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‘Mad Dog’ Mattis and the Spirit of Trumpism

He exemplifies the dual nature of the new administration

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When it comes to foreign policy, the incoming Trump administration displays a split personality. This was readily apparent during the campaign, when, on the one hand, Donald Trump told us we were lied into the Iraq war, that NATO is “obsolete,” and that we have no business supporting regime change in Syria – and, on the other hand, he declared that he would crush ISIS, that it was a mistake to leave Iraq, and that we have to “rebuild our military,” as if we don’t already spend as much as the top ten defense spenders. It was a combination of “isolationist” rhetoric and belligerent bombast – surely an odd combination (albeit not one without precedent in our history, but we’ll get to that later).

We are seeing this ambiguity play out in the process of the Trump transition, as national security slots are slowly filled. Mike Flynn, a three-star general and former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, exemplifies this Janus-faced persona: in Flynn’s interview with Al Jazeera, interviewer Mehdi Hasan remarked “There’s a dove General Flynn and there’s a hawk General Flynn,” and this applies not only to Trump himself but also to his latest appointee, Gen. James “Mad Dog” Mattis, chosen for Secretary of Defense.

A retired four-star Marine Corps general, former commander of CENTCOM, Mattis commanded the Marines during the invasion of Iraq, and also served as Supreme Allied Commander of NATO (2007-09). Mattis is idolized by many and feared by some. The Cato Institute’s Christopher Preble, a staunch anti-interventionist, sees him as a restraining influence on our new commander-in-chief: “[W]ithin the Trump administration he could be a critical voice of caution with respect to the wisdom or folly of the use of force going forward.” Preble cites Mattis as saying:

> “As I look back over these wars since World War II – Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, dare I say Afghanistan, stick Somalia in there somewhere, other expeditions – when America goes to war with murky political end states, then you end up in a situation where you are trying to do something right, but you’re not sure if it’s the right thing. And suddenly you end up

> with a situation where the American people say 'what are we doing here?' And 'what kind of people are we that we do this sort of thing?'
>
> "If you don't know what it is that you're going to achieve, then don't be surprised that eventually you've wasted treasure, lives, and the moral authority of the United States."

According to several reports, Gen. Mattis's favorite reprise to those who advocate some form of military intervention is "And then what?"

It turns out that Mattis opposed – or, at least, privately questioned – the Iraq war, as a new report in The Intercept has it.

But neither is Mattis a peacenik, or even an America First-type "isolationist." They don't call him "Mad Dog" for nothing.

This report in *Politico* characterizes him as holding a longstanding "grudge" against Iran:

> "Mattis has embraced the Marine Corps' longstanding grievance against Iran, one that goes back to the 1980s.
>
> "In fact, Mattis' anti-Iran animus is so intense that it led President Barack Obama to replace him as Centcom commander. It was a move that roiled Mattis admirers, seeding claims that the president didn't like 'independent-minded generals who speak candidly to their civilian leaders.' But Mattis' Iran antagonism also concerns many of the Pentagon's most senior officers, who disagree with his assessment and openly worry whether his Iran views are based on a sober analysis or whether he's simply reflecting a 30-plus-year-old hatred of the Islamic Republic that is unique to his service. It's a situation that could lead to disagreement within the Pentagon over the next four years – but also, senior Pentagon officials fear, to war.
>
> "'It's in his blood,' one senior Marine officer told me. 'It's almost like he wants to get even with them.'"

The source of this decades-long grudge is, of course, the 1983 Beirut bombing by an Iranian-trained operative that killed 241 Americans: 220 of those killed were Marines. Iranian actions in the Gulf in the 1980s, as well as in post-invasion Iraq, added to the animus.

If it comes to a crisis in which the possibility of war with Iran is raised, will Gen. Mattis, as Defense Secretary, have the objectivity to ask "And then what?"

We don't know the answer to that question, just as we don't know what the response of Gen. Flynn, now Trump's National Security Advisor, will be, because Flynn, too, has it in for Tehran, which he sees as part of a global anti-American alliance that includes countries as widely separated as North Korea and Venezuela. Yes, really.

There are, roughly, three factions within the US military and national security bureaucracy, each with their own view of the principal threat to the US at the present moment. Under the Obama administration, the dominant faction has seen the Russians as the number one worry for US

policymakers. Russia, after all, is armed with nuclear weapons, and the Russophobes have been pretty active lately, pointing to Crimea, Ukraine, and Putin's supposedly threatening moves along the Polish and Baltic fronts. And what with the recent accusations that Moscow is "interfering" in our elections, with the Clinton campaign going so far as to malign Trump as a Russian "puppet" – the kind of charge not heard even during the most frigid years of the cold war – this position takes on a political as well as a geo-strategic coloration.

The other view is that Iran is the main danger, while a third faction holds that "VEOs" – violent extremist organizations, such as ISIS and al-Qaeda – are the biggest threat. It seems, at least from what I've observed over the past year or so, that Trump himself holds to this latter view, while Mattis adheres to the former, and Flynn is somewhere in between.

Trump's campaign slogan, "America First," gives us a broad hint of what to expect of his foreign policy – and a way to interpret his own statements, as well as his appointments. So let's go back and look at what the old America First Committee – the biggest peace movement in American history – stood for.

Organized by a group of conservative businessmen to oppose US entry into World War II, and joined by nearly a million rank-and-file members, their four-point program read as follows;

> "1) The United States must build an impregnable defense for America.
>
> "2) No foreign power, nor group of powers, can successfully attack a prepared America.
>
> "3) American democracy can be preserved only by keeping out of the European war.
>
> 4) 'Aid short of war' weakens national defense at home and threatens to involve America in war abroad."

Note the order: the notion of military preparedness comes first and second, with opposition to entry into the European war third and fourth. The leader of the AFC was Gen. Robert E. Wood, with a history of military service nearly as long and distinguished as that of Gen. Mattis. He was certainly no pacifist. The AFC routinely billed its rallies as "Peace and Preparedness Mass Meetings," and the same emphasis on a strong military came across in the public statements of its leaders and the Committee's publications.

The original America Firsters lost out. The current ones aren't replicas of the originals, but they come out of that tradition, whether they know it or not. It is an ambiguous legacy, one with both Jacksonian and Jeffersonian roots, to utilize Walter Russell Meade's categories of foreign policy thought: how it plays out in the context of the twenty-first century is subject to a number of factors, some of them unknowable.

What all this means for the future is by no means certain: however, it is far better than what we have come to expect from the liberal internationalists. If we were anticipating their reign, under a restored Clinton regime, we would know for sure what to expect: war on every front.