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The ‘Adults In The Room’ With Trump Weren’t Adults At All

A new book tour by H.R. McMaster shows how little the foreign policy professionals have learned from two decades of endless war.

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When President Donald Trump took office, his aides promised there would always be adults in the room. Especially when it came to foreign policy, learned, stable professionals would ensure responsible and intelligent actions.

Except the adults turned out to be idiots. They fought the president at every turn when he sought to withdraw from endless wars. They insisted that Washington remain allied to the worst of the worst, supporting the vile Saudi regime in its aggressive and murderous war against Yemen. They urged policies that treated Russia as a permanent enemy. They backed American dominance of every existing alliance and relationship, infantilizing America’s friends and maximizing Washington’s obligations.

Now former national security adviser H.R. McMaster has reminded Americans that many members of the infamous Blob, the foreign policy elite, are brain dead. Their thinking about the world ended decades ago. They mouth hypocritical platitudes while seeing everything through an antiquated prism.

For instance, McMaster recently charged that Tehran, a political, economic, and military wreck, has “hegemonic designs.” He made this claim after serving at the center of foreign policymaking in the world’s dominant power which is determined to be the global hegemon in control of every region on earth, essentially imposing the Monroe Doctrine on every continent. Supportive policymakers insist that the U.S. should intervene everywhere while no one else can intervene anywhere. Indeed, in their view America is entitled to meddle at any time for any reason.

Within the administration, McMaster orchestrated American support for Saudi Arabia, which did far more than Tehran to play regional hegemon. The antediluvian royals invaded one neighbor, deployed troops in a second, supported jihadist rebels against a third, kidnapped the prime minister of a fourth, launched a diplomatic/economic offensive against a fifth, and are promoting a civil war in a slightly more distant sixth. Riyadh’s behavior is reckless, dangerous, criminal, and, yes, hegemonic.

But it is in deploying the Munich comparison that McMaster, once thought to be an innovative military thinker, demonstrated that his time in government apparently killed off some of his

once-abundant gray matter. In this he is not alone. Virtually every minor dictator in the most distant and underpopulated lands has been compared to Nazi Germany's Adolf Hitler at least once. If we avert our glance for merely a moment, we are warned, Dictator X in Country Y is likely to launch a campaign of conquest across Continent Z. Or something similar. Thus only American intervention can prevent the onset of a new global dark age.

McMaster has been on a book tour promoting his latest tome with its utterly conventional demand for a harder line against, well, everyone. And why not? After all, surely America has money to burn after running a \$3.1 trillion deficit during the 2020 fiscal year. With the federal debt already over 100 percent of GDP. Another \$2 trillion or more in red ink expected in 2021. And the total "COVID deficit" predicted to run between \$8 trillion and \$16 trillion. But why worry: it's only money!

Anyway McMaster was asked about President Donald Trump's negotiation with Afghanistan. Is it America's "Munich agreement" and "a policy of appeasement with Taliban"? Yes, replied McMaster.

It is hard to believe that McMaster doesn't understand the concept of appeasement or know Munich's circumstances. More likely, he doesn't care about the facts and preferred to take a cheap shot at Trump, always an easy target.

First, appeasement is a time-tested and oft-successful strategy. It usually is better to make a deal than go to war. A little more appeasement before World War I involving Austro-Hungary and Serbia, which armed the gang that assassinated the Hapsburg heir, an obvious *casus belli*, might have forestalled a global conflict that consumed around 20 million lives and ultimately led to the Munich agreement and the far deadlier and more destructive World War II.

Second, on its face, Munich was a sensible attempt at appeasement. It redressed the World War I injustice of treating millions of ethnic Germans as pawns in a global chess game. At the Versailles Treaty conference, the oh-so-moral allies grabbed territorial plunder here, there, and everywhere, while prattling about self-determination. Hitler did not arise in a vacuum; allied avarice and myopia helped bring him to power.

Munich was a tragedy because the allies sought to appease the one person in Europe who could not be satiated. The pact transferred from Czechoslovakia to Germany the Sudetenland, which was taken by Prague from the long-gone Austro-Hungarian Empire against the wishes of its ethnic Germans residents. Berlin won, yet Hitler was irritated that the settlement denied him the war he desired. He invaded Poland the following year. However, Germany was not as well prepared for conflict in 1938 and Hitler might have been removed by his own military, which was contemplating a coup because of his apparent recklessness.

The short lesson of the agreement: the problem was Hitler, not appeasement. Most Europeans probably believed that preserving the continent's peace warranted shifting to Germany territory filled with people who should not have been given to Czechoslovakia in the first place. In the abstract, Britain and France had good reason not to back Prague in a war over what were frankly

ill-gotten gains. Unfortunately, London and Paris didn't understand who and what they were dealing with—but they were not alone in sharing that delusion.

As for Afghanistan, one must hope that McMaster is not confused by the difference between Nazi Germany and the insurgent Taliban. A generation earlier, the Germans demonstrated their ability to wreak continental and even global murder and mayhem. In contrast, the Taliban's motley mix of Islamists and opportunists at most threaten to gain control over additional territory in an impoverished, isolated land, located thousands of miles from America, which never had a strong central government to begin with.

Nevertheless, McMaster declared that “We will pay the price, and we'll be back. We'll have to go back, and at a much higher cost.” Why? Central Asia has no intrinsic value for America. The Taliban want to rule their villages and valleys, not threaten the U.S. at home.

Moreover, Afghanistan has no inherent connection to terrorism; the link was Osama bin Laden, who was initially involved there fighting the Soviets. After the U.S. intervened, he fled to and operated from Pakistan, a nominal American ally. And of course, he now is dead. Al-Qaeda's remnants could operate anywhere, as do many of its spin-offs today. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, located in Yemen, has long been viewed as the most dangerous affiliate.

In any case, the region matters far more to the powers nearby, which have an incentive to promote a reasonably stable if not liberal Afghanistan. They do not want to see the return of terrorism. In fact, Christian Russia, Hindu India, and Shia Iran all have been targeted by Sunni terrorists. Communist China, busy locking up Sunni Uyghurs in reeducation camps, could be next on the terrorists' target list. This gaggle of states has the makings of a good coalition to guard against growth in the Islamic State and revival of al-Qaeda, neither of which is in the Taliban's interest, which would not want to trigger another round of U.S. retaliation.

As for humanitarian considerations, America has spent more than 19 years at war trying to create a liberal, centralized government where none previously existed. That is more than enough commitment of American lives and wealth.

McMaster's strategic judgment is no better than his historical analysis. He complained that Trump's exit plan “renders the war unjust, because we no longer have defined a just end.” It's not clear why he believes leaving makes the conflict unjust. The U.S. got in for good reason, to retaliate against both al-Qaeda and the Taliban for the 9/11 attacks, sending the clear message that attacking America and hosting terrorists that strike America is a very bad idea. Washington foolishly stuck around for another 18-plus years trying to make Afghanistan into a better place, a theoretically moral but highly imprudent objective. And now, years late, an administration is finally trying to stop wasting American lives and wealth.

In the end, McMaster sounds like just all the other policymakers who misled the public over faux progress in Afghanistan year after year. As the *Washington Post* reported in its devastating “Afghanistan Papers” project nearly a year ago: “U.S. officials constantly said they were making progress. They were not, and they knew it.” Yet upon these claims, Washington wasted thousands of lives and trillions of dollars.

That is the true immorality, the shocking injustice, the criminal misconduct.

President Trump has gotten much wrong. But on Afghanistan he is far closer to the truth than the faux adults who surrounded him throughout his time in office. During McMaster's next PR event for his book, he ought to be asked why purported leaders like him have so much trouble confronting their own failures.

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