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Why We Should Fear the ‘Washington Establishment’ Figures Who are Pulling the Strings in the Trump Administration

People sitting in cafes in Baghdad under the rule of Saddam Hussein used to be nervous of accidentally spilling their cup of coffee over the front page of the newspaper spread out in front of them. They had a good reason for their anxiety because Iraqi newspapers at that time always carried a picture of Saddam on their front page. Defacing his features might be interpreted as an indication of disrespect or even of a critical or treasonous attitude towards the great leader.

Saddam Hussein invariably got star billing in the Iraqi press, but he would be impressed at the astonishing way in which it has become the norm in the US media for the words and doings of President Trump to monopolise the top of the news. Day after day, the three or four lead stories in *The New York Times* and *CNN* relate directly or indirectly to Trump. And, unlike Saddam, this blanket coverage is voluntary on the part of the news outlets and overwhelmingly critical.

Trump’s outrageous insults and lies have succeeded in keeping the spotlight firmly on him ever since he declared his candidacy for the presidency in 2015. Whatever else he may be, he is seldom boring, unlike so many of his defeated rivals and opponents who believed that his obvious failings must inevitably sink him.

One day they may be proved right, but that day is a long time coming; the open loathing for Trump on the part of much of the American media is curiously ineffectual because it is repetitious and no great disaster has so far hit America one year into his presidency.

Commentators note that, for all his bellicose rhetoric, he has yet to start any wars – unlike all his Republican predecessors going back to President Ford.

The constant demonisation of Trump carries another danger that is under-appreciated and may produce a real-world disaster. The US media blames everything on him and respectfully portrays the bevy of generals who populate the upper ranks of his administration – Chief of Staff John Kelly, Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis and National Security Adviser HR McMaster – as the only adults in the room. Yet it may turn out that they and other business and political figures, such as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and the CIA chief Mike Pompeo, are more likely to bring about a war than Trump himself.

Just how poor is the judgement of the very people who are meant to be a restraining force on Trump was shown last month when Tillerson made a classic blunder that may have negative results for the US for years to come. On 17 January, he announced the US military forces would stay in Kurdish controlled north-east Syria after the defeat of Isis in order to weaken Iran and President Bashar al-Assad. Just three days later on 20 January, Turkey, predictably enraged at what it saw as a US territorial guarantee of a de facto Kurdish state, sent its forces across the Syrian border to invade the Kurdish enclave of Afrin.

Tillerson had unwittingly initiated a new phase in the Syrian conflict in which the US is self-isolated and Turkey, Russia, Iran and Assad had been brought closer together. The Kurds in Afrin, one of the few places in Syria not devastated by war, have to hide in caves as the direct result of the new US initiative.

Trump's isolationism may be less risky than the neo-interventionism of his senior advisers. Reports from Washington suggest that the decision to get more fully engaged in the Syrian civil war was contrary to what Trump himself wanted. By this account, he would have preferred to use his State of the Union address to announce that the US mission in Syria had ended in triumph with the defeat of Isis and that he was withdrawing US ground forces. Instead, the decision went the other way as McMaster and Mattis supported by Tillerson successfully argued for keeping US ground forces in Syria and Iraq.

These senior officials were only advocating the consensus opinion of the US foreign policy establishment, as was swiftly illustrated by media commentators. Even as Turkish tanks were rolling into Syria, an editorial in *The Washington Post* was applauding Tillerson for having “bluntly recognised a truth that both President Trump and President

Barack Obama attempted to dodge” – which is that the US needs a political and military presence in Syria.

What Trump and Obama were really dodging was repeating the post 9/11 US mistake in pursuing open-ended military ventures against multiple enemies in fragmented countries like Afghanistan and Iraq where it could not win. In the case of Obama, this sense of caution and ability to see what might go wrong was carefully calculated; in the case of Trump, the caution is instinctive and not always operative, but the end result was often the same.

Despite all Trump’s condemnation of Obama’s supposed weakness, his strategy in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria did not differ much from his predecessor – that is until his chief security officials switched to an interventionist policy in Syria last month.

Traditional policy of relying on force to overcome all obstacles or what Obama nicknamed “The Washington Playbook” looks as if it is back in business. He privately condemned the US foreign policy establishment for being wedded to dubious allies like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in pursuit of over-ambitious objectives

American strength in the world was ebbing before Trump, though the divisive and mercurial nature of his presidency is speeding up the decline. In every continent a power vacuum has opened up which is being filled by many eager candidates. They generally have the same ingredients of populism, demagoguery, authoritarianism and nationalism, though the quantities of each may differ, and they are certainly making the world a more dangerous place because they do not know the limits of their own power.

From Manila to Warsaw, there has been the rise of the mini-Trumps who tend to know the politics of their own country well, but be dangerously ignorant of that of other countries. It is in the nature of arbitrary rulers, who have suppressed domestic criticism, such as Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia, that they pursue exaggerated ambitions moving over ice that is always thinner than they imagine.

US power in the world is declining, having reached its peak between the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the start of the Iraq war in 2003. Two dangers are emerging: one is the feckless nature of Trump administration which acts as a sort of out-of-control wrecking ball, though the damage done is limited by Trump’s low attention span and divisions in Washington.

A second danger is the US foreign policy establishment. which has learned nothing new from past failures, which would like to restore US power to what it once was and is does

not understand that this can no longer be done. This is “the Washington Playbook”, which Obama came to deride and ignore and is just as dangerous as anything Trump may do.