

## The Dolls of Militarism From War Hawks to Chickenhawks

Posted by Joan Russow

Thursday, 05 April 2018 07:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 15 April 2018 19:24

---

### The Dolls of Militarism From War Hawks to Chickenhawks By Danny Sjursen

I get sick of saying it, but just when you thought it couldn't get any worse...

Donald Trump's continual cabinet reshuffling -- otherwise the stuff of reality-TV drama -- has become genuinely frightening. Like so many Russian *matryoshki* or nesting dolls, the president has been removing one war hawk after another, only to reveal yet more extreme versions of the same creature. And [rumor](#) has it that such personnel moves have yet to reach their end point.

In just the last few weeks, President Trump has fired his secretary of state and national security adviser, while nominating two fanatical replacements: CIA Director Mike Pompeo and former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton. The "old" team, Rex Tillerson and Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, were flawed choices from the start, but Pompeo and Bolton seem like an instant formula for a war -- or two or three of them. (And keep in mind that we're already actively fighting at least [seven](#) wars across the Greater Middle East and Africa.)

Tillerson [gutted](#) the State Department and, had he stuck around, might have gone down as one of the [worst](#) secretaries of state ever to walk the halls of Foggy Bottom. Still, the former ExxonMobil CEO does seem to have tried to

[restrain](#)

Trump's more extreme positions on the Paris climate accords and the Obama-era Iran nuclear deal. In addition, as his infamous "moron"

[comment](#)

suggests, he evidently wasn't cowed by our bully-in-chief.

Lieutenant General McMaster was no prince either. He helped [craft](#) a National Defense Strategy that all but declared a new Cold War on Russia and China. He was also to the right of reasonable on Iran and North Korea. Nevertheless, he is an intelligent man with genuine academic [bona fides](#).

I've met the guy and, even though we disagree on almost everything, he's certainly preferable to a zealot like Bolton. McMaster thinks critically and wasn't always reflexively pro-war.

However, Trump, a man who likes his information in tiny doses (and preferably on Fox News), [reportedly](#)

## The Dolls of Militarism From War Hawks to Chickenhawks

Posted by Joan Russow

Thursday, 05 April 2018 07:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 15 April 2018 19:24

---

found H.R.'s detailed

[briefings](#)

insufferable. And McMaster's recent suggestion that Russia played an "incontrovertible"

[role](#)

in the 2016 U.S. election evidently didn't help him one bit either.

Think about it for a second. An embattled, [scandal-ridden](#) administration suddenly fires two hawkish, though tenuously mainstream, foreign policy advisers and replaces them with off-the-grid warmongers. Connect those dots and it gets scary, fast. In fact, the situation is starting to resemble a Hollywood-style,

[Wag-the-Dog](#)

, drum-up-a-war-to-distract-the-populace scenario.

With whom? Given the proclivities of Pompeo and Bolton, the obvious candidate is Iran. After all, as their records suggest, both the incoming secretary of state and the national security adviser suffer from acute cases of [Iran hysteria](#) and have been beating the Islamic Republic war drum for years now. So look for Trump and his two new subordinates to strike a less than substantial deal with nuclear North Korea (to show their cuddly diplomatic side) and then pivot toward tearing up the Iran nuclear deal in May and heading for military action against non-nuclear -- and so more vulnerable -- nuclear-pact-

[adhering](#)

Iran.

Count on this, at least: it's going to be one hell of a ride for America's already [overstretched](#) military men and women -- and one hell of a

[cash bonanza](#)

for an already flush military-industrial complex.

### The Bolton Problem

No question about it: John Bolton is a nightmare. If he worked for Iran or any other Muslim state, we'd label him a fundamentalist extremist. But he's ours and his religion of choice has long been chauvinist interventionism, so instead he tends to get the lifeless (and perhaps not even [accurate](#)) label "neoconservative."

## The Dolls of Militarism From War Hawks to Chickenhawks

Posted by Joan Russow

Thursday, 05 April 2018 07:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 15 April 2018 19:24

---

How bad is he? Well, we'd all undoubtedly be far better served if *Michael* Bolton were national security adviser and just sang "How Am I Supposed to Live Without You" throughout his term in office.

The national security adviser holds an incredibly influential position and doesn't even require Senate confirmation hearings. Need proof? The establishment's favorite statesman-cum- [war criminal](#) Henry Kissinger started out in that position for President Richard Nixon. The thought of Bolton's voice being the final one Trump hears (and he's well-known to be prone to whatever last [catches](#) his attention) before making decisions about war and peace should chill us all.

How dangerous is Bolton, who came to Trump, like so many others, via his position as a commentator at Fox News? Back in 2005, he couldn't even pass [muster](#) among Republicans in Senate confirmation hearings to become President George W. Bush's ambassador to the United Nations. Dubya had to slip him in with a [recess](#) appointment (a decision even he [came to regret](#)). But give Bolton credit, at least, for consistency. He's been wrong about every significant foreign policy move since 9/11. Of course, he was hardly alone in that in Washington politics, but he does stand out for his unapologetic regime-change enthusiasm. He's repeatedly [called](#) for preventive war with North Korea. He's [long called](#) for regime change in Iran by force of arms and, back in distant 2017, even placed a [time stamp](#) on that event (the end of 2018)!

He still insists that the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which [shattered](#) that country and the entire region, was justified, a fact that ought in itself to have disqualified him in the eyes of a president who, on the campaign trail, repeatedly called that war "dumb."

A man who hasn't learned from or even accepted the failure of regime change in Iraq is now to take the helm coordinating U.S. military policy for the future. If Iraq didn't constitute a mistake, then what would? It's hard to imagine. If preventive war -- not exactly street [legal](#) in international law -- is A-okay, why not, say, regime change in Syria (another country the president recently

## The Dolls of Militarism From War Hawks to Chickenhawks

Posted by Joan Russow

Thursday, 05 April 2018 07:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 15 April 2018 19:24

---

[claimed](#)

he wanted to get out of) and risk war with Turkey, Iran, and Russia as well? Or how about directly taking on Iran, an event that could make the invasion of Iraq look like the "

[cakewalk](#)

" it was billed as back in early 2003? There are plenty of nasty regimes out there and you can bet on one thing: Bolton will advise the president to use his \$716

[billion](#)

military for more than just

[parades](#)

.

### The Pompeo Problem

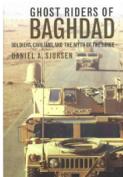
In 1986, Mike Pompeo was the class valedictorian at West Point and he then spent some time in the pre-9/11 Army. You might think that, all these years later, he would have at least a hint or two about the real-life costs of unwinnable, unnecessary wars in the Greater Middle East. Still, he's clearly on the war-with-Iran crazy train. He's even [bragged](#) that it would only take 2,000 air sorties to wipe out Iran's nuclear capabilities. The million-dollar question that should follow evidently doesn't even occur to him: What *then*

? A ground invasion? An indefinite blockade and/or no fly zone? How would Israel respond? What about Russia? Would Shia militias turn on American troops elsewhere in the region?

If James Mattis keeps his job (an open question these days for the man who has [confided](#) to ever-ready-to-leak colleagues that he doubts he can even work with John Bolton), Pompeo could become the nation's first top diplomat in memory to be more hawkish than the secretary of defense, himself a former four-star general. Foggy Bottom could then be

[renamed](#)

War Department 2.0.



[Buy the book](#)

Pompeo is a staunch [Islamophobe](#) and has even [received](#) an award from the extremist anti-Muslim hate group ACT for America. The presumptive secretary of state possesses the

## The Dolls of Militarism From War Hawks to Chickenhawks

Posted by Joan Russow

Thursday, 05 April 2018 07:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 15 April 2018 19:24

---

anti-Islamic, Christian

[zealotry](#) of

Vice President Mike Pence combined with the bombast of Trump and the (dangerous) intellect of the purported “

[adults](#)

” in (or now leaving) the “room,” Mattis and McMaster.

No less unsettling: Pompeo’s actions at his last job as CIA director. While there, for example, he fought to release documents that were designed to intimate alleged [collusion](#) between Iran and al-Qaeda. Forget all you know about the Middle East in these last years; forget that Osama bin Laden and Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei were on opposite sides of an ongoing, regional sectarian war; forget that Iran is actively fighting al-Qaeda-linked groups in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. Pay attention to Pompeo, a man ready to insist that Iran equals al-Qaeda and so is, in fact, the sort of 9/11-associated culprit to which Congress meant to apply its 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force.

In other words, while at the CIA, Pompeo continued to peddle an updated version of the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld playbook that sold their invasion of choice -- in that case, falsely linking Iraqi autocrat Saddam Hussein to al-Qaeda -- to an uninformed citizenry. Or to put it another way, Pompeo and Bolton are on the same page, both ready to replay an old script one more time.

If John Bolton is still a true believer when it comes to the doctrine of [crusading](#) regime change, then Mike Pompeo is exactly the diplomat-in-chief to sell it to an intellectually unengaged president, a largely

[AWOL](#)

Congress, and a distracted public. All the pieces will soon be in place for the next disaster.

### From Hawkish Generals to Chickenhawks

So what’s really going on here? Two disturbing trends seem to be at work: the move from rule by general to rule by civilian chickenhawk and the end of dissent (or even debate) within Trump’s inner circle.

The president’s initial record of appointing not one but three of “[his](#)” generals to run the

## The Dolls of Militarism From War Hawks to Chickenhawks

Posted by Joan Russow

Thursday, 05 April 2018 07:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 15 April 2018 19:24

---

national security team and the White House was itself a threat to the republic and its time-honored tradition of civilian primacy over the military. Those three flag officers -- McMaster, Mattis, and retired general John Kelly -- already inhabited their own echo chamber when it came to America's wars. All of them were still wedded to the

[myth](#)

of the Iraq surge to "victory" of 2007-2008. According to this fable (still widely accepted in military circles), the U.S. military could've/would've/should've won in Iraq after General David Petraeus's

[famed "surge";](#)

there, if only feckless Barack Obama had left the troops in Iraq just a bit longer (by which they meant, as in South Korea after 1953, for more or less ever).

In addition, appointing highly decorated veterans in an era in which all things military are adulated in this country had its own potential for squelching dissent. Witness Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders taunting a reporter that it would be "[highly inappropriate](#)" to question White House Chief of Staff John Kelly because he had once been a four-star Marine general. Still, Mattis and McMaster are at least intelligent, somewhat principled men who haven't always toed the Trump line or kissed the proverbial ring. (McMaster had been bucking authority inside the Army for three decades, even writing a

[book](#)

arguing that the joint chiefs should have stood up to President Lyndon Johnson in the Vietnam War years.)

The president's new appointees, civilians though they are, will out-hawk the generals any day of the week. Bolton, in particular, had made a name as a Fox News commentator [calling](#) for war with North Korea and Iran in the sort of language one doesn't -- in my experience -- even hear in the military ranks. So, big picture, the national security state seems now to be moving from one threat to democracy, a politicized military, to another: the frenzied chickenhawkery of even more extreme civilians.

What President Trump seems to value most is sycophantic loyalty not to the nation but to himself, a quality that's the most essential aspect of any [cult of personality](#). Which means one thing: outright dissent of any real sort inside the administration is a thing of the past (an autocratic mood that could, sooner or later, spread to the larger society). What did McMaster and Tillerson ultimately have in common? Simply put, both attempted to restrain Trump's more extreme impulses and neither truly

[clicked](#)

with the president on a personal level. Big mistake. What this president wants above all else isn't critical thinking or informed debate on crucial issues but total allegiance.

## The Dolls of Militarism From War Hawks to Chickenhawks

Posted by Joan Russow

Thursday, 05 April 2018 07:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 15 April 2018 19:24

---

The defining characteristics of this White House are [nepotism](#) and sycophancy. John Bolton is never going to temper Trump's most bellicose instincts and Pompeo is already a Trump sycophant. When defending Pompeo's appointment, Trump's two main arguments were that he was a West Point graduate and that they are "always on the same

[wavelength](#)

." It's been widely

[reported](#)

that the two men have hit it off on a personal and professional level, as Pompeo personally delivered daily oral CIA intel briefs in the Oval Office (since Trump loathes reading). Pompeo grasped just how to get what he wanted in such a situation: stay in the boss's good graces. Mind-melding with the president is the path to promotion in this administration.

As America enters the second spring of the Trump era, it's creeping ever closer to yet more war. McMaster and Mattis may have [written](#) the National Defense Strategy that [over-hyped](#) the threats on this planet, but Bolton and Pompeo will have the opportunity to address these inflated threats in the worst way possible: by force of arms.

Trump finally has the minions he wants: devoted and fervently militaristic.

And while the public remains focused on the man's outlandish shenanigans, his team will be cooking up something far worse: a new war to put all the others to shame.

*Major Danny Sjursen, a [TomDispatch regular](#), is a U.S. Army officer and former history instructor at West Point. He served tours with reconnaissance units in Iraq and Afghanistan. He has written a memoir and critical analysis of the Iraq War,*

[Ghost Riders of Baghdad: Soldiers, Civilians, and the Myth of the Surge](#)

*He lives with his wife and four sons in Lawrence, Kansas. Follow him on Twitter at*

[@SkepticalVet](#)

*and check out his new podcast*

[Fortress on a Hill](#)

*, co-hosted with fellow vet Chris 'Henri' Henriksen.*

## The Dolls of Militarism From War Hawks to Chickenhawks

Posted by Joan Russow

Thursday, 05 April 2018 07:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 15 April 2018 19:24

---

[The views expressed in this article are those of the author, expressed in an unofficial capacity, and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.]

Follow TomDispatch on [Twitter](#) and join us on [Facebook](#). Check out the newest Dispatch Book, Alfred McCoy's

[In the Shadows of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of U.S. Global Power](#), as well as John Dower's

[The Violent American Century: War and Terror Since World War II](#)

, John Feffer's dystopian novel

[Splinterlands](#)

, Nick Turse's

[Next Time They'll Come to Count the Dead](#)

, and Tom Engelhardt's

[Shadow Government: Surveillance, Secret Wars, and a Global Security State in a Single-Superpower World](#)

.

Copyright 2018 Danny Sjursen