

TRUMP HEADS FOR THE DOOR IN SYRIA AND AFGHANISTAN, AND CAN'T FIND IT

War by radical Islamist terrorists against the United States began long before 9/11 and will continue long after. You can like it or not, but it is reality. Donald Trump didn't like it, and acted like it wasn't true. He opposed "endless wars" in the Middle East but had no coherent plan for what followed withdrawing US forces and effectively abandoning key regional allies as the withdrawal unfolded. Trump liked to say, wrongly, it was all "thousands of miles away." By contrast, during my time at the White House I tried to operate in reality, with mixed success.

Syria: Lawrence of Arabia, Call Your Office

After our April retaliation for Assad's chemical-weapons attack on Douma, Syria reemerged indirectly, through Turkey's incarceration of Pastor Andrew Brunson. An apolitical evangelical preacher, he and his family had lived and worked in Turkey for two decades before his arrest in 2016 after a failed military coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Brunson was a bargaining chip, cynically charged as conspiring with followers of Fethullah Gulen, an Islamic teacher living in America, once an Erdogan ally but now an enemy obsessively denounced as a terrorist. Just after Trump's return from Helsinki, Erdogan called to follow up on their brief encounter at NATO (and later phone call) about Brunson and his "relationship" to Gulen. Erdogan also raised another favorite subject, frequently discussed with Trump: the conviction of Mehmet Atilla, a senior official of the state-run Turkish bank Halkbank, for financial fraud stemming from massive violations of our Iran sanctions.¹ This ongoing criminal investigation threatened Erdogan himself because of allegations he and his family used Halkbank for personal purposes, facilitated further when his son-in-law became Turkey's Finance Minister.² To Erdogan, Gulen and his "movement" were responsible for the Halkbank charges, so it was all part of a conspiracy against him, not to mention against his family's growing wealth. He wanted the Halkbank case dropped, unlikely now that US prosecutors had their hooks sunk deep into the bank's fraudulent operations. Finally, Erdogan fretted about pending legislation in Congress that would halt the sale of F-35s to Turkey because Ankara was purchasing Russia's S-400 air defense system. If consummated, that purchase would also trigger mandatory sanctions against Turkey under a 2017 anti-Russia sanctions statute. Erdogan had a lot to worry about.

What Trump wanted, however, was very limited: when would Brunson be released to return to America, which he thought Erdogan had pledged? Erdogan said only that the Turkish judicial process was continuing, and Brunson was no longer imprisoned, but under house arrest in Izmir, Turkey. Trump replied that he thought that was very unhelpful, because he had expected to hear Erdogan tell him that Brunson, who was just a local minister, was coming home. Trump stressed his friendship with Erdogan, but implied it would be impossible even for him to fix the hard issues facing the US-Turkey relationship unless Brunson returned to the US. Trump was genuinely agitated. After a riff on Tillerson, and puzzled expressions about Gulen (which Trump claimed was the first time he had heard about it), he said incredulously (and inaccurately), that Erdogan was telling him that Brunson wouldn't be coming home. That was why no one would do business with Erdogan, Trump complained, especially because America's entire Christian community was upset about this one pastor; they were going crazy. Erdogan answered that the Moslem community in Turkey was going crazy, but Trump interrupted to say they were going crazy all over the world, which they were free to do. If possible, the conversation went downhill thereafter.

Trump had finally found someone he relished sanctioning, saying "large sanctions" would ensue if Brunson wasn't returned to the US. On August 2, Treasury sanctioned Turkey's Justice and Interior Ministers,³ and two days later, Turkey sanctioned their counterparts, Sessions and Nielsen, in response.⁴ Although we had discussed these measures with Trump, he told me later that day he thought it was insulting to Turkey to sanction Cabinet officials.

Instead, he wanted to double the existing steel tariffs on Turkey to 50 percent, which appalled the economic team. Trump had imposed worldwide steel and aluminum tariffs on national-security grounds in March 2018, under the authority of section 232 of the 1962 Trade Expansion Act, a little-known statute that found great favor in Trump trade policy. The “national security” grounds were gauzy at best; the 232 tariffs were classically protectionist. To use them now for political leverage to obtain Brunson’s release violated any known statutory rationale, however worthy the cause. Trump, of course, sensed no one was going to challenge him in these circumstances. Away we went.

The Turks, worried about escalating problems with America, wanted a way out, or so we thought, trying to wrap an exchange for Brunson into the Halkbank criminal investigation. This was at best unseemly, but Trump wanted Brunson out, so Pompeo and Mnuchin negotiated with their counterparts (Mnuchin because Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control was also looking into Halkbank).⁵ In three-way conversations, Mnuchin, Pompeo, and I agreed nothing would be done without full agreement from the Justice Department prosecutors in the Southern District of New York, where the case, involving over \$20 billion in Iran sanctions violations, was pending. (In my days at the Justice Department, we called the Southern District the “Sovereign District of New York,” because it so often resisted control by “Main Justice,” let alone by the White House.) Several times, Mnuchin was exuberant he had reached a deal with Turkey’s Finance Minister. This was typical: Whether Mnuchin was negotiating with Turkish fraudsters or Chinese trade mandarins, a deal was always in sight. In each case, the deal fell apart when Justice tanked it, which was why trying this route to get Brunson’s release was never going to work. Pompeo said, “The Turks just can’t get out of their own way,” but it was in fact Justice prosecutors who rightly rejected deals worth next to nothing from the US government’s perspective. In the meantime, Turkey’s currency continued to depreciate rapidly, and its stock market wasn’t doing much better.

We had a problem with multiple negotiators on both sides. Haley was conducting conversations with Turkey’s UN Ambassador, which the Turks said they didn’t understand. Neither did we. Pompeo said grimly he would resolve this problem by telling Haley to stop making unauthorized contacts with the Turks, confusing further what was already confused enough. Fortunately, this time it worked. Diplomatic efforts, however, produced nothing on Brunson. Trump allowed the negotiations to continue, but his instinct on Erdogan proved correct: only economic and political pressure would get Brunson released, and here at least Trump had no problem applying it despite Mnuchin’s happy talk. Erdogan went almost instantly from being one of Trump’s best international buddies to being a target of vehement hostility. It kept my hopes alive that Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un, or others would, in due course, inevitably show Trump their true colors, and we could at that moment reconnect our errant policies to reality. Also possible, of course, was Trump’s returning again to “best buddy” mode, which did in fact happen here just a few months later. Ironically, although the media painted Trump as viscerally anti-Muslim, he never grasped—despite repeated efforts by key allied leaders in Europe and the Middle East and his own advisors to explain it—that Erdogan was himself a radical Islamicist. He was busy transforming Turkey from Kemal Ataturk’s secular state into an Islamicist state. He supported the Muslim Brotherhood and other radicals across the Middle East, financing both Hamas and Hezbollah, not to mention being intensely hostile toward Israel, and he helped Iran to evade US sanctions. It never seemed to get through.

In the meantime, Trump tired of Turkish delays and obfuscation, and on August 10, dubious legal authority notwithstanding, he ordered Turkey’s steel tariffs doubled to 50 percent and the aluminum tariffs doubled to 20 percent, probably the first time in history tariffs were raised by tweet:

I have just authorized a doubling of Tariffs on Steel and Aluminum with respect to Turkey as their currency, the Turkish Lira, slides rapidly downward against our very strong Dollar! Aluminum will now be 20% and Steel 50%. Our relations with Turkey are not good at this time!

Turkey retaliated with its own tariffs, and Trump responded by requesting more sanctions. Mnuchin tried to slow-roll Trump on sanctions, which I thought would only frustrate him further. Then the Vice President suggested Jared Kushner call Turkey’s Finance Minister, since they were both sons-in-law of their respective countries’ leaders. Really, what could go wrong? I briefed Pompeo and Mnuchin on this new “son-in-law channel,” and they both exploded, Mnuchin because the Turkish son-in-law was Finance Minister, his counterpart, and Pompeo because this was one more example of Kushner’s doing international negotiations he shouldn’t have been doing (along with the never-quite-ready Middle East peace plan). I always enjoyed bringing good news. Trump and Kushner were flying to a political fund-raiser in the Hamptons where Mnuchin had already arrived, and Kushner called me later to say Mnuchin had “calmed down.” Kushner also said he had told the Turkish son-in-law he was calling in his “personal”

capacity as a matter of “friendship” and in no way was signaling “weakness” to the Turks. I doubted the Turks believed any of that.

On August 20, Trump called me in Israel about a shooting that morning near the US embassy in Ankara. I had already checked the incident out, finding it to be a local criminal matter, unrelated to the US. Nonetheless, Trump wondered if we should close the embassy, thereby increasing the heat regarding Brunson, and perhaps do something else, like canceling Turkey’s F-35 contract. I called Pompeo and others to fill them in and asked the NSC staff traveling with me to consider what options might be available. Pompeo thought we should declare Turkey’s Ambassador persona non grata and directed State’s lawyers to contact the White House Counsel to confer further. These steps were unorthodox, but we had spent considerable effort on Brunson and still not secured his release. In a few days, however, Trump reversed course, deciding against doing anything on our embassy or Turkey’s Ambassador, instead returning to the idea of more sanctions. “You have it on Turkey,” he said to me, meaning, basically, figure out what to do. He reaffirmed this view a few days later, saying, “Hit ’em, finish ’em. You got it,” and he told Merkel in a phone call that Erdogan was being very obtuse on the Brunson issue, saying we would be imposing substantial sanctions in the next few days. The Qataris, who were extending Turkey a massive financial lifeline,⁶ also volunteered to help on Brunson, but it was hard to see their effort having any success.

In fact, there was very little progress diplomatically, even as the effects of sanctions and the obvious split with the United States over Brunson and other issues (such as buying Russia’s S-400 air defense system) continued to wreak havoc across Turkey’s economy. Turkey, urgently needing more foreign direct investment, was rapidly moving in the opposite direction, which eventually affected its decision-making. Its judicial system ground its way to yet another hearing on Friday, October 12, in Izmir, where Brunson had been under house arrest since July. With strong indications the court was working toward releasing him, the Defense Department prepared to stage a plane in Germany in case it was needed to retrieve Brunson and his family. Bizarrely, the court *convicted* Brunson of espionage and related crimes (which was ridiculous), sentenced him to five years in jail, and then decided because of time served and other mitigating factors, he was free to go. This outcome showed that the political fix was in: Erdogan’s claim Brunson was a spy had been “vindicated” for his domestic political purposes, but Brunson went free.⁷

At 9:35 a.m., I called Trump, who was as usual still in the Residence, and said we were 95 percent certain Brunson was out. Trump was ecstatic, immediately tweeting away, mixed in with a tweet about why Ivanka would be a great UN Ambassador. He wanted Brunson brought immediately to the White House, not stopping at the US medical facility at Landstuhl, Germany, for medical observation and care if necessary. Delays in getting the Pentagon plane to Izmir meant Brunson had to overnight in Germany anyway. In turn, that meant his visit to the White House would be Saturday afternoon, when North Carolina members of Congress, his home state, and additional family and friends would attend. After seeing the White House physician just to ensure they were ready for the wild scene about to unfold, Brunson and his wife walked to the West Wing. I spoke to them briefly, surprised to hear that Brunson had followed me for a long time and almost always agreed with me. The Brunsons went to the Residence to meet Trump and then walked with him along the colonnade to the Oval Office, where those assembled greeted them with cheers. The press mob entered as the pastor and the President talked. At the end, Brunson knelt next to Trump’s chair, put his arm on Trump’s shoulder, and prayed for him, which, needless to say, was the photo du jour. So the Brunson matter ended, but bilateral relations with Turkey were at their lowest ebb ever.

Before his release, however, conditions in Syria were already deteriorating. We worried in September that Assad was planning to savage Idlib Governorate,⁸ long an opposition stronghold in northwestern Syria. It was now home to hundreds of thousands of internally displaced Syrians, mixed with radical terrorists, as well as a Turkish military presence intended to deter any Assad attack. Russia and Iran would almost certainly assist Assad, producing bloodshed and chaos, and launching massive refugee flows from Syria into Turkey. Along with legitimate refugees, thousands of terrorists would escape, many of whom would head to Europe, their preferred destination. I was particularly worried Assad might again use chemical weapons, and I pushed urgently for the Defense Department to think about a possible military response (hopefully again with Britain and France) in case it happened. I didn’t want to be unprepared, as in April. If required, retaliation should not again just aim at degrading Syria’s chemical-weapons capability but at permanently altering Assad’s proclivity to use it. This time, Mattis freed the Joint Chiefs to do what they should do; there was extensive advance planning, based on alternative assumptions, limitations (e.g., rigorously avoiding the risk of civilian casualties), and objectives. Unlike in April, I felt that if worse came to worst, we were ready to present real options for Trump to choose from.

In the meantime, Israel wasn’t waiting around, repeatedly striking Iranian shipments of weapons and supplies that could be threatening.⁹ Jerusalem had its own communications with Moscow, because Netanyahu was not after Russian targets or personnel, only Iranians and terrorists. Russia’s real problem was its Syrian allies, who shot down

a Russian surveillance plane in mid-September,¹⁰ which also prompted Moscow to turn over elements of its S-300 air defense system to the Syrians, troubling Israel greatly.¹¹

In Iraq, on Saturday, September 8, Shia militia groups, undoubtedly supplied by Iran, attacked Embassy Baghdad and our Basra consulate, and Iran launched missiles against targets near Irbil in Kurdish Iraq.¹² Coming days before the anniversary of 9/11, and with the 2012 assault on our Benghazi diplomatic compound on our minds, we needed to think strategically about our response. We did not. Kelly told me that, after a campaign event, Trump “unleashed” to him yet again on wanting out of the Middle East entirely. Dead Americans in Iraq, tragic in themselves, might accelerate withdrawal, to our long-term detriment, and that of Israel and our Arab allies, if we didn’t think this through carefully. By Monday, however, our “response” was down to a possible statement condemning Iran’s role in the attacks. Mattis opposed even that, still arguing we weren’t absolutely sure the Shia militia groups were tied to Iran, which defied credulity. Our indecision continued until Tuesday, when Mattis precipitated an Oval Office meeting on this one-paragraph statement, with Trump, Pence, Mattis, Pompeo, Kelly, and me. It was now so late few would notice it, whatever it said. This was Mattis obstructionism at work: no kinetic response, and perhaps not even a press release responding to attacks on US diplomatic personnel and facilities. What lesson did Iran and the militias draw from our complete passivity?

Predictably, there were renewed threats by Shia militia groups within weeks, and two more rocket attacks on the Basra consulate. Pompeo decided almost immediately to close the consulate (which employed over a thousand people, including government employees and contractors) to avoid a Benghazi-like catastrophe. This time, even Mattis could not deny the Iran connection. Betraying no sense of irony, however, and still opposing any kinetic action in response, he worried that shuttering the consulate would signal we were retreating from Iraq. Nonetheless, on September 28, Pompeo announced the consulate’s closure.¹³ When we come to the events of summer 2019, and the shooting down of US drones and other belligerent Iranian acts in the region, remember well these Administration failures to respond to the provocations one year earlier.

Shortly thereafter, Trump flipped again on Erdogan and Turkey. With the Brunson matter now six weeks behind us, the two leaders met bilaterally on December 1 at the Buenos Aires G20 summit, largely discussing Halkbank. Erdogan provided a memo by the law firm representing Halkbank, which Trump did nothing more than flip through before declaring he believed Halkbank was totally innocent of violating US Iran sanctions. Trump asked whether we could reach Acting US Attorney General Matt Whitaker, which I sidestepped. Trump then told Erdogan he would take care of things, explaining that the Southern District prosecutors were not his people, but were Obama people, a problem that would be fixed when they were replaced by his people.

Of course, this was all nonsense, since the prosecutors were career Justice Department employees, who would have proceeded the same way if the Halkbank investigation started in the eighth year of Trump’s presidency rather than the eighth year of Obama’s. It was as though Trump was trying to show he had as much arbitrary authority as Erdogan, who had said twenty years earlier as mayor of Istanbul, “Democracy is like a streetcar. You ride it to the stop you want, and then you get off.”¹⁴ Trump rolled on, claiming he didn’t want anything bad to happen to Erdogan or Turkey, and that he would work very hard on the issue. Erdogan also complained about Kurdish forces in Syria (which Trump didn’t address) and then raised Fethullah Gulen, asking yet again that he be extradited to Turkey. Trump hypothesized that Gulen would last for only one day if he were returned to Turkey. The Turks laughed but said Gulen needn’t worry, since Turkey had no death penalty. Fortunately, the bilateral ended shortly thereafter. Nothing good was going to come of this renewed bromance with yet another authoritarian foreign leader.

In fact, the Europeans had already shifted attention from the risks of an Assad assault into Idlib Governorate to concern about a Turkish attack in northeastern Syria, the triangular region east of the Euphrates River, south of Turkey, and west of Iraq. Largely under Syrian Opposition control, and dominated by Kurdish fighters, several thousand US and allied troops were deployed there to assist the continuing offensive against ISIS’s territorial caliphate. Begun under Obama, whose misguided policies in Iraq contributed heavily to the emergence of ISIS and its caliphate to begin with, the offensive was finally nearing success. It was close to eliminating ISIS’s territorial holdings in western Iraq and eastern Syria, although not eliminating ISIS itself, which still held the allegiance of thousands of fighters and terrorists living in and roaming through Iraq and Syria but not controlling any defined territory.

Erdogan was purportedly interested in destroying the caliphate, but his real enemy was the Kurds, who, he believed with some justification, were allied to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK, in Turkey, which the US had long considered a terrorist group. Why we were affiliated with one terrorist group in order to destroy another stemmed from Obama’s failure to see that Iran was a much more serious threat, now and in the future. Many parties to this conflict opposed ISIS, including Iran, its terrorist proxy Hezbollah, and its near-satellite Syria. Tehran, however, unlike Obama, was also focusing on the next war, the one after ISIS was defeated. As the ISIS caliphate

shrank, Iran was expanding its span of control in the region, leaving the US with its awkward squad of allies. That said, America had long supported Kurdish efforts for greater autonomy or even independence from Iraq, and a Kurdish state would require border adjustments for existing states in the neighborhood. It was complicated, but what was not complicated was the strong US sense of loyalty to Kurds who had fought with us against ISIS, and fear that abandoning them was not only disloyal but would have severely adverse consequences worldwide for any future effort to recruit allies who might later be seen as expendable.

In the meantime, there was turmoil at the Pentagon. On Friday, December 7, at our weekly breakfast, Mattis said somberly to Pompeo and me, “You gentlemen have more political capital than I do now,” which sounded ominous. Mark Milley’s nomination to succeed Dunford as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs would be announced the next day, before the Army-Navy game, but we knew it was coming. Milley, then Army Chief of Staff, had impressed Trump and won the job on his own. Mattis had tried to force his preferred candidate on Trump, but many Trump supporters believed that the last thing he needed was a Mattis clone as Chairman. By pushing prematurely, perhaps because Mattis knew he would be leaving well before Dunford’s term expired on September 30, 2019, Mattis had hurt his own cause. At our next Ward Room breakfast, Thursday, December 13, the mood was decidedly unhappy for several reasons, but largely because we all felt, silently to be sure, Mattis was coming to the end of his ride. It didn’t bother me that Mattis’s obstructionism would be leaving with him, but his departure was part of a problematic, almost inevitable pattern. None of the three prior Republican Administrations in which I served had seen anything approaching this extent and manner of senior-level turnover.

On December 14, Trump and Erdogan spoke by phone. I briefed Trump beforehand on the situation in Syria, and he said, “We should get the hell out of there,” which I feared he would also say directly to Erdogan. Trump started by saying we were getting very close to a resolution on Halkbank. He had just spoken to Mnuchin and Pompeo, and said we would be dealing with Erdogan’s great son-in-law (Turkey’s Finance Minister) to get it off his shoulders. Erdogan was very grateful, speaking in English no less. Then he switched to Syria. He said Trump knew Turkey’s expectations regarding the YPG (a Syrian Kurdish militia, part of the Opposition Syrian Defense Forces) and the FETO (Gülenist) terrorist network, which Erdogan characterized as threats to Turkish national security which were poisoning bilateral relations between Washington and Ankara. Nonetheless, whined Erdogan, contrary to fact, America was continuing to train YPG forces, including up to 30–40,000 new recruits. He complained of the discrepancy between Trump’s political will and US military activities on the ground, which were causing questions in his mind. Turkey, said Erdogan, wanted to get rid of ISIS and the PKK, although, in my view, by “PKK” he was really referring to Kurdish fighters generally.

Trump said he was ready to leave Syria if Turkey wanted to handle the rest of ISIS; Turkey could do the rest and we would just get out. Erdogan promised his word on that point, but said his forces needed logistical support. Then came the painful part. Trump said he would ask me (I was listening in to the call, as was customary) to immediately work on a plan for US withdrawal, with Turkey taking over the fight against ISIS. He said I should work it out quietly but that we were leaving because ISIS is finished. Trump asked if I could speak, which I did, saying I had heard his instructions. As the call came to an end after further discussion on Halkbank, Trump said Erdogan should work with me on the military (telling me to do a good job) and Mnuchin on Halkbank. Erdogan thanked Trump and called him a very practical leader. Shortly thereafter, Trump said we should craft a statement that we had won the fight against ISIS, we had completed our mission in Syria, and we were now getting out.¹⁵ There was little doubt in my mind that Trump had seized on withdrawing from Syria as another campaign promise, like Afghanistan, he was determined to say he had kept. I called Mattis shortly thereafter to brief him; needless to say, he was not thrilled.

This was a personal crisis for me. I felt that withdrawing from Syria was a huge mistake, because of both the continuing global threat of ISIS and the fact that Iran’s substantial influence would undoubtedly grow. I had argued to Pompeo and Mattis as far back as June that we should end our piecemeal policy in Syria, looking at one province or area at a time (e.g., Manbij, Idlib, the southwest exclusion zone, etc.), and focus on the big picture. With most of the ISIS territorial caliphate gone (although the ISIS threat itself was far from eliminated), the big picture was stopping Iran. Now, however, if the US abandoned the Kurds, they would either have to ally with Assad against Turkey, which the Kurds rightly considered the greater threat (thereby enhancing Assad, Iran’s proxy), or fight on alone, facing almost certain defeat, caught in the vise between Assad and Erdogan. What to do?

First, on December 18, Mattis, Dunford, Coats, Haspel, Pompeo, and I (and a few others) convened in “the Tank” in the Pentagon, rather than the Sit Room, to attract less attention. Based on the Trump-Erdogan call, the Turks were doubtless telling anyone who would listen that we were turning northeastern Syria over to their tender mercies. The potential dangers on the ground were daunting, starting with the thousands of ISIS prisoners held by the Kurds, pending some decision on their disposition. Estimates of the actual numbers of prisoners varied, in part due to differing definitions: Were they “foreign terrorist fighters,” meaning from outside the Middle East? From outside Syria and Iraq? Or local? Whatever the number, we did not want them moving en masse to the United States or

Europe. In mid-December, Trump suggested bringing the ISIS prisoners in northeastern Syria to Gitmo, but Mattis objected. Trump then insisted that other countries take back their own nationals from the Kurdish camps, which was hardly unreasonable, but which foreign governments strongly resisted, not wanting the terrorists coming home. No one did, but this resistance hardly contributed to a solution. As events developed, we did not resolve the issue before I left the White House.

Finally, exactly how long would it take for the US and other coalition forces to leave in a safe and orderly fashion? Dunford's planners estimated about 120 days; it certainly wasn't a matter of 48 hours. I asked about holding on to the At Tanf exclusion zone, located inside Syria at the tri-border junction of Syria, Jordan, and Iraq, not in northeastern Syria, but which US forces held. Control of At Tanf neutralized a key border crossing point on the road between Baghdad and Damascus, which forced Iran and others to cross from Iraq into Syria at a more distant border crossing to the north. Surprisingly, Mattis was skeptical of At Tanf's worth, probably because he was focused on ISIS rather than Iran. Iran was my main concern, and I stayed firm on At Tanf throughout my time as National Security Advisor. Besides, why give territory away for nothing?

As we had agreed, Mattis, Dunford, Pompeo, and I began to call our allies to prepare them for what was about to happen, receiving no sign of support. France's Etienne told me Macron would certainly want to talk to Trump about the decision, which didn't surprise me. Other reactions were equally predictable. I was in the Oval that afternoon when Macron's call came through, and he was not happy. Trump brushed him aside, saying we were finished with ISIS, and that Turkey and Syria would take care of any remnants. Macron replied that Turkey was focused on attacking the Kurds, and would compromise with ISIS. He pleaded with Trump not to withdraw, saying that we would win in a very short time, and should finish the job. Trump agreed to consult again with his advisors, telling me I should talk to Macron's people (which I had already done), and Mattis and Dunford that they should talk to their counterparts. Almost immediately, Mattis called to say that French Defense Minister Florence Parly was not at all happy with Trump's decision. Israel's Ambassador Ron Dermer told me that this was the worst day he had experienced thus far in the Trump Administration.

The next day, Wednesday, December 19, Mattis, Pompeo, and I had our weekly breakfast in the Ward Room, dominated by Syria, notwithstanding our extensive Pentagon discussion the day before. Numerous press stories had appeared, filled with inaccuracies,¹⁶ which I thought came largely from the Pentagon, via allies in Congress. Later in the day, Trump tweeted a video with his own explanation, and press and congressional calls were overwhelming the White House, which, other than the NSC, was yet again focused on the Mexico border wall and related immigration topics. Republicans in Congress almost uniformly opposed Trump's Syria decision but largely said they would avoid the media, an inhibition Democrats did not share. Republican acquiescence in mistaken national-security policies, however, didn't help the country or ultimately the party. I reported on the negative Hill reaction that morning, but Trump didn't believe it, probably relying again on Rand Paul's assurances that he represented the party's real base. As if this weren't enough, Turkey detained a Texas National Guardsman on duty at Incirlik air base, near Adana (which problem, unlike Brunson's, was resolved quickly).

By Thursday, Trump understood he was getting mauled by media coverage of the Syria withdrawal, which was a small fraction of what would happen if he proceeded to leave Afghanistan completely. We concluded it was not wise to set a deadline for withdrawal but stressed it should be "orderly." The Turkish military provided a potential lifeline in that regard. They knew full well there had to be military-to-military talks on an orderly transfer of power in an otherwise essentially ungoverned region before the handover Trump proposed could succeed. Those talks would take time, and indeed the US delegation was making plans to travel to Ankara only on Monday, Christmas Eve, the next week.

That afternoon, I learned that Mattis was in the Oval alone with Trump, and a previously scheduled bill-signing ceremony was running very late. As we were talking, Mattis came out, with Trump right behind him. I could tell instantly something was up. Mattis seemed stunned to see me waiting, but he shook hands without much of an expression. Trump said, "John, come on in," which I did, with just the two of us in the Oval. "He's leaving," said Trump. "I never really liked him."

After the bill-signing ceremony, Trump and I talked for roughly twenty minutes on how to handle the Mattis departure. Trump wanted to put out a tweet before Mattis's public relations machine got rolling. Mattis had given Trump a long resignation letter explaining why he was leaving, unquestionably written for widespread public distribution, which Trump had not actually read. Instead, he had simply left it on the *Resolute* desk, from which it had been removed for the bill-signing ceremony. When we retrieved the letter, I read with surprise that Mattis wanted to serve until the end of February, spending his remaining time as Secretary of Defense testifying before Congress and speaking at the February NATO Defense Ministers' meeting. Even more surprising to Trump, given the tenor of his conversation with Mattis, was the letter's substance, rejecting Trump's policies. I explained to Trump that the scheduling was completely untenable, though I was not sure it sank in. He was, however, more and

more expressive about how much he didn't like Mattis. "I created a monster when I named him 'Mad Dog,'" said Trump, which was at least partially correct. (Mattis's real moniker was "Chaos.") I returned to my office to call Pompeo at 5:20 p.m., and by then, Trump's tweet was out and the Mattis press blitz under way. Pompeo said Mattis had stopped by State on the way to the White House, giving him a copy of the resignation letter. Mattis said, "The President doesn't pay attention to me anymore. It's his way of saying he doesn't want me. It's time to leave." I thought all these things were true, and Pompeo agreed.

All this turmoil over Mattis, of course, affected the Syrian and parallel Afghan dramas, especially because Mattis made Trump's order for US forces to exit Syria the determining factor in his resignation. Nonetheless, the succession question remained. By Saturday, two days after the Mattis meeting in the Oval, Trump told me at about six fifteen p.m. that he wasn't waiting around for February for Mattis's departure and had decided to name Deputy Defense Secretary Pat Shanahan as Acting Secretary of Defense. (At this point, Trump was torn between nominating Shanahan for the job full-time and naming retired General Jack Keane.) In addition, Trump now wanted Mattis out immediately, not even coming to the Pentagon on Monday. I pointed out it was almost Christmas, and Trump said, "Christmas isn't until Tuesday. We should fire him today."

On Sunday, December 23, I spoke with Trump just before a ten a.m. call with Erdogan. Trump had just finished "a good talk" with Shanahan, whom he had found "very impressive." Trump wondered why he had not been so impressed in their previous encounters. He supplied his own answer, with which I agreed, that Shanahan "had been held down over there [at the Pentagon] by Mattis," adding, "He loves you and Pompeo." A January 1 start date, however, would still leave Mattis in place until December 31, and Trump was rumbling again that he wanted him out immediately. I said I would see what could be done and then immediately called Shanahan, who was in Seattle with his family. I suggested that, Christmas or no Christmas, he should think about returning to Washington immediately. I also called Dunford, reaching him as he landed at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. I told him what had happened with Erdogan on Syria, and with Mattis, which he appreciated because no one else had conveyed the Pentagon news. I assured Dunford that Trump wanted him to stay as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, which I sort of made up, but which I expected was true, and appropriate to ease any concerns with the turmoil Mattis had caused. At least for now, we seemed to be steady again.

But Syria was still in flux. Over the weekend, Trump decided he wanted another call with Erdogan to make two points: first, don't attack any US troops in Syria, and second, be sure to attack ISIS and not Kurds, both points being correct, but it was a little late to fill them in after his earlier call with Erdogan and the subsequent publicity.¹⁷ So after greetings and opening remarks, Trump said that, first, he wanted Erdogan to get rid of ISIS, and that we would provide assistance if Turkey need it. Second, he pressed Erdogan not to go after the Kurds and kill them, noting that a lot of people liked them for fighting with us for years against ISIS. Turkey and the Kurds should go after the remaining ISIS forces together. Trump acknowledged that such a strategy might be a change for Erdogan, but he stressed again how much support there was for the Kurds in the United States. Trump then came with what he thought was the clincher: the prospect of substantially greater US trade with Turkey. Erdogan took pains to say he loved the Kurds and vice versa, but added that the YPG-PYD-PKK (three Kurdish groups in Turkey and Syria, the nine initials of which Erdogan rattled off as if spelling his own name) were manipulating the Kurds, and did not represent them. He pointed out that his government had Kurdish MP's and ministers, that the Kurds had a special love and sympathy for him, and that he was the only leader who could conduct big rallies in the Kurdish areas. He had no intention of killing anyone but terrorists. We had heard all this before, and it was standard Erdogan regime propaganda.

Rallies! What an appeal to Trump! At this point, perhaps recognizing he was being drawn into a trap on the Kurds—those Erdogan planned to decimate versus those who loved coming to hear him, a distinction we had no business trying to help Erdogan with—Trump asked me to say what I thought of Erdogan's comments. On the spur of the moment, I said we should leave it to the upcoming military-to-military discussions to distinguish the terrorists from the non-terrorists. My feeling was that parsing this question would go absolutely nowhere, thereby postponing our departure from Syria.

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day were quiet. At nine forty-five p.m. Christmas night, my Secret Service detail and I left for Andrews, where, under extraordinary security precautions, Trump, the First Lady, and a small traveling party boarded Air Force One to head for Iraq (eight hours ahead of Washington time). I got some sleep, and woke up in time to see that word of the trip still hadn't broken and that security was good enough that we could continue to our destination at al-Asad Air Base, where we expected, among other things, to meet with Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi and several top officials. Trump also arose "early," although it was already afternoon Iraq time, and we spent a fair amount of time in his office chatting away because so few others were up yet. We ranged from what he would say to the Army and Marine troops at al-Asad and in the State of the Union address in January, to sending a New Year's greeting to Xi Jinping and whether Trump should get the Nobel Peace Prize. Trump also raised the

widespread political rumor he would dump Pence from the ticket in 2020 and run instead with Haley, asking what I thought. White House gossip was common that Ivanka and Kushner favored this approach, which tied in with Haley's leaving her position as UN Ambassador in December 2018, thus allowing her to do some politicking around the country before being named to the ticket in 2020. The political argument in Haley's favor was that she could win back women voters alienated from Trump. By contrast, it was said, the evangelicals supporting Pence had nowhere else to go in 2020, so their votes were not at risk if Haley took his place. I explained it was a bad idea to jettison someone loyal, and that doing so risked alienating people he needed (who could stay home, even if they didn't vote for Trump's opponent) without necessarily generating new support because of the replacement. That seemed to be Trump's thinking as well.

We landed at al-Asad about seven fifteen p.m. local time, in near-total darkness and under the tightest security possible. We careened away from Air Force One in heavily armored Humvees, heading for the tent where the US commanders would meet us. As we drove along, it became clear we were not really certain whether Abdul Mahdi was actually coming or not. For security reasons, he had received minimal notice, but we heard a plane was on the way from Baghdad, the only uncertainty being whether Abdul Mahdi was on it! Greeting the President and the First Lady in the tent, arranged with tables, chairs, and flags, were Army Lieutenant General Paul LaCamera, the commander of Operation Inherent Resolve (in Iraq and Syria); Air Force Brigadier General Dan Caine (nicknamed "Raisin"); the Deputy Commander; and several others. I wanted a little more "inherent resolve" in the Administration, so I took LaCamera aside and urged him to stress the threat from Iran in Syria, in addition to whatever else he planned to say.

If I had to pick one clear point in time that saved the US military presence in Syria (at least through the end of my White House tenure), this was it: sitting in this tent, at the makeshift conference table, with the President and First Lady at the head, and the rest of us on the sides, after the obligatory performance before the traveling press pool. The press left about eight p.m., and LaCamera and his colleagues began what I'm sure they thought would be a standard briefing, where they talked and the President listened. Were they in for a surprise! LaCamera got only as far as "It's crystal clear that we are to get out of Syria," when Trump interrupted with questions and comments. LaCamera said at one point, "I can protect our interests in Syria while withdrawing, and I can do it from here." Trump said he had told Erdogan not to attack US forces in Syria, and LaCamera and Caine were explaining what they were currently doing against ISIS when Trump asked, "Can you knock the shit out of them on the way out?" They both responded, "Yes, sir," and Trump said, "That is my order; take it out from here." LaCamera proceeded to explain that the US had been seeking to build "partnership capacity" over the years, but Trump interrupted to say he had given repeated extensions of the time needed to defeat ISIS and was tired of doing so. He then asked, "What can we do to protect the Kurds?" and I jumped in to tell the commanders that the President had expressly told Erdogan that he didn't want harm done to the Kurds who had helped us in Syria. LaCamera and Caine explained they could finish off the ISIS territorial caliphate in the next two to four weeks. "Do it," said Trump, "you have the okay on that," asking why Mattis and others couldn't have finished the job in the last year and a half. Trump came to believe he was hearing a lot of this information for the first time, which may or may not have been true but was his view nonetheless.

As the discussion moved on, LaCamera said that the al-Asad base was also critical to keep pressure on Iran. Trump asked quizzically, "Staying in Iraq puts more pressure on Iran?" US Ambassador to Iraq Douglas Silliman answered, "Yes," emphatically, and LaCamera and others agreed. Trump began to bring the meeting to a close by saying he wanted "a vicious withdrawal" from Syria and that he saw a continuing US presence in Iraq as being "a lynchpin" for a number of reasons. I decided to press my luck, asking LaCamera and Caine about the value of the At Tanf exclusion zone. LaCamera was saying, "I haven't briefed my bosses yet—" when I interrupted, pointed to POTUS, and said, "You are now." LaCamera, to his credit, recovered quickly and said we should hold on to at Tanf. Trump responded, "Okay, and we'll decide the schedule on that later." Trump and the First Lady shortly thereafter moved off to a mess tent nearby to meet service members, and Stephen Miller, Sarah Sanders, and I stayed back with LaCamera, Caine, and the other commanders to draft a statement we could release publicly. We wrote that the President and the commanders "discussed a strong, deliberate and orderly withdrawal of US and coalition forces from Syria, and the continuing importance of the US presence in Iraq to prevent a resurgence of the ISIS territorial threat and to protect other US interests," which all agreed was a fair summary of the meeting.¹⁸

I thought the outcome was fantastic, not because we had a final decision on US military activity in Syria, but because Trump had come away with a very different appreciation for what we were doing and why it was important. How long it would last was a separate question, but I planned to move while the impression was strong. And why had Trump's advisors not gotten him to Iraq or Afghanistan earlier? We had all collectively failed on that score.

By the time we finished drafting the statement, it was clear Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi was not coming, a big mistake on his part. His advisors convinced him it was unseemly for Iraq's Prime Minister to meet the President on

an American base, notwithstanding that our facility was completely surrounded by an Iraqi base (which had once been ours as well). They had a good phone call instead, and Trump invited Abdul Mahdi to the White House, a positive sign. We rode to a hangar, where Trump addressed the troops, receiving an enthusiastic reception. Even Americans callous about our country and indifferent to its greatness would be moved by the enthusiasm, optimism, and strength of spirit of our service members, even in the middle of the Iraqi desert. This really was America's "inherent resolve" in the flesh. The rally ended at about 10:25 p.m., and we motorcaded in the dark back to Air Force One to fly to Ramstein Air Base in Germany to refuel.

I called Pompeo to report on the Iraq visit and then talked to Shanahan and Dunford (who was in Poland, having just left al-Asad the night before). We landed at Ramstein at one forty-five a.m. German time, met with the US commanders there, and then rode to a hangar with a large crowd of service members waiting to greet the Commander in Chief (at two in the morning!). Trump shook hands and took selfies with many service members along the rope line the base had fashioned. Then, back to Air Force One, headed for Andrews, where we landed at five fifteen a.m. on December 27, all of twenty minutes behind the original schedule.

Trump called me later in the afternoon to urge moving forward quickly with "the two-week plan" to finish off the ISIS territorial caliphate in Syria. I said I had heard "two to four weeks" from LaCamera and Caine, which he didn't contest, but he said anyway, "Call it 'the two-week plan.'" I briefed Dunford in more detail, having found almost immediately after Mattis left that Dunford could handle the confused, often conflicting array of Trump's Syria priorities (withdraw, crush ISIS, protect the Kurds, decide how to handle At Tanf, don't release the prisoners, keep the pressure on Iran). These were presidential outbursts, off-the-cuff comments, knee-jerk reactions, not a coherent, straight-line strategy, but bits and pieces we needed to thread our way through to get to a satisfactory outcome. What Dunford and I feared, along with many others, was ISIS's making a comeback in regions it had formerly controlled, thereby once again threatening to become a base from which to launch terrorist attacks against America and Europe.

I also wanted to minimize any potential gains for Iran, something Mattis never seemed to prioritize but which Dunford understood better. He and I discussed developing a plan to accommodate all these priorities, which was difficult but far superior to the Mattis style, which veered from insisting we had to remain in Syria indefinitely to saying, in effect, he would spite the President by doing exactly what he said: withdraw immediately. Since Erdogan appeared to believe that "the only good Kurd is a dead Kurd," big rallies notwithstanding, Dunford thought Turkey's immediate military objective in Syria would be to expel Kurds from the area along the Turkey-Syria border and then move hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees from Turkey back across the border into the now-largely-depopulated border zone. He suggested creating a NATO-based monitoring force, supported by American intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; air cover; and a "dial 911" capability to intervene if elements of the monitoring force ran into trouble, with minimal US forces on the ground.¹⁹ I was also happy when Dunford quickly agreed on keeping US forces in At Tanf, which Mattis had not. Perhaps there was a way ahead.

Dunford suggested he join the early January trip I was planning to Turkey and then stay afterward to talk to their military, which I agreed to. This way, the Turks would hear a unified US government message, thereby lessening their ability to exploit differences among the various American players, always a favorite foreign-government strategy. I briefed Pompeo on these discussions, saying we had prevented a very bad outcome in Syria and were verging now on constructing something adequate and doable. Pompeo wanted to be sure the State Department envoy handling Syria was present for the Turkey meetings, which I agreed to reluctantly. That's because Pompeo himself had told me two days before Christmas that Jim Jeffrey, a former US Ambassador to Turkey, "had no love lost for the Kurds, and still saw Turkey as a reliable NATO partner." Those were clear warning signs of an advanced case of "clientitis," a chronic State Department affliction where the foreign perspective becomes more important than that of the US.²⁰ Pompeo, Shanahan, Dunford, and I agreed to draft a one-page "statement of principles" on Syria to avoid misunderstandings, which Defense thought was particularly important.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell called on January 4 as I was leaving for Israel, my first stop before Turkey, to say, "I had you on my mind," about Syria and Afghanistan, noting there was "a high level of alarm" around the Senate over recent developments. I said the key objective of my trip was to get straight exactly what we were going to do in Syria. Indeed, in an on-the-record meeting with the press traveling with me on Sunday, January 6, at Jerusalem's King David Hotel, I said, "We expect that those who have fought with us in Syria, in the Opposition, particularly the Kurds, but everybody who's fought with us, is not put in jeopardy by the coalition withdrawal. It's a point the President has made very clear in his conversations with President Erdogan of Turkey."²¹ That is in fact what Trump had said, and it was correct when I said it in Israel. Later in the day, Washington time, asked by a reporter about my remarks as he was boarding Marine One for Camp David, Trump said, "John Bolton is, right now, over there, as you know. And I have two great stars. And John Bolton is doing a great job, and Mike Pompeo is doing a great job. They're very strong and they work hard... We're coming up with some very good results."²² It is also true, of course, that Trump changed his mind again when the Turks pushed back after reading

this and other comments I made in Jerusalem, meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu. But's that's where we were at the trip's start.

Trump called me at about eleven forty-five p.m. on January 6, saying, "You're awake, right?" which I assuredly was not. Someone had told him the Turks were unhappy with various of my remarks reported in the press. Of course, I hadn't said anything Trump hadn't said to Erdogan. Nonetheless, Trump said several times during this brief call, "My base wants to get out [of Syria]," which meant visiting Turkey would certainly be fun. Indeed, the next day, as we flew from Jerusalem, the embassy in Ankara was hearing Erdogan was so irritated that he might cancel the meeting scheduled with me. In diplomatic circles, this was seen as a slight, but I saw it as proof our Syria policy was right on the mark, from the US perspective, if not Turkey's.

After I arrived in Ankara at 4:35 p.m. local time, Pompeo called to report Trump was unhappy with a *New York Times* story, filled with even more than the usual quota of mistakes, recounting contradictions in our Syria policy, citing statements from Administration officials.²³ Of course, many of the contradictions came from Trump himself, and Pompeo agreed he had made a few statements tracking mine (such as saying we would not allow Turkey to "slaughter the Kurds," which had not received widespread media attention but which certainly irritated the Turks).²⁴ We agreed our embassy should not plead for a meeting with Erdogan and that we had perhaps reached the moment we knew was inevitable, where Trump's desire to exit Syria came crashing into his statement about protecting the Kurds. That was something Erdogan would not tolerate. Trump called me about an hour later. He didn't like the reporting on internal Administration disagreements, but he was mostly worried whether the Defense Department was still working hard on "the two-week plan" to defeat the ISIS caliphate. I urged him to call Shanahan to reassure himself and said I was seeing Dunford shortly in Ankara, and would also follow up with him.

Ironically, the next day, the *Washington Post* reported unhappily that Trump and I were actually on the same page on Syria²⁵—unhappily because the *Post* was contradicting its own story from the day before.²⁶ All this confused press coverage reveals both the inconsistencies within Trump's own thinking, and reporting based on second- and third-hand sources, exacerbated under a President who spent a disproportionate share of his time watching his Administration being covered in the press. It is difficult beyond description to pursue a complex policy in a contentious part of the world when the policy is subject to instant modification based on the boss's perception of how inaccurate and often-already-outdated information is reported by writers who don't have the Administration's best interests at heart in the first place. It was like making and executing policy inside a pinball machine, not the West Wing of the White House.

In the meantime, contrary to the statement of principles, Jim Jeffrey circulated a color-coded map showing which parts of northeastern Syria he proposed to allow Turkey to take over and which the Kurds could retain. Dunford didn't like what the map showed at all. I asked if our objective should not be to keep the Turks entirely on their side of the border with Syria east of the Euphrates River, and Dunford said that was certainly his position. I said I wanted to see northeastern Syria look much as it did now, but without US troops being present; I knew that might be "mission impossible" but thought it should at least be the objective we sought even if we couldn't reach it. Dunford agreed. At this point, Jeffrey finally wandered in, and we went through the draft statement of principles we could give to the Kurds. I added a new sentence to make clear we didn't want to see the Kurds mistreated and took pains to show we didn't accept a Turkish presence, military or otherwise, in northeastern Syria. Dunford and Jeffrey agreed to the draft, which, along with the map, in light of developments after I left the White House, is now purely a matter of historical interest.

Not surprisingly, Erdogan let us know he was canceling his meeting with me because he had to deliver a speech in Parliament. As we learned later, Erdogan's speech was a preplanned attack on what I presented as the US position. Erdogan had not moved an inch from his insistence that Turkey have a free hand in northeastern Syria, which we could not allow if we wanted to prevent retribution against the Kurds. Erdogan essentially gave a campaign speech (just prior to nationwide local and provincial elections, in which Erdogan's supporters would soon fare badly) saying "no concessions," and that it was "not possible... to make compromises" on the point.²⁷ On the way back, I spoke with Pompeo to brief him on the Turkey meetings. We agreed our views on the Kurds were "irreconcilable" with Turkey's and they needed to be "really careful." Pompeo said Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu was trying to reach him and that he planned to say: "You have a choice. You can either have us on your border, or the Russians and the Iranians [who would almost certainly move into northeastern Syria when we withdrew]. Your choice." I said that sounded right to me.

Next, I called Trump to report in. He thought the Turks had been ready months before to cross into Syria, which is why he wanted to get out to begin with, before Turkey attacked the Kurds with our people still in place. He continued, "Erdogan doesn't care about ISIS," which was true, and said the US would remain capable of hitting ISIS after we left Syria, also true. Trump was focused on his speech that evening on the Mexico border wall, the first of his Administration from the Oval Office, and he added, "Just don't show any weakness or anything," as if he didn't

realize I was describing things that had already happened. “We don’t want to be involved in a civil war. They’re natural enemies. The Turks and the Kurds have been fighting for many years. We’re not getting involved in a civil war, but we are finishing off ISIS.”

Meanwhile, I learned that Dunford thought Turkish military commanders were a lot less interested in going into Syria than Erdogan and were looking for reasons they could use to avoid conducting military operations south of their border, while simultaneously saying they were protecting Turkey from terrorist attacks. To them, said Dunford, “this is our Mexico border on steroids.” Dunford had proceeded consistently with the statement of principles, proposing a twenty-to-thirty-kilometer buffer zone, from which Kurdish heavy weapons would be removed, and which would be patrolled by an international force consisting largely of NATO allies and the like, who would ensure there were no Kurdish incursions into Turkey, and vice versa, as we had discussed earlier in Washington. The US would continue to provide air cover and search-and-rescue capabilities for the international force, which Dunford and I believed would also allow us to keep control of the airspace over northeastern Syria. Although Dunford didn’t stress it, because we were staying at al-Asad in Iraq, under Trump’s direction, we would also be able, if the need arose, to return to northeastern Syria quickly and in force to suppress any serious reappearance of an ISIS terrorist threat. Since Erdogan’s real priority was domestic politics, in my view, this arrangement might be enough. We now had to convince the Europeans to agree, but that was a problem for another day. While we played this string out, or developed a better idea, which might take months, we had a good argument for maintaining US forces east of the Euphrates.

As for the Kurds, Jeffrey would present the idea to their commander, General Mazloum Abdi, to see how he reacted. Dunford was fatalistic, believing that Mazloum’s options were quite limited, and that he might as well consider some insurance now. I then spoke with Pompeo, who thought this the proper line to pursue and that others in the region would support it. The Arab states had no love for Turkey, and they had financial resources that could make it easier for NATO allies and others to justify participating in a multinational monitoring force. Getting more equitable burden-sharing from our allies, NATO in particular, was a constant Trump theme, and a correct one. In the 1990–91 Persian Gulf conflict, George H. W. Bush had financed our war efforts by soliciting contributions from the beneficiaries in the region, like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and also other, more distant beneficiaries, like Japan. It was done with a tinge of embarrassment, referred to lightly as “the tin cup exercise,” but it had worked, and no one suggested it was dishonorable. There was no reason it might not work again.

I continued to explain this approach in Syria to Trump. In the Oval for another issue on January 9, Dunford made a more detailed presentation on why an international force in a buffer zone south of Turkey’s border was doable, allowing us to extricate ourselves without profoundly endangering the Kurds and our other anti-ISIS allies, not to mention our international reputation. Dunford now vigorously defended staying in At Tanf, which Jordan’s King Abdullah had also pressed on Pompeo during his visit, noting that the longer we stayed in At Tanf, the more secure Jordan was against the risk of the conflict in Syria’s spilling across the border into his country. Trump was pleased the “two-to-four-week plan” was under way, although he still expected results in two weeks, which wasn’t happening. He seemed satisfied, but it didn’t stop a long digression on Mattis’s failure to win in Afghanistan and Syria. Then he was off wondering why, after having fought the Korean War in the 1950s, we were still there, as well as critiquing the freeloading and ingratitude of sundry allies around the world. Just for the record, I did discuss with Trump several times the history of the “temporary” 1945 division of the Korean Peninsula, the rise of Kim Il Sung, the Korean War and its Cold War significance—you know, that old stuff—but I obviously made no impact. We endured this cycle repeatedly, always with the same outcome. Every few days, someone would inadvertently press a button somewhere, and Trump would be repeating his lines from the same movie soundtrack.

Dunford did a good job defending himself, and with minimal interference—running by me, because I thought it was better to let Trump hear it from someone else for a change. Others in the room (Pence, Shanahan, Coats, Haspel, Mnuchin, Sullivan, and more) largely remained silent. This was the longest conversation between Dunford and Trump I had seen, the first one without Mattis present. Dunford handled himself well, and I wondered how different things might have been if Mattis hadn’t acted like a “five-star general,” commanding all the four-star generals, but a real Secretary of Defense, running the entire, vast Pentagon machinery. Watching Dunford perform, it occurred to me there was a hidden wisdom in the statutory prohibition against former general officers becoming Secretary of Defense. It was not fear of a military takeover, but, ironically, that neither the civilian nor the military side of the Pentagon’s leadership performed so well when both were military. The Secretary’s broader, inevitably political role ill suited someone with a military background, leaving Mattis just to supervise Dunford and the other Joint Chiefs, who really didn’t need more military supervision. It also underscored how unpersuasive Mattis was in meetings in either the Sit Room or the Oval. He may have established a reputation as a warrior-scholar for carrying with him on the battlefield a copy of Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*, but he was no debater.

All these negotiations about our role in Syria were complicated by Trump's constant desire to call Assad on US hostages, which Pompeo and I thought undesirable. Fortunately, Syria saved Trump from himself, refusing even to talk to Pompeo about them. When we reported this, Trump responded angrily: "You tell [them] he will get hit hard if they don't give us our hostages back, so fucking hard. You tell him that. We want them back within one week of today, or they will never forget how hard we'll hit them." That at least took the Trump-Assad call off the table. We didn't act on the talk about striking Syria.

Efforts to create the international monitoring force, however, did not make progress. One month later, on February 20, Shanahan and Dunford said it would be an absolute precondition for other potential troop contributors that there be at least some US forces on the ground in the "buffer zone" south of Turkey's border, with logistical support coming from al-Asad in Iraq. I certainly had no problem with the idea, but raising it with Trump was undoubtedly dicey. In an Oval Office pre-brief for another Erdogan call the next day, I said the Pentagon believed unless we kept "a couple of hundred" (a deliberately vague phrase) US troops on the ground, we simply could not put a multilateral force together. Trump thought for a second and then agreed to it. Erdogan said he really wanted Turkey to have exclusive control of what he called the "safe zone" inside northeastern Syria, which I thought unacceptable. With the speakerphone on the *Resolute* desk on mute, I suggested to Trump he simply tell Erdogan Dunford was handling those negotiations, the Turkish military would be in Washington the next day, and we should just let the military-to-military talks continue. Trump followed through.

Afterward, I raced to my office to tell Shanahan the good news. A few hours later, I called Dunford to be sure he had heard, and he said, "Ambassador, I don't have much time to talk because we're going outside right now for the ceremony to rename the Pentagon 'the Bolton Building.'" He was as pleased as we all were and agreed that "a couple of hundred" was a good figure of speech (which could mean up to four hundred without too much poetic license). He would make clear to the Turks he didn't want any of their troops south of the border. I called Lindsey Graham, urging him to keep it quiet so others didn't have a chance to reverse it, which he said he would do, also volunteering to call Erdogan, with whom he had good relations, to urge full support for Trump's decision. Unfortunately, Sanders issued a press statement, without clearing it with anyone who knew the facts, which caused significant confusion.²⁸ We had to explain that "a couple of hundred" only applied to northeastern Syria, not At Tanf, where there would be another two hundred or so US forces, for a total north of four hundred. I deliberately never tried to pin it down more precisely, despite the media confusion. Dunford also assured me he had calmed down US Central Command, which was worried about contradictory news reports, saying, "Don't worry, the building is still named after you."

With occasional bumps in the road, this was the situation in northeastern Syria until I resigned. ISIS's territorial caliphate was eliminated, but its terrorist threat remained unabated. Prospects for a multilateral observer force deteriorated, but the US presence remained, fluctuating around fifteen hundred country-wide. How long this "status quo" could last was unknowable, but Dunford preserved it through the September 30 end of his term as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Erdogan's belligerence remained unchecked, perhaps because of Turkey's deteriorating economy and his own domestic political troubles. Trump refused to impose any sanctions for Erdogan's S-400 purchase, ignoring widespread congressional dismay.

When Trump finally erupted on October 6, 2019, and again ordered a US withdrawal, I had left the White House nearly a month earlier. The result of Trump's decision was a complete debacle for US policy and for our credibility worldwide. Whether I could have averted this result, as happened nine months before, I do not know, but the strongly negative bipartisan political reaction Trump received was entirely predictable and entirely justified. To have stopped it a second time would have required someone to stand in front of the bus again and find an alternative that Trump could accept. That, it seems, did not happen. There was some good news, however: after years of effort, on October 26, the Pentagon and the CIA eliminated ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a daring raid.²⁹

Afghanistan: A Forward Defense

By late 2018, Afghanistan was undoubtedly a sore spot for Trump, one of his principal grievances against the "axis of adults" so beloved by the media. Trump believed, not without justification, he had given Mattis all the leeway he requested to finish the Taliban, as with finishing the ISIS territorial caliphate. In Iraq and Syria, the stated goal had been accomplished (whether it should have been the only goal is a different story). In Afghanistan, by contrast, the stated goal was not in sight, and things were undeniably going the wrong way. That grated on Trump. He believed he had been right in 2016, he believed he had been right after the military failures in 2017 and 2018, and he wanted to do what he wanted to do. A reckoning was coming.

Trump opposed a continuing US military presence in Afghanistan for two related reasons: first, he had campaigned to “end the endless wars” in faraway places; and second, the sustained mishandling of economic and security assistance, inflaming his instinct against so much frivolous spending in federal programs. Besides, Trump believed he had been right in Iraq, and everyone now agreed with him. Well, not everyone.

The argument I pressed again and again, regarding all the “endless wars,” was that we hadn’t started the wars and couldn’t end them just by our own say-so. Across the Islamic world, the radical philosophies that had caused so much death and destruction were ideological, political as well as religious. Just as religious fervor had driven human conflicts for millennia, so it was driving this one, against America and the West more broadly. It wasn’t going away because we were tired of it, or because we found it inconvenient to balancing our budget. Most important of all, this wasn’t a war about making Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, or any other country nicer, safer places to live. I am not a nation builder. I do not believe what is, after all, an essentially Marxist analysis that a better economic way of life will divert people from terrorism. This was about keeping America safe from another 9/11, or even worse, a 9/11 where the terrorists had nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. As long as the threat existed, no place was too far away to worry about. The terrorists weren’t coming to America on wooden sailing ships.

By the time I arrived, this debate had been through many iterations, so I did not face a clean slate. My first involvement was May 10, 2018 (later in the day after the post-midnight return of the hostages from Korea), when Zalmay Khalilzad, a friend I had known since the Bush 41 Administration, who had succeeded me as Ambassador to the UN in 2007, came to visit. “Zal,” as everyone called him, an Afghan-American and also former US Ambassador to Afghanistan, said he had been approached by people purporting to speak on behalf of various Taliban factions who wanted to talk peace. He had spoken to others in the US government who could evaluate the bona fides of these approaches, but he wanted to give me an early heads-up in case they proved real, which by late July Khalilzad told me they had. I saw no reason further contacts shouldn’t proceed, not that I expected much, and he initially became a back-channel negotiator with the Taliban. Within a month, the role had expanded to Khalilzad’s being one of the growing number of State Department “special envoys,” a convenient role that avoided having them confirmed in more traditional State positions.

Given Trump’s periodic eruptions on our continuing military presence in Afghanistan, there was a growing sense we should have a full NSC meeting, or at least a military briefing, before the end of the year. I wanted any briefing to be as far after the elections as possible, but for reasons I never understood, Mattis wanted it sooner. It was finally scheduled for November 7, the day after the congressional midterms. I was sure Trump would be unhappy about the Republicans’ losing control of the House, no matter what happened in the Senate. Did Mattis in particular want a flat-out Trump decision to withdraw, so Mattis could then resign on a matter of principle? Or was this an institutional Pentagon effort to have Trump be squarely responsible, not US failings during the course of the war, and especially not the collapse of the beloved counterinsurgency strategy that had failed in both Afghanistan and Iraq? Pompeo agreed with me that the briefing should have been held later in November, but we couldn’t stop it.

At one p.m. on Election Day, I met with Khalilzad, who thought he had more time to negotiate with the Taliban than I believed likely, given my expectation Trump would pull the plug, perhaps the next day. Pence told me Mattis still argued we were making military progress in Afghanistan and should not change course. Pence knew as well as I that Trump didn’t believe that, and there was substantial evidence Mattis was wrong. Here, once again, it wasn’t so much that I disagreed with Mattis substantively as it was frustrating that he was determined to run into the wall on Afghanistan (as on Syria), and that he had no alternative line of argument to avoid getting the “wrong” answer. Kellogg sat in on the Pence-Mattis meeting and told me later Mattis simply repeated what he had said for two years. No wonder Trump was frustrated with what he called “his” generals. To my litigator’s instincts, this was the sure way to lose. In truth, I didn’t have a better answer, which is why I wanted more space after the elections before having this briefing.

At two p.m. on November 8, we convened in the Oval, with Pence, Mattis, Dunford, Kelly, Pompeo, Coats, Haspel, myself, and others present. Pompeo led off, but Trump quickly interjected, “We’re being beaten, and they know they’re beating us.” Then he was off, raging against the statutorily mandated Afghanistan Inspector General, whose reports repeatedly documented wasted tax dollars but also provided amazingly accurate information about the war that any other government would have kept private. “I think he’s right,” said Trump, “but I think it’s a disgrace he can make such things public.” Mentioning Khalilzad, Trump said, “I hear he’s a con man, although you need a con man for this.” Pompeo tried again, but Trump rolled on: “My strategy [meaning what ‘his’ generals had talked him into in 2017] was wrong, and not at all where I wanted to be. We’ve lost everything. It was a total failure. It’s a waste. It’s a shame. All the casualties. I hate talking about it.” Then Trump raised the first combat use of the MOAB (“Massive Ordnance Air Blast”), “without your knowledge,” said Trump to Mattis,³⁰ complaining for the umpteenth time that the MOAB had not had its intended effect. As was often the case, Trump had truth mixed with misunderstanding and malice. Mattis had delegated to the US commander in Afghanistan authority to use the

MOAB, so further authorization was unnecessary. As for the MOAB's effects, that remained a matter of dispute within the Pentagon. One thing was sure: Mattis was not going to win this argument with Trump, who knew what he wanted to know, period. I knew I didn't want this briefing.

Predictably, Mattis ran right into his favorite wall, lauding the efforts of other NATO members.

"We pay for NATO," said Trump.

"ISIS is still in Afghanistan," said Mattis.

Trump said, "Let Russia take care of them. We're seven thousand miles away but we're still the target, they'll come to our shores, that's what they all say," said Trump, scoffing. "It's a horror show. At some point, we've got to get out." Coats offered that Afghanistan was a border-security issue for America, but Trump wasn't listening. "We'll never get out. This was done by a stupid person named George Bush," he said, to me. "Millions of people killed, trillions of dollars, and we just can't do it. Another six months, that's what they said before, and we're still getting our asses kicked." Then he launched into a favorite story, about how we helicoptered schoolteachers every day to their school because it was too dangerous for them to go on their own: "Costs a fortune. The IG was right," he said, veering off into a report about the construction of "a billion-dollar Holiday Inn" and saying, "This is incompetence on our part. They hate us and they shoot us in the back, blew the back of the guy's head off, arms and legs and things [referring to a recent "green-on-blue" attack where a Utah National Guardsman was killed].³¹ India builds a library and advertises it all over."

On it went. "We've got to get out. My campaign was to get out. People are angry. The base wants out. My people are very smart, it's why [Dean] Heller lost [his Nevada Senate reelection bid]. He supported Hillary." Mattis tried again, but Trump was on to Syria: "I don't understand why we're killing ISIS in Syria. Why aren't Russia and Iran doing it? I've played this game for so long. Why are we killing ISIS for Russia and Iran, Iraq, which is controlled by Iran?"

Pompeo gave in, saying, "If that's the guidance, we'll execute it, but the story is that we won't get victory."

Trump answered, "That's Vietnam. And why are we guarding South Korea from North Korea?" Pompeo said, "Just give us ninety days," but Trump responded, "The longer we take, the more it's my war. I don't like losing wars. We don't want this to be our war. Even if we did win, we get nothing."

I could see it coming; sure enough, Mattis said, "It's your war the day you took office."

Trump was ready: "The first day I took office, I should have ended it." And on and on it went. And on.

Trump finally asked: "How long do you need?" and Pompeo said, "Until February or March. We'll prepare the options to exit." Trump was furious, furious he was hearing what he had heard so many times before: "They've got it down so fucking pat." Then he was back to criticizing Khalilzad, and whether anything the Taliban signed would be worth anything. "How do we get out without our guys getting killed? How much equipment will we leave?"

Dunford spoke for the first time, saying, "Not much."

"How do we get out?" asked Trump.

"We'll build a plan," said Dunford.

I had been silent throughout because the whole meeting was a mistake. Inevitably, Trump asked, "John, what do you think?" I said, "It sounds like my option is in the rearview mirror," explaining again why we should counter terrorists in their home base and why Pakistan's nuclear-weapons program made it imperative to preclude a Taliban haven in Afghanistan that might accelerate Pakistan's falling to terrorists. Dunford said if we withdrew, he feared a terrorist attack on the US in the near future. Trump was off again—"Fifty billion dollars a year"—until he ran down and said to no one in particular, "You have until Valentine's Day."

Most participants filed out of the Oval dispirited, although Pompeo and I remained behind as Sanders and Bill Shine rushed in to say Jeff Sessions had resigned as Attorney General, the first of many year-end departures. One month later, Trump named Bill Barr to succeed Sessions. Also one month later, after another report we were losing ground to the Taliban, Trump exploded again: "I should have followed my instincts, not my generals," he said, reverting to the MOAB's not having its intended effect. He now didn't want to wait for Khalilzad but wanted to announce the withdrawal of US forces prior to the end of his second full year in office, or even before. If he waited until his third year, he would own the war, whereas if we exited in the second year, he could still blame his predecessors. I said he simply had to address how to prevent terrorist attacks against America once we withdrew. He answered, "We'll say we're going to flatten the country if they allow attacks from Afghanistan." I pointed out we had already done that once, and we needed a better answer. I said I might have been the only one worried about Pakistan if the Taliban regained control next door, but Trump interrupted to say he worried as well; the speech had to address that issue. Basically, as we talked, the outline of the speech emerged: "We've done a great job and killed a lot of bad people. Now we're leaving, although we will leave a counterterrorism platform behind." Fortunately, the concept of a counterterrorism platform was already well advanced in Pentagon thinking, but it was hardly the first choice.³²

At my regular breakfast with Mattis and Pompeo, this one on Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day, I suggested we seek to answer three questions: Would the Afghan government collapse after we left, and, if so, how fast? How fast and in what ways would ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other terrorist groups react to withdrawal? And how fast could the various terrorist groups mount attacks on the United States?

We scheduled another Oval Office meeting for Monday, and Mattis had barely begun before Trump was all over him. I felt sorry for Mattis, not to mention the country as a whole. After a somewhat shortened version of what he'd said in the prior gathering, Trump concluded, "I want out before January 20. Do it fast." He then turned to his visits to Walter Reed, where the wounded soldiers had not had the impact on Trump they have on most people, impressing them with their bravery and commitment to their mission. Trump had simply been horrified by the seriousness of their wounds (oblivious also that advances in military medicine saved many men who would simply have died in earlier wars). Then we were back to the MOAB not having its intended effect and other refrains, including "that stupid speech" in August 2017 where Trump had announced his new Afghanistan strategy of moving onto the offense. "I said you could do whatever you wanted," he said, and glared, looking straight at Mattis. "I gave you complete discretion, except for nuclear weapons, and look what happened." Trump was bitter whenever his 2017 speech came up, but one wonders how he would have felt if the strategy had prevailed. Pompeo told me later that, from his CIA perch at the time, he felt Mattis had unfortunately wasted several months in 2017 doing nothing, afraid Trump would reverse himself and start talking again about withdrawing. We certainly could have used those months now.

"What's a win in Afghanistan?" Trump asked.

Mattis correctly responded, "The United States doesn't get attacked." Finally switching his tack, Mattis offered, "Let's say we're ending the war, not that we're withdrawing."

"Okay, you ready?" Trump asked no one in particular, but using this favorite phrase indicating something big was coming. "Say we have been there for eighteen years. We did a great job. If anybody comes here, they will be met like never before. That's what we say," he said, although Trump then expanded the withdrawal to include Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Then Trump came back at Mattis: "I gave you what you asked for. Unlimited authority, no holds barred. You're losing. You're getting your ass kicked. You failed." This painful repetition demonstrates that Trump, who endlessly stresses he is the only one who makes decisions, had trouble taking responsibility for them.

"Can we delay it [the withdrawal] so we don't lose more men and diplomats?" Mattis asked.

Trump roared back, "We can't afford it. We've failed. If it were turning out differently, I wouldn't do it."

We wandered disconsolately down to Kelly's office, where we reconnoitered what to do next. Dunford, who had been largely silent, said there was no way to withdraw everyone safely in the time frame Trump wanted, and he would insist on another meeting to explain why. Kelly, totally fed up by this point, said Trump cared only about himself (he was thinking at least in part about Trump's unwillingness, up until that point, to visit Iraq or Afghanistan). Mattis then told Dunford to withdraw everyone from the Afghan boonies back to four or five key bases, from which they would depart the country, and to secure the landing and takeoff flight paths of the planes that would lift the men and equipment, as if another four-star Marine general couldn't figure that out on his own. I honestly do not know how Kelly and Dunford restrained themselves from telling Mattis what he could do with his withdrawal plan, but this was the "five-star general" phenomenon at work. Mattis should have worried about persuading Trump, not nitty-gritty plans on the ground in Afghanistan.

Afterward, I walked Pompeo to his car outside the West Wing, agreeing that Trump's assessment of Republican views on Afghanistan was completely wrong. "He's going to get crushed politically," said Pompeo, "and deservedly so." I concluded the generals really were in a cliché, fighting the last war, not dealing effectively with Trump's attitude, which they were partly responsible for. As a latecomer, I saw that what seemed like successes to Mattis and his colleagues, such as the August 2017 Afghanistan speech, were, in retrospect, mistakes. Trump had been pushed far beyond where he wanted to go, and now he was overreacting in the other direction. The media's hallowed "axis of adults" was not alone in this mistake, but before we could recover, we had to admit the misperception of Trump it rested upon. Khalilzad could pick up the pace of his negotiations, but his efforts were disconnected from what was happening on the ground in his country. It looked like there were a grim couple of months ahead.

On December 20, as Pompeo later told me, just hours before his resignation, Mattis gave Pompeo not only his resignation letter but also other documents, one particularly important here. This was a draft public statement on the operational plans for the Afghan withdrawal, which basically preempted whatever Trump might say about it in his January State of the Union speech. Stunned, Pompeo told Mattis he simply could not release such a document and that there was no way to edit it to make it acceptable. Mattis asked if he would at least send it along to me, and Pompeo said he knew I would agree with him. Neither Pompeo nor I knew at the time that the Defense Department had drafted an "execute order" elaborating what the draft statement said, and distributed it to US commanders and embassies worldwide, all part of Mattis's resignation scenario. We obviously understood this only hazily in all the

confusion, but it produced an explosion of press stories. It reflected a common Mattis tactic, one of spite, to say, in effect, “You want withdrawal? You’ve got withdrawal.” They didn’t call him “Chaos” for nothing.

Even after Mattis’s departure, Shanahan, Pompeo, and I continued the weekly breakfasts. On January 24, reflecting our divergent views on key points, Shanahan and I worried that Khalilzad was giving away too much, not because he was a poor negotiator, but because those were Pompeo’s instructions. The Taliban was insisting that the draft US-Taliban statement (itself a troubling concept) under negotiation say that all foreign forces (meaning us) would withdraw from Afghanistan.³³ That certainly wouldn’t leave room for the counterterrorism capabilities, even though Trump said he wanted them. I worried that State was so wrapped up in getting a deal, it was losing the bigger picture—a congenital department problem. Pompeo vigorously disagreed, although he readily conceded the negotiations could go into a ditch at any point, hardly a vote of confidence in the Taliban as a “negotiating partner,” a term they like at State. The central problem with the diplomatic strategy was that if the Taliban really thought we were leaving, they had no incentive to talk seriously; they could simply wait, as they had often done before, and as Afghans had done for millennia. As the Taliban saying went, “You have the watches, we have the time.” The breakfast ended inconclusively, but Shanahan called later saying he remained very nervous about both the pace of the negotiations, which seemed to have picked up considerably, and their substance. Pompeo just wanted to negotiate a deal and declare success, without much more. This dichotomy characterized the internal debate for months to come.

The State of the Union was delayed for weeks due to the acrimonious budget fight and partial government shutdown. It was finally scheduled for February 5, and the key passage on Afghanistan was mercifully brief: “In Afghanistan, my Administration is holding constructive talks with a number of Afghan groups, including the Taliban. As we make progress in these negotiations, we will be able to reduce our troop presence and focus on counter-terrorism.”³⁴ This comment received little attention, but it embodied struggles that persisted until my final days in the White House. At least at this point there was still hope.