coarseness — has been revolting. With luck, and assuming he manages to finish his term, voters will cashier him in 2020. That said, however, the barrage of attacks and news coverage that followed his decision to reduce the U.S. military presence in Syria has obscured something the country really needs: a debate about the basic principles of recent U.S. foreign policy. This policy, which has loomed large since 9/11, has five, interrelated elements.

First, recent U.S. foreign policy has authorized serial military interventions undertaken in the name of universal human rights, the commitment to which is belied by the many repressive regimes that the United States supports. A recent, egregious example is U.S.-armed Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, which began in the final year of Obama's presidency and has

ravaged a dirt-poor country, killed thousands of civilians, and created a cholera epidemic and a famine.

Second, recent U.S. foreign policy rests largely on the so-called war against terrorism which has no clarity of strategic purpose — namely, whether the “terrorists” pose a clear and present danger or are a species of militant Islam produced by complex causes that may be rooted in local factors that have little to do with the United States. The war on terror has used drone strikes and special operations to convert large swathes of the planet into a battlefield and commits the country to promiscuous, preventive, and open-ended interventions across the globe.

The foreign policy establishment says that we must persevere, lest adversaries doubt our will and allies lose their nerve. But endless interventions ensure militants a steady stream of recruits.

Third, and a consequence of the first two, the decapitation of governments (such as in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya) produces chaos and bloodletting while leaving the United States with two bad choices: doubling down for years (Afghanistan and Iraq) or bugging out (Libya). The

first two ventures have cost \$5.9 trillion (counting the money already spent and the future obligations to our troops), while the third has proved to be a boon for Al-Qaeda, IS, and a network of human traffickers and armed militias who have thrived in the resulting power vacuum.

Fourth, recent foreign policy has all but ignored the cumulative opportunity costs. While it is true that money can't fix all of our festering domestic problems, it would certainly help ameliorate some of them. Imagine if the money saved by winding down needless, counterproductive wars was put towards updating crumbling infrastructure, or addressing the child poverty rate (which ranks among the highest in OECD countries), or treating the raging opioid and suicide epidemics (the latter of which has taken a heavy toll on veterans and active-duty soldiers; at least 45,000 have killed themselves since 2013). The military, which is currently having to lower its health and education standards in order to field a force, is especially aware of the consequences of decreased domestic investment.

Lastly, U.S. foreign policy since 9/11 has largely allowed Congress to go AWOL. The Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), legislation passed on September 14, 2001, has amounted to a permanent permission slip presidents can invoke to mount armed interventions of various sorts, thus enabling the continual military interventions of recent years. Congress can undo this legislation whenever it

chooses, but instead has all but abdicated its constitutional right to declare war.

By assuming the cloak of “anti-terrorism,” U.S. foreign policy post 9/11 has amounted to an endless game of whack-a-mole, pitting the United States against militant movements that move from one country to another. How, then, does this game end? What will victory look like? The foreign policy establishment says that we must persevere lest adversaries doubt our will and allies lose their nerve. But these shopworn shibboleths about being persistent and demonstrating credibility keep the game going. Endless interventions simply generate resentments that ensure militants a steady stream of recruits. Sticking with the same failed strategy in hopes of a obtaining a different result amounts to insanity.

Trump famously described himself as a “very stable genius.” He is, in fact, neither stable nor particularly smart. Yet he deserves credit for his intuition in 2016. He sensed the American public’s frustration over the forever wars, the burden of which is borne by a small segment of our society because we do not have a military draft, and which are paid for with the national credit card rather than by raising taxes. Trump also grasped the depth of resentment among those who feel belittled, even mocked, by a super-rich elite that knows nothing, and perhaps cares less, about their workaday hardships. He tapped into the despair of people whose jobs succumbed to outsourcing and automation and those who have jobs but nevertheless struggle to cover basic expenses.

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as a revolutionary savior. It convinced nearly 63 million voters that he would dismantle a dysfunctional system and replace it with one that would, at long last, fix their problems. In the end, unsurprisingly, Trump has managed only to perpetrate one more con job. His promise of a new foreign policy has proven bogus. Since 2016, the number of U.S. troops has increased in virtually every region of the world; the total in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria soared from 18,000 at the end of Obama’s term to 26,000 by the end of 2017. Most recently Trump dispatched 3,000 troops to Saudi Arabia, supposedly to shore up its defenses against Iran, never mind that the United States has sold the House of Saud \$90 billion worth of arms since 1950 so it could supposedly defend itself.

Trump spun a narrative, which, for all of its simplemindedness and crudeness, portrayed him, a quintessential creature of privilege,

Under Trump, the forever wars grind on. Drone strikes and military raids remain the commander-in-chief’s tools of choice — notably in Libya, Somalia, and Yemen. Obama was scarcely a paragon of transparency on civilian deaths caused by drone strikes, but as of this year, the Trump administration stopped releasing annual reports on drone attacks, thereby making it even harder to ascertain civilian casualties and deaths. If anything, Trump uses military force even less discriminately than his predecessor did. The self-proclaimed architect of restraint turns out to be the avatar of more of the same.

And yet all that disaffection he tapped into to win the presidency remains. Though not all of it stems from a loss of confidence in U.S. foreign policy, the disenchantment with militarized “global leadership” and awareness of its abundant failures will likely still haunt us in 2020 and beyond. A true change in our policy will require a root-and-branch assessment that distinguishes between essential goals, commitments, and expenditures and those that owe to bureaucratic inertia, entrenched vested interests, and a foreign policy establishment that not only lacks new ideas but is also increasingly sequestered in Washington, D.C., and disconnected from public sentiment. It will entail realigning ends and means, redefining national security so as to take account of domestic socio-economic considerations. It will require winding down wars that breed millenarian movements and more terrorism. Despite his propensity for big talk, the current commander in chief won’t achieve any of this.

No thoroughgoing change will occur unless the foreign policy establishment rethinks its worldview. And that won’t happen until members of the blob — whether in Congress, the military, think tanks, or the media — acknowledge the role that their collective folly has played in elevating someone like Trump to the presidency. The U.S. foreign policy crisis predates Trump. It won’t end simply with his removal from office.

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