

# *The* American Conservative

## **Is Mike Pompeo The Worst Secretary Of State In History?**

*With his laughable attempts at diplomacy and general hawkishness, he's certainly in the runnings for the honor.*

November 5, 2020

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Is Mike Pompeo the worst secretary of state ever? He's been awful, no doubt. However, there are 69 other contenders for that title.

Among modern secretaries, Colin Powell was misused by George W. Bush, who defrauded the country in selling the tragically misbegotten invasion of Iraq. Madeleine Albright, her mindset permanently stuck in Adolf Hitler's world, stands out for her enthusiastic embrace of war for others to fight. Alexander Haig achieved little beyond claiming to be in charge in the wake of the assassination attempt against Ronald Reagan. William Rogers was overshadowed by National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, who eventually took the latter's position.

Going back a bit further, Robert Lansing helped maneuver the U.S. into World War I, one of the dumbest, most counterproductive moves in American history. The earlier one looks, the more circumstances diverge, making any comparative judgment more difficult.

Still, about the best that can be said of Pompeo is that he has not gotten America into any new wars, despite his best efforts. Most often he has played the anti-diplomat, determined to insult, hector, demand, insist, dictate, threaten, harangue, and impose. But never persuade. The results speak for themselves: the administration's record lacks any notable successes that benefit the U.S, the supposed purpose of an "America First" foreign policy. There was a bit of good, a lot of bad, and some real ugly.

A solid good was President Donald Trump's most important diplomatic initiative: his opening with North Korea. Pompeo took over in March 2018, with the first summit already planned. That initiative faltered the following year at the second summit in Hanoi, which was Pompeo's responsibility.

Alas, the secretary lost points by apparently doing nothing to disabuse the president of the belief that Pyongyang was prepared to turn over its entire arsenal with the hope that Washington would look favorably upon its future aspirations. That was never going to happen, especially after the allied double-cross of Libya, which yielded its missiles and nascent nuclear program, and after Trump dumped the nuclear accord with Iran, demanding that Tehran abjectly surrender its independent foreign policy. The North can easily imagine similar mistreatment, by this or a future administration.

Washington has also pursued better relations with India, which is a positive. As elsewhere, however, concern about human rights violations is almost entirely absent from Pompeo's portfolio unless it operates as a weapon against an adversary. The secretary cheerfully holds the coat of allied dictators as they jail, torture, and murder. Such is the case with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has abetted if not aided rising religious persecution.

The Abrahamic accords between Israel and Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates were a tepid good. Improved relations between Arabs and Israelis are useful, though strengthening two authoritarian regimes is not. The Bahraini Sunni monarchy sits atop a Shia population with the backing of the Saudi military, while the Emirates, nicknamed "Little Sparta," by the Pentagon—as if that's a compliment—has used its military to commit murder and mayhem against Yemen in a war of political aggression and economic exploitation. The related negotiations with Sudan have been worse, using an unjust terrorist state designation to force recognition of Israel, which will undermine the democracy that has yet to be fully born after last year's popular revolution.

Examples of bad are far more common. For example, Pompeo has worked to thwart the president's evident desire to exit "endless wars." Nineteen years of nation-building in Afghanistan is enough. The U.S. does not belong in the Syrian civil war. Iraq and its neighbors are capable of and should deal with whatever remains of the Islamic State.

The secretary has played an equally malign role in Europe, undercutting his boss—and, not incidentally, the American people—by working to spend more on, and place more troops in, the continent, even as Trump pushed the Europeans to do more on their own defense. This is an inane strategy: Washington should cut defense welfare to states with the capability to protect themselves and allow them to decide how to proceed.

Much the same policy has played out with America's relationship to South Korea. Japan has escaped most of that pressure. Yet consider the defensive capabilities against China for Japan and the region if Tokyo spent not 1 percent of GDP on its military, but 2 or 3 percent. And why shouldn't it do so, instead of expecting Americans to do the job for it?

The secretary turned human rights into a political weapon, sacrificing any credibility on the issue. He tears up while criticizing Iran but kowtows to the Saudi royals, who are far more brutal killers. He is horrified by the crimes committed by Venezuela's Maduro regime, but spreads love to Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who has punished the slightest criticism, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who is turning Turkey into an autocracy. Pompeo actually introduced a new initiative in support of unalienable rights *with the support of countries like Saudi Arabia* and other assorted tyrannies.

Then there is the ugly. Using sanctions to try starve the people of Syria and Venezuela in order to force their governments to yield to America is not just immoral but ineffective. Both regimes have survived much and are not inclined to surrender.

At least Venezuela is a matter of geographic interest to Washington. Syria has never mattered to U.S. security and Pompeo should have backed the president's effort to bring home all American troops. Today, U.S. and Russian troops are clashing there over the administration's bizarre and

illegal seizure of Syrian oilfields. Also inexplicable is reinforcing six decades of failure by tightening sanctions on Cuba; the private business community there has suffered badly as a result, reducing what was becoming a sharp challenge to the political authorities during the waning days of the Obama administration.

The fixation on Iran, which appears to come more from Pompeo than Trump, can best be explained as turning Mideast policy over to Saudi Arabia and Israel. The result of abandoning the nuclear accord has been nothing short of catastrophic. The Iranians have refused to negotiate. Instead they ramped up nuclear reprocessing, interfered with Gulf tanker traffic, attacked Saudi oil facilities, and attacked U.S. bases and the embassy in Iraq. Far from reestablishing deterrence, as claimed, the secretary was left to whimper and whine that he might have to close America's embassy in Baghdad.

Pompeo has taken the lead in the administration's shameful policy toward Saudi Arabia, aiding it in its war of aggression against impoverished Yemen. That nation has been at war within and without for most of its existence. Riyadh decided to invade to restore a puppet regime to power, turning typical internal discord into a sectarian war in which Tehran was able to bleed the ineffective Saudi armed forces, which were armed and aided by the Pentagon. In this way, the secretary has made the American population into accomplices to war crimes.

Even more foolish geopolitically, Pompeo has matched Albright's retreat to World War II clichés with a stroll back into the Cold War. Russia is an unpleasant actor but doesn't threaten American security. Europe is capable of defending itself. Alas, constantly piling on sanctions without providing an off-ramp ensures continued Russian hostility and a tilt toward China in that burgeoning struggle. How does this make any sense for America?

Finally, Pompeo has been his blundering, maladroit, offensive self in seeking to launch an American-led campaign against the People's Republic of China. Beijing poses a serious challenge, but not primarily a security issue. No one believes that the PRC plans to launch an armada across the Pacific to conquer Hawaii. The issue is Washington's willingness to pay the cost to forever treat Asia-Pacific waters as an American lake.

As for other issues, the U.S. needs work in concert with friendly powers. Pompeo has done his best to drive away potential partners: for instance, the G-7 refused his demand to call COVID-19 the Wuhan Virus and even allies such as South Korea have remained far more measured in their relations with China, determined not to turn their large neighbor into an enemy. In what promises to be a long and complicated relationship, genuine and serious diplomacy, which obviously lies beyond Pompeo's limited capabilities, is required.

On the personal side, he appears to have abused his position for both personal and ideological advantage. For example, so committed to showing his fealty to Riyadh, he declared an "emergency" to thwart congressional opposition and rush munitions to the Saudi military so it could kill more Yemeni civilians. He then sought to impede a departmental investigation, pressuring and firing the inspector general. What prompted his determination to so avidly assist a ruler who is ostentatiously vile, reckless, and even criminal is one of the greatest mysteries of his tenure.

Tragically, Pompeo proved to be one of the greatest obstacles to the best of the president's international agenda. In a speech delivered last year in which he claimed to be implementing the Founders' foreign policy vision, he denigrated diplomacy and its successful fruits, such as opening up both Cuba and Iran to potentially corrosive outside influences, which is the most likely strategy to induce change over the long term. This approach would be more in sync with Trump's desire to deal with countries such as North Korea and Iran.

Indeed, left to his own devices, Pompeo would likely have America at war with Iran and perhaps beyond—Venezuela, China, and/or Russia. His belligerence serves the American people badly. As does his consistent campaign, conscious or not, to thwart the president's brave but incompetent attempts to escape largely braindead practices enforced by what Ben Rhodes termed "the Blob," the foreign policy establishment that dominates the field.

The secretary has forgotten that his job is not to push his personal ideological line. Rather, it is to advance the interests of the American people, with a special emphasis on defending their lives, territory, liberties, constitutional system, and prosperity. In this, he has failed consistently. Maybe he isn't the worst secretary of state in history. But surely he is one of the worst.

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