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Trump administration dusts off Cold War playbook to defend Saudi ties

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The Donald Trump administration is dusting off an influential Cold War-era foreign policy playbook to help justify its support for Riyadh.

Writing in *The Wall Street Journal* this week before the Senate voted to advance a bill that would end US support for the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo cited a famed 1979 essay to explain why the Trump team is sticking by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman amid international uproar over the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

In “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” Jeane Kirkpatrick, a one-time Democrat who later switched parties and served as UN ambassador during the Ronald Reagan administration, called on the United States to support conservative autocrats over communist dictatorships during the height of the Cold War, after President Jimmy Carter criticized the human rights records of American allies in Nicaragua and Iran.

“Mr. Carter’s ideological predilections had blinded him to US national-security interests and inhibited him, to borrow a phrase, from putting America first,” Pompeo wrote. “What a timely reminder for critics of President Trump’s pragmatic — and correct — approach to the US-Saudi relationship today.”

It’s not the first time the Trump administration has invoked Kirkpatrick to justify US ties with autocrats.

In a confidential memo last year obtained by Politico, Brian Hook, then the State Department director of policy planning, cited Kirkpatrick to push then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson toward a “realist” foreign policy. Hook, who now heads up the State Department’s counter-Iran policy, wrote that Trump’s so-called “America First” world view reflected declining optimism “that the world can be easily democratized or reshaped simply by expressing American liberal values, or by badgering American allies.”

But colleagues of Kirkpatrick, who died in 2006, say Pompeo’s reading omits key points. The former UN ambassador notably sought to cast off the notion that the United States “was a morally fallen nation” following the Vietnam War and embraced pro-American authoritarian regimes that had a shot at eventual democratic reform.

“She said that authoritarian non-ideological dictatorships often changed into something milder or democratic, as in Taiwan, whereas no communist regime had never evolved in that way,” said Joshua Muravchik, who worked for Kirkpatrick on the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, a

centrist foreign policy group in the 1970s. “She was making a more complicated point here, and Pompeo leaves out parts of it.”

Muravchik says Trump’s praise of Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is difficult to divorce from the US administration’s overall foreign policy.

“Certainly Trump himself is not influenced by her, or else he wouldn’t have the posture he does toward Putin, not to mention toward Kim,” Muravchik said. “I can only imagine what she would have had to say about a president who says he’s fallen in love with Kim Jong Un.”

Experts also question whether Kirkpatrick’s thinking is a fit for a post-Cold War world, where the United States is no longer locked in an ideological battle with Moscow.

“She wrote her famous Dictators and Double Standards article at a time when the US was locked in a bitter fight to the death in the Cold War with the Soviet Union, which was big and bad and nuclear-armed and sprawling all over the world,” said Christopher Preble, a vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Don’t look for Kirkpatrick-themed book clubs to pop up in the halls of the State Department or the White House, either. A former US official who served under the Trump administration told *AI-Monitor* that Pompeo’s reference to Kirkpatrick appears to be searching for ideological moorings for decisions that are being made by the president, not a doctrine that’s guiding the administration.

“As the president cozied up to various autocrats, it just became clear to appointees that standing up for human rights wasn’t a good strategy if they were personally ambitious,” the former official said. “Nobody wanted to be out on a limb and have the president cut that limb off.”

The official said that during a visit to Poland in January, Tillerson — who was still secretary of state — and top aides weren’t initially planning to commemorate International Holocaust Day, which took place during the trip. Tillerson only scheduled an appearance at a Holocaust remembrance event in Warsaw on Jan. 27 after the nation’s parliament passed a law criminalizing mention of Polish crimes in the World War II genocide.

In the end, experts say trying to discern a pattern in the Trump team’s apparent willingness to look the other way over human rights concerns might be a losing proposition.

“The one thing we do know about Donald Trump is he is a transactional person in his business dealings and as president,” Preble said. “It’s very particular, it’s very much on a case-by-case basis, and we risk getting ourselves into trouble if we assume a grand strategic narrative.”