

VANITY FAIR

“Acerbic, Condescending, Gruff, Demeaning”: Will John Bolton Become Trump’s Warmonger Rasputin, Or Just His Next Mooch?

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“I heard you’re actually the devil incarnate and I wanted to meet you,” Defense Secretary **James Mattis** said as he greeted **John Bolton** at the Pentagon on Thursday. Mattis was joking, of course, but it appeared that he was also trying to downplay speculation that he, and other members of **Donald Trump**’s security and foreign-policy teams, might clash with the president’s new national security adviser—a notorious Bush-era war hawk. Bolton, a former undersecretary of State and ambassador to the U.N., can evince an avuncular, Muppet-like quality, with his overgrown eyebrows and Yosemite Sam mustache. Inside the State Department, however, former colleagues warn that his abrasive personality is matched only by a tactile, nearly algorithmic understanding of the levers of power. It’s a form of wonkery that could prove particularly valuable in his new role, as the fulcrum between various intelligence and diplomatic agencies and the president, himself. “I think he knows the interagency better than anyone in the cabinet, beyond probably the vice president,” **Andrew Bowen**, who worked with Bolton at the American Enterprise Institute, told me. A former U.S. official put it more succinctly: “Bolton is so dangerous because he is good at what he does.”

Bolton’s arrival comes at a critical juncture for the presidency. The recently departed **H.R. McMaster** and **Rex Tillerson** helped provide Mattis with a bulwark against Trump’s worst foreign policy instincts. “We had that period of 14 months where Rex Tillerson was doing his own thing, and McMaster was doing his own thing,” Bowen continued. “There never was any cohesiveness—which I think oftentimes meant that there was not the president’s ambition and agenda was never actually being fully carried out, because there [was] all this competing chaos.” Bolton, however, is a member of a new coalition of administration officials that share the president’s nationalistic and pugilistic ideology. An unrepentant early architect and cheerleader of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, he has been a fierce advocate of ditching the Obama-era Iran nuclear accord, and has previously called for a regime change in North Korea. His appointment, alongside the nomination of the comparably hawkish **Mike Pompeo** at the State Department,

portends the most cohesive approach to U.S. foreign policy since Trump took office. “I think it’s gonna be a much better-run machine,” Bowen said.

While sources I spoke with dismiss the swirling narrative that Bolton will “clean house” upon his arrival at the N.S.C., they do expect him to re-assert its authority, which eroded as McMaster fell out with Trump. “It probably will be playing a much stronger role than it has under McMaster, who didn’t have great rapport with the president, or **[Mike] Flynn**, who flamed out immediately,” **Matthew Waxman**, a Columbia University professor who held various positions in the Bush administration, said. “Bolton is sure to make sure that it has a significant role to play and he’s very skilled at doing that.”

One former U.S. official, who held positions in both the Ronald Reagan and **George W. Bush** administrations, told me that he believes Bolton will effectively enable the president. “One of the main functions of the N.S.C. is to make sure that presidential decisions are implemented by the government, which if you think about it, is not automatic. There are these gigantic bureaucracies and the president is one person,” this person said. “I think where John will be more active is in any situation where he believes that a decision that the president has made is not being implemented, or if information is being held back from the White House. That is where the N.S.C. really needs to be most forceful.”

But Bolton, for all his mastery of the bureaucracy, will be walking into a West Wing unlike any other. As Mattis himself knows, Trumpworld can be an apparatchik’s nightmare, a place where policy is often determined by temperament. “He’s a very skilled, experienced Washington operator but his experience has been in establishment Washington and this is a non-establishment White House,” Waxman said. “What will happen when his skill at managing a traditional Washington bumps up against the untraditional aspects of this White House?”

Bolton has never been known for being a team player. One former high-ranking State Department official recalled Bolton throwing office supplies at them during several arguments. This person described Bolton as “acerbic, condescending, gruff, [and] demeaning when somebody doesn’t agree with him or he doesn’t like your argument.” They added, “I can’t imagine how he is going to moderate that tendency all the time with Trump.” A second former State Department official intimated the same: “He is outspoken, sharp elbowed and not someone you’d describe as a consensus builder or team builder.”

Others were less harsh. “My experience with him is that he doesn’t play bureaucratic games. He is forceful and he will make a very powerful argument,” the former Bush and Reagan official said. “What people need to do is master their brief and make their argument, try to persuade him. I think some of the complaints are coming from people who just got out argued and didn’t like it . . . He’ll just argue the point and try to win.” Or, as Bowen put it to me, “People will either very much like John or they may not very much like him at all.”

Indeed, Bolton’s ability to play nice with the rest of the N.S.C. could make or break his success. “He’ll be very successful as an adviser to the president. He gets a lot of access, fine,” a current State Department staffer explained. “But that only goes so far . . . the wheels of bureaucracy come from convening power.” And Trump’s new, more militaristic inner circle is chock-full of

big personalities. While Tillerson cut an inconspicuous profile and McMaster largely shunned the spotlight, Bolton may clash with Pompeo, U.N. ambassador **Nikki Haley**, and White House senior adviser **Jared Kushner**, who had taken to freelancing in Tillerson and McMaster's shadows. If their personalities mesh, "Bolton, Pompeo, and Haley could turn into a very hawkish triumvirate running the U.S. foreign-policy machine," United Nations expert **Richard Gowan** told me last week. At the same time, "they are likely to be rivals behind the scenes"—especially if Bolton seeks to influence policy-making at the U.N. "Bolton will probably lean on Haley to get tougher on second-order issues at the U.N., like development cooperation, on which she has been pretty pragmatic to date," Gowan suggested. "He knows the U.N. inside out, and while he will have bigger fish to fry in Washington, I am pretty sure that he'll use whatever spare time he has at the weekend to target U.N. initiatives he does not like."

With Pompeo, the dynamics could be even more complicated. "You can't have a strong National Security Adviser and a strong Secretary of State. Naturally, that has never happened in history," Bowen said. Pompeo has a broader mandate, as secretary of state, but is also limited by the weakened department he inherits from Tillerson, which is missing several layers of senior leadership. "The one big question mark will be how quickly does Pompeo fill those positions and is he filling them with his choices or the White House's choices or Bolton choices," Waxman said. "Watch for wrestling over who gets to control those appointments, and Bolton knows those jobs inside and out, having spent a lot of time at the State Department, and he's very savvy about what roles, authorities, and responsibilities different senior positions of the State Department have. I think he'll be watching that organizational map very carefully and looking to influence it." Pompeo, he noted, will "be taking over a building and departments that Bolton knows much better than him."

Then there is Jared Kushner. Tillerson and McMaster were both reported to have tense interactions with the president's son-in-law, whose wide-ranging portfolio—which includes U.S.-Mexico relations and brokering peace between Israel and Palestine—infringed on their territory. Bolton's appointment incited a fresh wave of speculation that Kushner, who was recently stripped of his classified security clearance by Chief of Staff **John Kelly**, will see his laundry list of responsibilities curtailed amid the Cabinet shake-up.

Those that know Bolton dismissed the notion that he would seek to assert his authority over Kushner on foreign policy. "He is a very smart fellow. He will look around the White House and try to figure out who has what role. Who does the president trust?" the former Bush and Reagan official told me. **John Glaser**, the director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, echoed the sentiment. "My sense is that Bolton is temperamental but also understands where Trump's red lines would be," he told me. "One of his qualifications for this job is that he kind of knows how to manage a personality like Trump. If there is a criticism of McMaster and people like Tillerson, they knew less how to manage or manipulate a guy like Trump."

But how long Bolton will be able to manage Trump is a topic of discussion among diplomats. "Bolton will fall out of favor. He's the flavor of the month right now," the current State Department staffer, who has interacted with Bolton, said. "He'll put his foot in his mouth, he can't help it, right? He's not going to be able to change overnight and become very careful and

measured with his comments . . . [Trump] doesn't want anyone stealing the spotlight." One former State official suggested the countdown clock is already ticking. "Some say that he may last as long as **[Anthony] Scaramucci** lasted."