

Leaving Syria: President Trump's Withdrawal

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"The President announced an apparently impulsive decision that shook the world, showed little sign of nuanced consideration, confounded top advisers and by the end of the day left Washington in chaos and confusion." So goes a typical contribution from CNN, this time [by](#) Stephen Collinson, pooh-poohing President Donald Trump's decision to pull out some 2,000 US troops based in Syria.

Trump had, whether intentionally or otherwise, touched a sentiment that has seethed underneath the US character at stages of the imperium's muddled history. "Torn between nostalgia for a pristine past and yearning for a perfect future," [scribbled](#) that self-important sage and practitioner of US foreign relations, Henry Kissinger, "American thought has oscillated between isolationism and commitment."

Isolationism has become a pejorative used to scold and denigrate any movement that supposedly moves the US imperial machine away from its policing role. Cheered on from the international relations galleries, the US as an international sergeant has hardly bettered the world, often finding its clay feet in countries it needlessly deployed forces to. (It's all in the name of national security, of course.) Nor can it ever have been said to be *truly* isolationist in any strict sense.

Between the War of 1812 against Great Britain and the Spanish-American War of 1898, the US maintained a posture of intervention, interference and influence at the regional level, thus designating it an assertive "hemispheric" power. "Security," [suggested](#) historian John Lewis Gaddis, "could best be assured... by making certain that no other great power gained sovereignty within geographic proximity of the United States."

It also proved a violation of that keen injunction made by the all too intelligent President John Quincy Adams in his July 4th [address](#) in 1821, one that still sums up the US mission in all its doomed sanctimonious glamour. "Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will be her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be." But be wary of going abroad "in search of monsters to destroy"; to do so might make the US "dictatress of the world" while no longer being "the ruler of her own spirit".

Trumpland is a tense, manic place, one where chiding allies and high-fiving authoritarian figures might be permissible; but it is also one that eschews the stifling nature of relationships that entangle. Alliances, like love affairs, can cloy after awhile. Accusations of infidelity and poor bedroom performance are bound to follow.

Such an approach is bound to leave powers collaborating with Washington in the lurch, a point exemplified by the latest Syria announcement. "Does the USA," [tweeted](#) Trump on

Thursday, “want to be the Policeman of the Middle East, getting NOTHING but spending precious lives and trillions of dollars protecting others who, in almost all cases, do not appreciate what we are doing? Do we want to be there forever? Time for others to finally fight...”

For Trump, no one should have raised an eyebrow, or had a complaint. “Getting out of Syria was no surprise. I’ve been campaigning on it for years, and six months now, when I very publicly wanted to do it, I agreed to stay longer.” In what was a classic deferral of authority in the Syrian campaign, a backhanded admission of sorts, [he noted](#) how “Russia, Iran, Syria & others are the local enemy of ISIS.” Why do their blood shedding work? “Time to come home & rebuild.”

Where Trump [reverts](#) to full throttle idiosyncrasy (his critics would term it immodest derangement) is his novel assessment of attitudes of those three states at imminent US withdrawal. “Russia, Iran, Syria & many others are not happy about the US leaving, despite what the Fake News says, because now they will have to fight ISIS and others, who they hate, without us.” The focus, rather, was on the US “building by far the most powerful military in the world. ISIS hits us they are doomed!”

To round off the announcement, one of the last stalwarts resisting the fever of resignation and sacking that has afflicted the administration, announced his departure. US Defence Secretary General Jim Mattis added his name to a pre-Christmas evacuation party that has made the Trump tenure one of the most eventful in US history. His view on leaving remained that of the more orthodox defenders of the US imperium, with its umbrella of “alliances”.

“While the US remains the indispensable nation in the free world,” he banally enunciated in his [resignation letter](#), “we cannot protect our interests or serve that role effectively without maintaining strong alliances and showing respect to those allies.”

Other politicians keen to keep the US brand in foreign military theatres were also dismayed at the move. House Democrat leader Nancy Pelosi [was](#) “shaken by the news because of the patriot that Secretary Mattis is.” The general had proven to be “a comfort to many of us as a voice of stability in the Trump administration.”

Senator Lindsay Graham (R-S.C.), having argued that the US troops stationed in Syria were “vital to our national security interests” (he never coherently articulated how) seemed [personally stung](#) by the announcement. “I’m going to give you an honest evaluation. I am willing to support a Democrat if he followed sound military advice. I’m willing to fight a Republican if you don’t.”

After reading Mattis’ resignation letter, Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) [felt](#) that the US was “headed towards a series of grave policy errors which will endanger our nation, damage our alliances & empower our adversaries.” For Rubio and his extensively spread ilk in the foreign interventionist complex, Adams’ warning of 1821, given an awkward Trump twist in 2018, is not just history but another, very distant country. Empire is its own global and lengthy commitment; to withdraw from any theatre is an admission that it is running out of gas and giving cheer to rivals.

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