

Bolton account of Trump White House: Another volley in the conflict within the US ruling elite

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The new book by John Bolton, who was national security advisor in the Trump White House from April 2018 to September 2019, marks another blow struck in the ongoing conflict within the American ruling elite, particularly over foreign policy, that has destabilized the Trump presidency since its inception.

While press coverage of *The Room Where It Happened* focuses on its indictment of Trump as a fool, a bully and an ignoramus, concerned only about his own reelection and his family business—not very startling revelations—the main significance of the book is that it criticizes Trump’s foreign policy entirely from a right-wing standpoint.

Bolton particularly bemoans Trump’s last-minute decision, in June 2019, not to launch cruise missile strikes on Iranian targets, after Iran shot down a US military spy drone that was overflying Iranian territory. Trump tweeted that killing 150 Iranian soldiers in retaliation for destroying an unmanned drone would be seen around the world as “disproportionate.”

After vociferously opposing this action, Bolton resigned, or was fired, just over two months later. He writes now, after a year, that Trump’s decision not to kill large numbers of Iranians was “the most irrational thing I ever witnessed any President do.” That comment alone tells more about Bolton than about Trump.

According to the review of the book in the *New York Times*, one of the Iranian targets Bolton was seeking to destroy was Qassim Suleimani, top leader of the elite Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Seven months later, on an even thinner pretext than that provided in June 2019, Trump ordered the drone missile strike that killed Suleimani and ten other Iranian and Iraqi officials.

Trump himself has given the book enormous publicity by demanding its suppression and ordering the Justice

Department to file a series of legal motions to that effect. The DoJ demanded Tuesday that a federal court seize any profits Bolton might earn from the book—for which he received a \$2 million advance—and on Wednesday sought a temporary restraining order blocking its publication outright.

Legal observers suggested that these court filings were aimed at an audience of one, Trump, and had no likelihood of success. Trump has publicly declared that all conversations between the president and his top aides are classified, a claim that would overthrow all constitutional and legal restrictions applied to the executive branch and would effectively make the president above the law.

No federal court has ever agreed to issue an order barring the publication of a book, known as “prior restraint,” and in this case, the book has already been printed in huge quantities and sent to warehouses for distribution to bookshops and newsstands for sale next Tuesday, June 23. An initial court hearing on the Justice Department suit is scheduled for today.

According to summaries of the book published in the media, Bolton describes Trump as “stunningly uninformed” (he thought Finland part of Russia and did not know Britain possessed nuclear weapons) and preoccupied with his own electoral and financial interests, frequently soliciting the support of foreign governments, including China.

Bolton claims that at a Group of 20 summit in 2019, Trump solicited support from Chinese President Xi Jinping in the form of the Chinese purchase of agricultural goods produced in states vital for Trump’s reelection. In return, Trump backed Beijing’s decision to build detention camps for large numbers of Uighur Muslims in China’s western province of Xinjiang.

Given that during the exchange between Trump and Xi,

only interpreters were present, Bolton either has sources within the State Department, who broke discipline to supply the information to him, or he learned about the discussion from intelligence agency surveillance of the summit. In either case, his charge amounts to another shot fired at Trump from within the national-security apparatus.

Coincidentally, or not, Trump signed legislation Wednesday sanctioning China over its oppression of the Uighurs, the same day his DoJ lawyers were demanding suppression of Bolton's book.

Referring to the same Trump-Xi conversation, an excerpt from the book published in the *Wall Street Journal* adds: "One highlight came when Xi said he wanted to work with Trump for six more years, and Trump replied that people were saying that the two-term constitutional limit on presidents should be repealed for him."

According to the reviews, the book consists largely of Bolton attacking Trump for excessive weakness and dilettantism in foreign policy, and a credulous belief in promises made to him by various leaders regarded with disfavor by Bolton himself: Kim Jong-un of North Korea, Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and so on.

In each case, Bolton was for a more aggressive and bullying posture, regarding Trump's overtures to North Korea and his reluctance to continue US military intervention in Syria, for example, as strategic debacles. He opposed Trump's desire to withdraw US troops from Europe, South Korea, Japan and Afghanistan

In a much-quoted interview with ABC News, set to air on Sunday, Bolton said that Putin thinks he can play Trump "like a fiddle," and that "he sees that he's not faced with a serious adversary here. I don't think he's worried about Donald Trump."

On only one issue did Trump apparently favor military action while Bolton had reservations, and that is in relation to Venezuela, where he claims Trump requested military options on several occasions, and had to be dissuaded by Pentagon officials and, ultimately, by a phone call from Putin.

On the question of relations with Ukraine, Bolton had hinted in January that he had important information that would be of use to the Democratic drive to impeach Trump for withholding military aid in order to induce the Ukrainian government to investigate his then prospective and now actual Democratic opponent, former Vice President Joe Biden.

Bolton leaves Ukraine to the final chapter of the book and offers himself as an eyewitness to at least one meeting where Trump directly connected the withholding of aid to demands for an investigation of the Democrats. "The next morning, August 20, I took Trump's temperature on the Ukraine security assistance, and he said he wasn't in favor of sending them anything until all the Russia-investigation materials related to Clinton and Biden had been turned over," Bolton writes, according to one review.

None of the witnesses before the various House committees that prepared the impeachment of Trump could provide such testimony, since they were lower-level intermediaries, witnesses to one or another element in the pressure campaign on Kiev. The top-level officials, such as Bolton, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Vice President Pence, as well as Trump himself, refused to testify.

The Democrats who spearheaded the impeachment campaign sought to enlist Bolton as a star witness, but he declined to appear voluntarily before the House Intelligence Committee and vowed to fight any subpoena in court. Once the Senate trial began, Bolton switched his public posture and offered to testify, assured that the Republican-controlled Senate would refuse to call him.

It is notable that in his reaction to the Bolton book, Biden, now the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, made no reference to impeachment, approaching it entirely from the standpoint of Trump's alleged request for Xi to assist his reelection campaign, which he called "morally repugnant." He added the suggestion that Trump's supposed dependence on Xi had led him to underplay the significance of the coronavirus epidemic, which originated in Wuhan, China.

There is an obvious reason for Biden to avoid the impeachment question, since Trump was seeking an investigation by Ukraine into a genuine scandal involving Hunter Biden, the former vice president's son, who was gifted with an \$80,000-a-month "job" as a member of the board of directors of the Ukrainian gas company Burisma, at a time when Joe Biden was in charge of Ukraine policy for the Obama administration.



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