



Trump and Syria

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Wisdom or capriciousness in removal of troops?

Should he, or should he not?

That is the question burning up pages of editorial copy and burdening the minds of pundits in the wake of President Trump's rather sudden decision to remove American troops from Syria.

After examining both sides of the issue, we were a bit conflicted ourselves as criticism emerged from the left, right, and center. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., one of the president's more fervent supporters of late, termed the decision irresolute and, ee gads, Obama-esque.

Washington Post columnist David Ignatius put Mr. Graham's stinging critique into a more balanced frame of argument. Mr. Ignatius stated that the United States' withdrawal will create a dangerous vacuum in the Middle East — to be filled by whom? Iran? Russia? Turkey? A revived ISIS? Bashar al-Assad? — that will prove inimical to American interests in that volatile region. And to think, Mr. Ignatius implies, the United States was exerting significant influence on the relative cheap — that is, a “small-footprint, low-visibility war” carried out by Special Op forces in conjunction with rock-tough Kurdish militia. The question, equally implied: Was this relatively modest presence all that was necessary to keep these characters at bay?

And yet . . .

And yet, as even Mr. Ignatius admits, that presence would not last in perpetuity. One day, the United States would have to break the hearts of the Kurds by breaking its promise to retain a fighting force capable of protecting that swath of eastern Syria the Kurds wrested from the ghoulish grip of the Islamic State. But here's the rub that Mr. Ignatius acknowledged, though few others of his ilk have: The war against ISIS, or the Islamic State, is all but over. Neither America's manpower nor its generosity is unlimited. The latter holds sway, or should, only when the situation on the ground dictates it should.

Thus, while we grant Mr. Ignatius his points, measured as they are, two considerations intrude on the argument he crafts. The first is purely visceral, a gut-level reaction to the many others who have taken the president to task — i.e., the beltway's “war party,” that rather unholy alliance of neocons and liberal hawks, or, as The National Interest's Doug Bandow itemized them: “ivory-tower thinkers, editorialists promoting perpetual war, wannabe commanders-in-chiefs eager to launch their next democracy crusade, and politicians who collected draft deferments when their lives were on the line . . . but who now see the need for the United States to ‘exercise leadership.’”

“The cacophonous criticism of the president's decision within the beltway,” Mr. Bandow added, “may be the best evidence of wisdom.”

We agree, for we know their kind well, as back in the heady-wine days of the Iraq invasion and “Mission Accomplished,” we subscribed to similar nostrums. Now, not so much, not after 17 years in Afghanistan.

The second consideration comes in the form of vital questions posed recently — and before Mr. Trump declared his intent — by columnist Pat Buchanan: “The question, then, for our times is this: Can the United States pursue a Cold War policy of containment against both of the other great military powers (China and Russia), even as we maintain our Cold War commitments to defend scores of countries around the globe? And, if so, for how long can we continue to do this, and at what cost?”

Thus, if anything, Mr. Trump is to be commended, even if begrudgingly, for a reassessment of our national interests, and where we should direct our blood and treasure. For guts and vision, Spectator USA’s John R. Bradley (see Today’s Quote) likens Mr. Trump’s decision to President Eisenhower’s bold ultimatum to the European powers and Israel to leave the Suez.

We view it simply as recognition that Congress never authorized war in Syria — and had no reason to do so, as permanent war would be an eventual outcome. As no less a military realist as our own Revolutionary War hero, Gen. Daniel Morgan, advised, Mr. Trump appears to be picking his battlefields — and national interests — with a care seemingly beyond his ken. Consider this, as Mr. Bandow does, as the “first practical application of a true ‘America First’ foreign policy.”

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