

The Room Where it Happened

A White House Memoir

John Bolton

Former National Security advisor of the USA

John Bolton is the former National Security Advisor to President Donald Trump. He was US Ambassador to the United Nations in 2005 to 2006. He has worked with Presidents Reagan, George Bush Sr and George Bush Jr.

The transition's spreading disorder increasingly reflected not just organizational failures but Trump's essential decision making style

Charles Krauthammer , a sharp critic of Trump said that Trump behaved like a 11 year old. He later said “ I was off by ten years”” he is like a one year old, everything is seen through the prism of whether it benefits Donald Trump.

I was approached many time to be an assistant to the president type of role. This was a non starter for me, so I politely declined. I was only interested in the National Security advisor role.

Henry Kissinger once told me “ never take a government job without an inbox”

After my appointment as National Security advisor, trump called me during his intelligence briefing saying “ you are getting great press” and the announcement was “playing big”

I do not think the press is the enemy of the people but as Dwight Eisenhower said in 1964 , its ranks are filled with ‘ sensation seeking columnists and commentators”

I had watched Trump closely during his fifteen months in office and I had no illusions that I could change him.

Condi Rice said to me “ the Secretary of state is the best job in the government and the national security advisor the toughest job”

Knowing of Trump's penchant to deal on anything, I mentioned Eisenhower's famous observation "if you cant solve a problem, enlarge it" and I said that's what Macron seems to be doing about Iran by coming with a four pillar strategy.

Trump used to say many times - “ the EU is worse than China, except it is smaller” adding that the EU was set up to take advantage of the US.

Even as we neared withdrawing from the wretched Iran Nuclear deal, trump's focus on North Korea weapons program resumed. The more I learned , the more discouraged AND pessimistic I became about a Trump-Kim summit.

On Sunday, Trump called me on my appearances on Television before the Kim summit. I had been 'very good' on Television he said, but I needed to praise him more ON TV because 'there's never been anything like this before'"

Trump got carried away with the thought. South Korea president Moon that he would recommend Trump for the Nobel peace prize.

When Kelly was leaving the white House he said " You can't imagine how desperate I am to get out of here. this is a bad place to work and you will find out." He was the first to see Trump in the morning and the last to see him at night and I can only conjecture how many mistakes he had prevented during his tenure.

Trump was unhappy that Trudeau had used his closing G7 press comments against him. “Just go after Trudeau, don’t knock the others, Trudeaus a behind your back guy”

Pompeo and I rode with Trump in the beast (the presidential limo). He was in a sour mood because he thought the Kim summit would fail because of Chinese pressure.

The Kim meeting was good. Trump said he knew he and Kim would get along almost immediately. Kim asked how trump assessed him and Trump said he loved that question. He saw Kim as smart, quite secretive and a very good person, totally sincere with a great personality. Kim said that in politics people are like actors.

Putin struck me as totally in control, calm, self confident, whatever Russia's domestic economic and political challenges might have been. He was totally knowledgeable about Moscow's national security priorities. I was not looking forward to leaving Putin alone in a room with Trump.

Trump in his first NATO summit in 2017 complained that too many allies were not meeting their 2014 commitment, to spend 2 % of GDP for defense by 20204 which for most Europeans meant defense in the European theatre.

Trump was correct on the burden sharing bit, his views were the same as Obama's, NATO a convergence of views that might have shaken Trump's confidence in his own had he paid attention to it.

Trump also unsigned the Paris agreement on climate change, which I fully supported.

The Paris agreement simply requires signatories to set national goals but doesn't say what these goals should be nor does it contain certain enforcement mechanisms. This is a theology masquerading as policy, an increasingly common phenomenon in international affairs.

By stressing process rather than policy, Obama inhibited US operations in cyberspace without ever having to say so explicitly, thereby evading the legitimate public debate we should be having over cyberspace.

Trump seemed to think that criticizing the policies of foreign governments made it tough for him to have good personal relationships with them. This was a reflection of his difficulty in separating personal from official relations. I am not aware of any case where Russia and China refrained from criticizing our policies for fear of irritating our leaders.

**Trump heads for the door in Syria and
Afghanistan and cant find it.**

Trump stressed his friendship with Erdogan (President of Turkey) but implied I would be impossible even for him to fix the hard issues facing the US Turkey relationship unless Brunson returned to the US. Trump was genuinely agitated by it.

Trump got tired of Turkish delays and obfuscations and ordered Turkey steel tariffs to double to 50 % and aluminum tariffs to double to 20 %, probably the first time that tariffs were raised by a tweet.

At the height of the Turkish issue , Vice President Pence suggested that Jared Kushner call Turkey's finance minister since they were both sons in law of their respective country Presidents. I briefed Pompeo and Mnuchin on this 'so in law ' channel and they both exploded.

Erdogan said when he was mayor of Istanbul twenty years earlier – “Democracy is like a street car. You ride it to the stop you want and then get off .”

I felt that withdrawing from Syria was a huge mistake because of both the continuing global threat of ISIS and the fact that Iran's influence would grow.

On a call with Erdogan, Trump said he wanted Erdogan to get rid of ISIS and not to hurt the Kurds.

Trump discussed the rumor of him wanting to replace Vice President Pence with Haley for 2020. The logic was that Haley would win back women voters who were alienated by Trump.

**Trump opposed continuing in Afghanistan
for two reasons:
he had campaigned for the end of endless
wars and
and this amounted to frivolous spending**

We discussed that if Trump continued with the soldiers in his third year, then he had to own the war, on the other hand , if he exited by year 2 , he could blame his predecessors.

Trump who endlessly claims that he makes all the decisions, has trouble in taking ownership for them.

Perhaps uniquely in presidential history, Trump engendered controversy over attendance at funerals, starting with Barbara Bush in April 2018, then John McCain's funeral where he did not attend even though previous Presidents attended both.

During the immigration controversy came the Khashoggi killing. Trump issued an unequivocal statement of support for MBS, the Saudi ruler.

Trump questioned his subordinates about their peers in a negative way, setting off a chain where there was no trust amongst them.

Macron all but insulted Trump at the Nov 11 speech saying 'patriotism is the exact opposite of nationalism'. Trump said he didn't hear it since his ear piece didn't work at that moment.

What now stands in the way of freeing Venezuela is the Cuban presence, supported by Russian financial resources.

Deng Xiaoping's decision to shift Chinese economic policy in 1978 and the US recognition of China and the derecognition of Taiwan in 1979 were critical turning points.

Politically china began moving away from becoming a democracy, not toward it. In Xi Jinping, china has its most powerful leader, and the most centralized government control since Mao.

Trump frequently says that stopping china's unfair growth at US expense is the best way to defeat china militarily, which is fundamentally correct.

Trumps favorite way was to get groups of people into the oval room to debate , to argue the issues. Without resolution or even worse, a decision one day would get reversed the next day. This made my head hurt.

In private, Trump said that both china and Russia were threats, I wish the press could hear that.

Chinas economic system was different from America's. till we addressed these structural issues, nothing would change.

Trump said that Huawei was China's largest telecom company. I said Huawei wasn't a company but an extension of China's intelligence resources.

With 2020 being an election year, it was inevitable that Trump's handling of the pandemic would become a campaign issue which it did almost immediately.

The right way to impose sanctions is to do so swiftly and unexpectedly, make them broad and comprehensive, not piecemeal, and enforce them rigorously, using military assets to interdict illicit commerce if necessary.

The New York Times wrote an article on focusing on the split between me and Trump over North Korea and Iran. The bigger picture was the split between Trump and Trump.

When I resigned in September 2019, no one was predicting the subsequent impeachment saga. I have no idea of who the whistleblower was.

Trump went out of his way to block my book, withholding my advisors and unclassified documents, obstructing my twitter account and outright threats of censorship.