

Trump Unloads on Bolton After Bolton Unloads on Trump

Book Review

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Region: [USA](#)

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John Bolton's [new memoir](#) "The Room Where It Happened," which came out two days ago in spite of White House attempts to block it, is the standard kiss and tell that senior American politicians and officials tend to write to make money for their retirement. There should be no question but that Bolton has done his best to cast the president in as bad a light as possible, which is easily done considering that communicating by twitter and through insults leaves a lot of room for second guessing about motive and intentions.

As required by law, Bolton's book was reviewed for classified information starting in December, and when the process was finished it was started all over again, making clear that the tit for tat over the contents was essentially political and unrelated to national security. Having failed to stop the publication, the Trump Justice Department will now move to take away Bolton's earnings from the book, a tactic that originated back in the 1970s with CIA whistleblower Frank Snepp's "[Decent Interval.](#)" Critics of the security review process have noted that when a book says nice things about the government it is rarely interfered with no matter what classified information it might reveal, while a work that is unfriendly can expect to be hammered and delayed by the state secrets bureaucracy.

Why Donald Trump hired leading neoconservative John Bolton in the first place remains somewhat of a mystery, but the most plausible theory is that the number one GOP donor Sheldon Adelson demanded it. Adelson regards Bolton as something of a protégé and was particularly taken by Bolton's enthusiasm for attacking Iran, something that the Las Vegas casino magnate and the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu both passionately desired.

After months of an apparently difficult tenure as National Security Advisor, John Bolton was finally fired from the White House on September 10, 2019, but the post mortem on why it took so long to remove him continued for some time afterwards, with the punditry and media trying to understand exactly what happened and why. Perhaps the most complete explanation for what occurred came from [President Donald Trump himself](#) shortly after the fact. He said, in some impromptu comments, that his national security advisor had "...made some very big mistakes when he talked about the Libyan model for Kim Jong Un. That was not a good statement to make. You just take a look at what happened with Gadhafi. That was not a good statement to make. And it set us back."

Incredible as it may seem, Trump had a point in that Bolton was clearly suggesting that North Korea get rid of its nuclear weapons in exchange for economic benefits, but it was the wrong example to pick as Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi gave up his weapons and was

then ousted and brutally killed in a rebel uprising that was supported by Washington. The Bolton analogy, which may have been deliberate attempt to sabotage any rapprochement, made impossible any agreement between Kim and Trump as Kim received the message loud and clear that he might suffer the same fate.

Subsequently, Bolton might have been behind media leaks that scuttled Trump's plan to meet with Taliban representatives and that also, acting on behalf of Israel, undercut a presidential suggestion that he might meet with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. Trump summed up his disagreements with Bolton by saying that the National Security Advisor "wasn't getting along" with other administration officials, adding that "Frankly he wanted to do things — not necessarily tougher than me. John's known as a tough guy. He's so tough he got us into Iraq. That's tough. But he's somebody that I actually had a very good relationship with, but he wasn't getting along with people in the administration who I consider very important. And you know John wasn't in line with what we were doing. And actually in some cases he thought it was too tough, what we were doing. Mr. Tough Guy."

Trump's final comment on Bolton was that "I'm sure he'll do whatever he can do to spin it his way," a throw-away line that pretty much predicted the writing of the book. Bolton has many supporters among hardliners in the GOP and the media as well as among democracy promoting progressive Trump haters and it will be interesting to see what damage can be inflicted on the president's reelection campaign.

Pre-publication reviews have focused on the takeaways from the book. The most damaging claim appears to be that Donald Trump asked the Chinese government to buy more agricultural products from the U.S. to help American farmers, which the president described as a key constituency for his reelection. Bolton claims that Trump specifically asked Chinese President Xi Jinping to buy American soybeans and other farm commodities and, as a possible quid pro quo, Trump intervened to reduce some financial penalties imposed on the Chinese telecommunications company ZTE for evading sanctions on Iran and North Korea.

Also concerning China, Bolton asserts that the president encouraged Xi to continue building concentration camps for the Muslim Uighurs, a religious and ethnic minority largely concentrated in the country's Xinjiang region. The context of the alleged comment is not clear, nor is it easy to imagine how the subject even came up, so the claim might be regarded as exaggerated or even apocryphal. Bolton [was not even present](#) when the alleged conversation took place and only learned of it second hand.

Other claims made by Bolton include that Trump didn't know that Britain was a nuclear power and that Finland is not part of Russia. The book also describes in some detail how Trump spent most of his time in White House intelligence briefings presenting his own views instead of listening to what analysts from the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) offices had to say.

That Donald Trump was a poor student and is an intellectual lightweight has been noted by many observers. Combining that with his essential lack of curiosity about the world and its peoples means that he does not know much about foreigners and the places they live in. But it is both condescending and somewhat of a cheap trick by Bolton to pillory him for his ignorance.

The media's vision of the most damaging charge, that Trump colluded with the Chinese, is,

quite frankly ridiculous. Buying American agricultural products is in the interest of both farmers and the U.S. economy. Reducing penalties on a major Chinese company as a sweetener and to mitigate bilateral tensions is called diplomacy. Of course, anything a president does with a foreign country will potentially have an impact when reelection time rolls along, but it would be difficult to suggest that Trump did anything wrong.

The Bolton book [has also been critiqued](#) by some, including the New York Times, as the exposure of “a president who sees his office as an instrument to advance his own personal and political interests over those of the nation.” Bolton writes how “Throughout my West Wing tenure, Trump wanted to do what he wanted to do, based on what he knew and what he saw as his own best personal interests... I am hard-pressed to identify any significant Trump decision during my tenure that wasn’t driven by re-election calculations.”

Trump is, to be sure, a man who has subordinated the dignity of the office he holds to personal ambition, but he differs more in the pervasiveness of his actions than in the substance. Many other presidents have made many of the same calculations as Trump though they have been more restrained and careful about expressing them.

Finally, a number of editors who have read review copies of the book have observed how badly written and organized it is. If anyone is looking for a real indictment of Donald Trump and all his works, they will not find it in the Bolton book. Apart from the new information it provides, which seems little enough, it would appear to be a waste of \$20 to possibly enrich an author who has been promoting and saying “more please” to America’s wars for the past 20 years.

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