

Trump Scores, Breaks Generals' 50-Year War Record

His national security team had been trying to box him in like every other president. But he called their bluff.

By [Gareth Porter](#)

Global Research, December 29, 2018

[The American Conservative](#) 28 December 2018

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [History, US NATO War Agenda](#)

*The mainstream media has attacked **President Donald Trump's** decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria [as impulsive, blindsiding his own national security team](#). But detailed, published accounts of the policy process over the course of the year tell a very different story. They show that senior national security officials and self-interested institutions have been playing a complicated political game for months aimed at keeping Trump from wavering on our indefinite presence on the ground in Syria.*

The entire episode thus represents a new variant of a familiar pattern dating back to Vietnam in which national security advisors put pressure on reluctant presidents to go along with existing or proposed military deployments in a war zone. The difference here is that Trump, by publicly choosing a different policy, has blown up their transparent schemes and offered the country a new course, one that does not involve a permanent war state.

The relationship between Trump and his national security team has been tense since the beginning of his administration. By mid-summer 2017, **Defense Secretary James Mattis** and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs **General Joseph Dunford** had become so alarmed at Trump's negative responses to their briefings justifying global U.S. military deployments that they decided to do [a formal briefing in "the tank,"](#) used by the Joint Chiefs for meetings at the Pentagon.

But when Mattis and Dunford sang the praises of the "rules-based, international democratic order" that has "kept the peace for 70 years," Trump simply [shook his head in disbelief](#).

By the end of that year, however, Mattis, Dunford, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo believed they'd succeeded in getting Trump to use U.S. troops not only to defeat Islamic State but to "stabilize" the entire northeast sector of Syria and balance Russian and Iranian-sponsored forces. Yet they ignored warning signs of Trump's continuing displeasure with their vision of a more or less permanent American military presence in Syria.

In a March rally [in Ohio ostensibly about health care reform](#), Trump suddenly blurted out, "We're coming out of Syria, like, very soon. Let the other people take care of it now. Very soon—very soon we're coming out."

Then in early April 2018, Trump's impatience with his advisors on Syria boiled over into [a major confrontation at a National Security Council meeting](#), where he ordered them unequivocally to accept a fundamentally different Syria deployment policy.

Trump opened the meeting with his public stance that the United States must end its intervention in Syria and the Middle East more broadly. He argued repeatedly that the U.S. had gotten “nothing” for its efforts, according to an account published by [the Associated Press](#) based on interviews with administration officials who had been briefed on the meeting. When Dunford asked him to state exactly what he wanted, Trump answered that he favored an immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces and an end to the “stabilization” program in Syria.

Mattis responded that an immediate withdrawal from Syria was impossible to carry out responsibly, would risk the return of Islamic State, and would play into the hands of Russia, Iran, and Turkey, whose interests ran counter to those of the United States.

Trump reportedly then relented and said they have could five or six months to destroy the Islamic State. But he also made it clear that he did not want them to come back to him in October and say that they had been unable to defeat ISIS and had to remain in Syria. When his advisors reiterated that they didn’t think America could withdraw responsibly, Trump told them to “just get it done.”

Trump’s national security team had prepared carefully for the meeting in order to steer him away from an explicit timetable for withdrawal. They had brought papers that omitted any specific options for withdrawal timetables. Instead, as the detailed AP account shows, they framed the options as a binary choice—either an immediate pullout or an indefinite presence in order to ensure the complete and permanent defeat of Islamic State. The leave option was described as risking a return of ISIS and leaving a power vacuum for Russia and Iran to fill.

Such a binary strategy had worked in the past, according to administration sources. That would account for Trump’s long public silence on Syria during the early months of 2018 while then-secretary of state Rex Tillerson and Mattis were articulating detailed arguments for a long-term military commitment.

Another reason the approach had been so successful, however, was that Trump had made such a big issue out of Barack Obama giving the Pentagon a timetable for withdrawal from Afghanistan. As a result, he was hesitant to go public with a similar request for a Syria timetable. As [CNN reported](#), a DoD official who had been briefed on the meeting “rejected that any sort of timeline was discussed.” Furthermore the official asserted that Mattis “was not asked to draw up withdrawal options....” Lieutenant General Kenneth McKenzie, the director of the Joint Chiefs, also [told reporters](#), “the president has actually been very good in not giving us a specific timeline.”

Nevertheless, without referring to a timeline, the White House issued a short statement saying that the U.S. role in Syria was coming to a [“rapid end.”](#)

Mattis and Dunford were consciously exploiting Trump’s defensiveness about a timeline to press ahead with their own strategy unless and until Trump publicly called them on it. That is what finally happened some weeks after Trump’s six month deadline had passed. The claim by Trump advisors that they were taken by surprise was indeed disingenuous. What happened last week was that Trump followed up on the clear policy he had laid down in April.

The Syria withdrawal affair is a dramatic illustration of the fundamental quandary of the

Trump presidency in regard to ending the state of permanent war that previous administrations created. Although a solid majority of Americans want to rein in U.S. military deployments in the Middle East and Africa, Trump's national security team is committed to doing the opposite.

Trump is now well aware that it is virtually impossible to carry out the foreign policy that he wants without advisors who are committed to the same objective. That means that he must find people who have remained outside the system during the permanent war years while being highly critical of its whole ideology and culture. If he can fill key positions with truly dissident figures, the last two years of this term in office could decisively clip the wings of the bureaucrats and generals who have created the permanent war state we find ourselves in today.

*

Note to readers: please click the share buttons above. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

Gareth Porter is an investigative reporter and regular contributor to *The American Conservative*. He is also the author of *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*.

Featured image: President Donald Trump walks with U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Michael Howard, commander of Joint Force Headquarters, at Arlington National Cemetery, May 29, 2017. Behind them are Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis and U.S. Marine Gen. Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. (Flickr/CreativeCommons/DOD photo by U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Brigitte N. Brantley)

The original source of this article is [The American Conservative](#)
Copyright © [Gareth Porter](#), [The American Conservative](#), 2018

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Gareth Porter](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca
www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca