

The Atlantic

How Lindsey Graham Tries to Keep Trump Hawkish

Conor Friedersdorf

October 4, 2018

Donald Trump rose to power denigrating the Iraq War and promising an “America First” foreign policy. He rarely shows any concern for human rights and is unapologetically transactional in his rhetoric. Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina is among the most hawkish, interventionist members of the Republican Party, believes that protecting human rights can be a good reason for going to war, and makes frequent rhetorical nods to a foreign policy that reflects American values.

“By talking to [President Trump] as much as you do,” Graham was asked at The Atlantic Festival on Wednesday, “do you believe you’re moving him to another position?”

What followed in his conversation with Jeffrey Goldberg, *The Atlantic*’s editor, illuminated how Graham attempts to influence the president, as well as Graham’s arguments for the ongoing presence of U.S. troops in war zones.

The short answer: He tells Trump that he will be repeating the mistakes of either George W. Bush or Barack Obama unless he maintains boots on the ground at numbers between the levels chosen by those two predecessors, while also spending tax dollars on infrastructure in multiple countries.

Here’s the longer answer:

I say, keep doing what Obama did and see if it works out better for you. Pull out of Syria. Be my guest. Take the 2,200 troops that keep us having a say in Syria. See what happens to the Kurds. If you pull the 2,200 troops out, the Kurds are going to be destroyed either by Turkey or Assaad, or isis comes back. And see if anybody will help you in the future.

You’ve got 13,000 troops in Afghanistan, and you’re tired of being there. Pull them out. See what happens when isis comes back along the Afghan/Pakistan border. See what happens when everything we worked for collapses because you wanted to leave. You own it. Now, if you’re willing to leave them in there, I’ll stand behind you. If you’re willing to stay the course in Afghanistan, I’ll give you all the protection I can.

But you’re president; I’m not.

These things really matter. Everybody is telling him that the 13,000 troops in Afghanistan are going to be needed for a while to come. Either listen to your commanders or just follow your political instincts.

The last guy to do that was Barack Obama.

This seems like a plausible way to manipulate Trump: Rather than appeal to substance, tell him Obama used the strategy you want him to reject.

Graham continued:

So here's what I would argue to the president—I do it all the time. Bush: too much. Not thinking it through. Hundreds of thousands. Obama: zero. Somewhere between 100,000 and zero is the right answer.

And what is winning, Mr. President. If you don't talk about the word *winning*, you're wasting your time. Winning in Afghanistan is *not losing*. Winning in Afghanistan is giving a chance for the country to develop slowly but surely, where women have more say, the army and the police get better, you wear down the Taliban so they'll actually want to talk.

Winning is over the arc of time, where terrorism becomes an ember, not a flame. You can bomb them to smithereens, but if you're not willing to build a small schoolhouse in a remote region in Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, or you name the country, Iraq, they'll win. You've got to invest in the lives of others to win this war. Killing will only take you so far. Learn from the mistakes of Bush. Learn from the mistakes of Obama. Listen to smart people. And whatever decision you make, own it.

Now, Graham's account isn't entirely accurate. Troop levels in Afghanistan under Bush were lower than 50,000 at their peak. And Obama would increase troop levels to more than 100,000 circa 2010 before beginning a gradual drawdown that never did get close to zero. (In 2014, Obama ordered the Pentagon to develop options for complete withdrawal after Afghan President Hamid Karzai refused to sign a security agreement with the United States, but by 2015 he reversed himself, arguing that conditions made it imprudent to leave.)

Ultimately, "saying the security situation in Afghanistan remains precarious, Obama announced that instead of dropping the U.S. troop level to 5,500, he will keep it at about 8,400," the Associated Press reported in 2016. "He said his successor can determine the next move." Under Trump, the AP reports, troop levels are about 15,000.

But never mind what Bush and Obama did. Is Graham's favored approach prudent? Should the U.S. leave at least 13,000 troops in Afghanistan indefinitely while building schools in remote areas of the country?

Doug Bandow offers one powerful dissent: "If more than 110,000 U.S. and 30,000 allied troops couldn't achieve victory in 2011," he reasoned, "roughly 15,000 U.S. and 7,000 allied personnel won't win today."

C. J. Chivers provides another:

The governments of Afghanistan and Iraq, each of which the United States spent hundreds of billions of dollars to build and support, are fragile, brutal and uncertain. The nations they struggle to rule harbor large contingents of irregular fighters and terrorists who have been hardened and made savvy, trained by the experience of fighting the American military machine.

Much of the infrastructure the United States built with its citizens' treasure and its troops' labor lies abandoned. Briefly schools or outposts, many are husks, looted and desolate monuments to forgotten plans. Hundreds of thousands of weapons provided to would-be allies have vanished; an innumerable quantity are on markets or in the hands of Washington's enemies. Billions of dollars spent creating security partners also deputized pedophiles, torturers and thieves.

National police or army units that the Pentagon proclaimed essential to their countries' futures have disbanded. The Islamic State has sponsored or encouraged terrorist attacks across much of the world—exactly the species of crime the global “war on terror” was supposed to prevent.

As a fellow skeptic of Graham's position, I regard its failure to grapple with opportunity costs to be among its most glaring flaws. The United States faces any number of potential threats to the lives of its citizens. Our military is on guard against adversaries including Russia, China, and North Korea. Our tax dollars are spent trying to mitigate threats as varied as a viral pandemic, an attack on our power grid, ongoing deaths from opiate overdoses, a catastrophic cyberattack, the eventual certainty of major earthquakes in the Pacific Northwest and California, an attempt to sabotage the water supply of a major city, and other matters of life and death on a massive scale that are too numerous to list.

Graham's preferred course requires a tremendous amount of blood and treasure. Among the most obvious questions it raises is, “Would it be better to refrain from risking that blood and to spend that treasure elsewhere?” And Graham's interventionist streak is not limited to Afghanistan. He favors fighting with Saudi Arabia in Yemen and an indefinite troop presence in Syria and Iraq—and war in Iran and North Korea if they do not accede to U.S. demands about their nuclear programs.

In each case, he argues that American deaths could result if his advice is not taken, but fails to contend with opportunity costs. He raises the possibility that another 9/11 could occur if the U.S. leaves Afghanistan, but never the possibility that, for instance, staying in Afghanistan instead of redirecting that money to efforts to secure fissile material most vulnerable to theft could end with a dirty bomb in New York City.

By spending time with Trump, flattering him at times and appealing to his aversion to anything associated with Obama, Graham may be succeeding in making him more interventionist than he would otherwise be. But until Graham's public arguments are stripped of the sunk cost fallacy and incorporate the opportunity costs of intervention, they should be rejected by observers more clearheaded than the president as unlikely to improve foreign policy or to make Americans any safer.