

## ***Trump at (Bureaucratic) War: Not Much Winning***

Aaron Mannes, Rachelle Guy, Khalil Kwok, and Megan Williams

University of Maryland, College Park

*This paper was presented at the Southern Political Science Association, January 2022.*

### **Introduction**

Although his political experience was limited, Donald Trump entered the office of the presidency with many strongly held views on policy and international affairs. Yet he had difficulty putting many of these beliefs into practice. There were cases in which Trump’s objectives were stymied by an uncooperative Congress – such as his oft ridiculed plans for “Infrastructure Week.” But in the foreign and national security affairs, where the president has a great deal of autonomy, Trump often found himself thwarted by his own advisors. While Trump was able to act unilaterally on many of his priorities such as withdrawing from the JCPOA and levying tariffs on friends and foe alike, in many other cases he was less successful. Trump came into office questioning the purpose and wisdom of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, yet despite regular calls for bringing the troops home, when he left office U.S. troops remained. It was eight months later, that his successor completed the U.S. withdrawal.

FDR, no slouch at bureaucratic infighting famously observed:

The Treasury is so large and far-flung and ingrained in its practices that I find it impossible to get the action and results I want—even with Henry [Morgenthau] there. But the Treasury is not to be compared with the State Department. You should go through the experience of trying to get any changes in the thinking, policy, and action of the career diplomats, and then you’d know what a real problem was. But the Treasury and the State Department put together are nothing compared with the Na-a-vy. The admirals are really something to cope with—and I should know. To change anything in the Na-a-vy is like punching a feather bed. You punch it with your right and you punch it with your left until you are finally exhausted, and then you find the damn bad just as it was before you started punching.<sup>1</sup>

This paper seeks to flesh out FDR’s vignette, with concrete examples of how the policy-making process can wear the president down. In the Trump administration these challenges were writ large due to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Eccles, *Beckoning Frontiers*, pg. 336

combination of presidential inexperience and lack of discipline and, thanks to leaks and tell-all books, their being played out to a great extent in public view.

This paper examines the conditions under which President Trump both succeeded and failed to achieve his desired policy outcome. Starting with the work of Elizabeth Saunders on the role of presidential experience in overseeing foreign policy advisors and applies the taxonomy of bureaucratic politics maneuvers outlined by Morton Halperin, Priscilla Clapp, and Arnold Kanter in *Bureaucratic Policy and Foreign Policy* to understand how decisions were made, implemented, or thwarted. In *International Organization* Saunders applies the principal-agent paradigm to understanding the interactions between experienced and inexperienced presidents and their experienced advisors.<sup>2</sup> Saunders focuses on questions of assessing risk in the face of war and finds the perfect case studies for comparison in the two Bush presidencies (where many of the advisors were the same, but the presidents in question varied dramatically in experience.) Saunders finds that an experienced president is better equipped to monitor activities of subordinates, less inclined to credibly delegate responsibility (not giving advisors a free hand), and more able to diversify information sources. Under an inexperienced president, agents are more likely to “drift” and pursue their own agendas and not those of the principal.

The Trump administration stands on its own, with no other obvious comparators. Although Trump was extremely inexperienced, not even having held any form of political office, he had deeply held views and attempted to enact them throughout his presidency. The interesting questions are, given an inexperienced president with policy preferences well outside of the policy mainstream (certainly within his own party), where and how was he able to succeed in implementing these preferences? What situations gave his agents vantages to drift from presidential preferences? What were these vantages? How did bureaucratic drift (in some cases a high-speed departure) operate? And how did an inexperienced president, facing experienced and often resistant advisors, seek to help himself.

To examine these problems, this paper considers a case study, Trump’s 2018 order to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria, in which the president succeeded and failed in achieving his stated ambition. The decision-making process is derived the popular accounts as well as the panoply of memoirs and accounts of the past administration. The maneuvers described are then categorized based on the taxonomy in *Bureaucratic Policy and Foreign Policy*, Morton Halperin, Priscilla Clapp, and Arnold Kanter which describe in detail the different bureaucratic moves used to influence a decision or shape its implementation.

---

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Saunders, “No Substitute for Experience: Presidents, Advisers, and Information in Group Decision Making,” *International Organization* 71, Supplement 2017, pp. S219-S247

The working hypothesis is that the two critical variables were if Trump’s advisors supported or opposed his decision and if the issue was complex and required extensive cooperation both across the government and potentially with foreign partners. The decisions considered will be those within the president’s authority – thus not issues that required congressional approval.

	Low Complexity	High Complexity
Advisor Support	High Probability of Presidential Success	Moderate Probability of Presidential Success
Advisor Opposition	Moderate Probability of Presidential Success	Low Probability of Presidential Success

*Table 1: The inevitable 2x2 Likelihood of a Presidential Order Being Carried Out*

The working hypothesis is that when for issues are of limited complexity (i.e. a presidential order will suffice and implementation does not require extensive cooperation with multiple parties) a president is more likely to succeed in having his instructions carried out. Less complex issues might include levying tariffs and sanctions and ordering limited military strikes. These are complex operations, but there are well-defined government programs that enable these types of presidential commands. When advisors support a policy, a president is also more likely to succeed. If the issue is complex, even with support of advisors, there may be resistance elsewhere in the bureaucracy, from Congress, or allies that make presidential success less likely. Negotiating treaties and large-scale military operations are cases of greater complexity. When advisors oppose a presidential initiative that is lower complexity, there are an array of tactics such as dissuading the president or urging the president to delay the decision in order to prevent decision from being made. When advisors oppose a more complex presidential decision, in addition to trying to shape the decision, they can also use the complex implementation process to stymie presidential authority.

### **The Bureaucratic Battlefield in the Trump Administration**

A simplistic picture of the policy process is of a linked upward slope and downward slope. The upward slope represents the decision process, the peak is the decision, and the downward slope is the

implementation process. This does not reflect reality because, as Halperin et al observe, "...the president himself seldom carries out a decision, only in very special cases are presidential decisions self-executing. Usually they begin a process."<sup>3</sup> Halperin et al continue,

...a presidential decision, rather than settling the question of what is to be done, simply opens a new round of maneuvers. The process that occurs after a presidential decision is made proceeds in much the same way as the efforts to get a presidential decision. Indeed, in many areas the two processes overlap, since a presidential decision may be followed by a simultaneous struggle over its implementation and the drafting of new decisions.<sup>4</sup>

White House decision-making is a messy process as best, but in the Trump White House, where disorder reigned, it was even more so. There are innumerable descriptions of the chaotic Trump White House which featured rapid staff turnover, the president as tweeter and leaker-in-chief, ill-defined roles, and lots of outside advisors including TV personalities acting as informal advisors.<sup>5</sup>

Although his advisors never stopped trying, it became quickly evident that the traditional maneuvers to shape decisions through information and argument<sup>6</sup> were of limited efficacy with Trump, who had strongly held views and resisted evidence to the contrary. When National Economic Advisor Gary Cohn, after numerous efforts to explain how the U.S. economy worked and why tariffs could hurt the U.S. economy asked, in frustration, "Why do you have these views?" Trump replied, "I just do. I've had these views for 30 years."<sup>7</sup>

On July 20, 2017, concerned about Trump's reflexive hostility to – and limited understanding of – American global commitments the Secretaries of State and Defense, along with Gary Cohn, invited Trump to an in-depth briefing at "the Tank," the secure conference room at the Pentagon where the Joint Chiefs of Staff meet. The trio chose their ground carefully, Trump had been impressed by the room when he first visited in January. They were joined by the senior military leadership, for added impact. This was all stage-managed as Trump's national security advisors were attempting a dangerous operation, a frontal assault on Trump's fundamental worldview. Mattis provided an in-depth briefing outlining global commitments and how they ultimately benefitted the United States. Extensive literature, as well as recent experience, highlight that evidence strongly challenging deeply held beliefs does not change these beliefs,

---

<sup>3</sup> Halperin 246

<sup>4</sup> Halperin 257

<sup>5</sup> <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/01/trump-hannity-dobbs-oval-office-staff-meetings.html>

<sup>6</sup> Halperin 139-180

<sup>7</sup> Woodward, *Fear*

but that the belief holder ignores or re-interprets evidence, or even goes into “amygdala hijack” and responds emotionally.<sup>8</sup>

The July 20 briefing did not go well. The presentation was lengthy and not tailored to Trump’s attention span. He found the presentation condescending and the subject infuriating. Trump began to interrupt, complaining about why the South Koreans didn’t pay for the U.S. troops based there or the new missile defense system being installed on the Korean peninsula. He went on to complain that NATO members were “in arrears” to the U.S. Cohn’s explanation of the importance of free trade was rejected by a president who insisted, “They’re ripping us off.” When the conversation turned to Afghanistan, Trump lashed out at the military. Reportedly he told them, “You don’t know how to win anymore.” “I wouldn’t go to war with you people.” “You’re a bunch of dopes and babies.”<sup>9</sup>

It was after this meeting that Tillerson reportedly said of Trump, “He’s a fucking moron.”

Trump was not the only president to abuse his advisors. It is, according to Halperin, a time-honored tactic to assert presidential control (LBJ was particularly famous for it).<sup>10</sup> Whether or not Trump’s outburst was strategic or emotional, it had at least some of its intended effect. It highlighted that the president would not be easily cowed by consensus among his advisors or bow to established expertise. Trump advisors still attempted to persuade the president, but while they could delay presidential decisions with which they disagreed, they increasingly relied on the implementation process to short-circuit or ameliorate presidential orders.

Gary Cohn engaged in a direct tactical manipulation, on at least two occasions taking papers off the president’s desk so that they would not be signed. One was an order to withdraw from a free trade agreement with Korea, the other was an order to withdraw from NAFTA.<sup>11</sup>

Mattis deployed an array of tactics. According to Trump’s third National Security Advisor John Bolton, a master of bureaucratic infighting in his own right, whose efforts will be discussed below:

Mattis knew where he wanted Trump to come out militarily, and he also knew that the way to maximize the likelihood of his view’s prevailing was to deny information to others who had a legitimate right to weigh in. It was simple truth that not presenting options until the last minute, making sure that those options were rigged in the “right” direction, and then table-pounding,

---

<sup>8</sup> There is extensive literature on shared images among decision-makers and elites. A counterpoint could be that a Washington consensus was a deeply held shared image of the U.S. role in the world and Trump was in fact the challenger.

<sup>9</sup> Rucker 137-146

<sup>10</sup> Halperin 297-298

<sup>11</sup> Woodward Fear

delaying, and obfuscating as long as possible were the tactics by which a savvy bureaucrat like Mattis could get his way.<sup>12</sup>

Bolton's observations were in response to Mattis' delays in providing targeting options in response to a Syrian chemical weapons attack in April 2018. Besides hampering analysis of the targets, the White House Counsel needed time to issue a legal opinion. With British and French allies calling for a rapid military response, and Mattis insisting that further options would take more time, the Defense Secretary's preferences prevailed. Bolton adds that Mattis was able to succeed because of the overall process that Trump created:

Of course, Trump didn't help by not being clear about what he wanted, jumping randomly from one question to another, and generally frustrating efforts to have a coherent discussion about the consequences of making one choice rather than another. . . . Achieving a better outcome, however, would require more bureaucratic infighting and a further NSC meeting, thereby losing more critical time. That was a non-starter, and Mattis knew it.<sup>13</sup>

Bolton decries Mattis' bureaucratic tactics, but uses a full arsenal himself, sometimes to enable the president and at other times to stymie him. Most people in the president's orbit did.

Trump's strongly held core ideas, but limited experience and refusal to adhere to a disciplined decision-making process created a complex situation. In the simple decision-making process outlined above, the base of the decision-making slope offered little room for maneuver. On many issues Trump was simply not persuadable – although advisors did seek nuggets and factoids that might influence him. As issues moved up the slope to actual decisions or down the slope to implementation, Trump's inexperience and lack of discipline gave Trump's advisors room to drift from presidential priorities.

## Syria

On the morning of December 19, 2018, Trump tweeted: "We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency." Later that day, Trump tweeted a short video in which he stated: "We have won against ISIS, our boys, our young women, our men — they're all coming back, and they're coming back now."<sup>14</sup> This order sent shockwaves through the administration, Washington, and worldwide. In retrospect, this sudden order was no surprise. Trump had long called for ending what he viewed as costly American military commitments abroad. Nonetheless, nearly a year after Trump left the

---

<sup>12</sup> Bolton 50

<sup>13</sup> Bolton 56

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/us/politics/trump-syria-turkey-troop-withdrawal.html>

White House, U.S. troops remain in Syria and their exit does not appear to be on the horizon.<sup>15</sup> President Trump's inability to achieve this clear and distinct policy goal illustrates both how experienced advisors to an inexperienced president can drift from presidential preferences and maintain their own preferred policies, but further the mechanisms by which these advisors can work to thwart and undermine a president.

Trump's predecessor, President Obama, had avoided deploying U.S. military forces in the conflict between the Assad regime and Syrian rebels. The rise of the Islamic State (IS – also ISIS) changed Obama's calculus and special forces conducted operations in Syria during the summer of 2014. Late in 2015 an initial 50 ground troops were deployed to support the Syrian Democratic Forces, a predominantly Kurdish force, that was leading the fight against IS. Ultimately the force grew to approximately 2000 when Trump called for their complete withdrawal in December 2018.<sup>16</sup> Although Trump strongly supported the fight against IS, and claimed credit for its success, by late 2018 IS held a tiny fraction of the territory they had held at their peak. At this point, Trump's antipathy to U.S. interventionism re-emerged.

Trump had a strongly held view that other countries were taking advantage of the U.S. and that American military deployments were not in the nation's interest. Trump had a long track record of making these statements about U.S. policy in general and about Syria in particular. Even before launching his campaign for the presidency, when Obama increased support for Syrian rebels Trump said, "We should stay the hell out of Syria."<sup>17</sup> During the campaign Trump stated, "The U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems."<sup>18</sup> Trump had previously stated that his only reason for continuing U.S. involvement in Syria was the existence of IS, saying "What we should do is focus on ISIS. We should not be focusing on Syria."<sup>19</sup> Trump has also said, "The enormous resources that we continue to expend in those countries! ... We should just declare victory, end the wars and bring our troops home"<sup>20</sup> Sources within the administration report that Trump's frustrations with the U.S. presence in Syria – and elsewhere – came up frequently and unsolicited in many contexts.<sup>21</sup>

Trump's national security team was generally supportive of the U.S. presence in Syria for an array of reasons: completing the mission against IS, countering Iranian (and Russian) presence in the region, and

---

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/26/will-us-leave-syria>

<sup>16</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-syria-islamic-state-group-middle-east-international-news-96701a254c5a448cb253f14ab697419b>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/07/us/politics/donald-trump-syria-twitter.html>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-americas-dumping-ground-contributes-to-vibrancy-and-growth/2015/09/15/498de09e-5be4-11e5-b38e-06883aacba64\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-americas-dumping-ground-contributes-to-vibrancy-and-growth/2015/09/15/498de09e-5be4-11e5-b38e-06883aacba64_story.html)

<sup>19</sup> <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-syria-strike-is-trumps-first-big-break-from-his-campaign-rhetoric/>

<sup>20</sup> Woodward 463

<sup>21</sup> Bolton 53

protecting the Kurds who had allied themselves with the United States and were threatened by Turkey. Efforts to persuade Trump of these arguments had generally been unsuccessful. In the absence of a direct order, they ignored presidential preferences and continued to conduct business as usual. Only weeks before Trump's tweet Secretary of Defense Mattis had promised U.S. allies that American presence in Syria would continue through 2020 in order to ensure stability and prevent an IS resurgence. The U.S. special envoy for the anti-IS coalition, Brett McGurk had made a similar promise in a State Department briefing on December 11.<sup>22</sup>

Trump's tweeted orders to withdraw from Syria were sent after a December 14 phone call with Turkish President Erdogan. When Bolton briefed Trump on the situation in Syria in preparation for the call, Trump said, "We should get the hell out of there."<sup>23</sup>

During the call, when Erdogan urged Trump to remove US troops from Syria, he was pushing on an open door. While Erdogan was pursuing his own ends (attacking the Kurds, some of whom had carried out a long-running insurgency in southeastern Turkey), he told Trump that the US had defeated 99% of the IS, asking why the US was still involved in Syria if the IS was gone. Erdogan assured Trump that the Turks could finish the job. In the call Trump instructed Bolton to begin preparing a plan for immediate withdrawal, to be completed within 30 days.<sup>24</sup> Given the recalcitrance of his advisors to provide options for withdrawing U.S. troops from Syria, it seems unsurprising that when a foreign leader that Trump respected offered a solution to this problem, he leapt at it.

In his memoir, Bolton was frank about his opposition to this decision:

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. ... What to do?<sup>25</sup>

For Bolton, and the rest of Trump's senior national security team, which opposed the abrupt withdrawal, the combined diplomatic, military, and logistically complexity of removing even a relatively small number of troops from an active war zone provided multiple vantage points from which to delay and obfuscate a presidential order.

---

<sup>22</sup> Rucker 335-6 Months earlier, Bolton implied that to counter Iran an open-ended U.S. presence in Syria would be necessary. <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/12/19/trump-threat-iran-syria-1070274>

<sup>23</sup> Bolton 193

<sup>24</sup> Bolton 194

<sup>25</sup> Bolton 194-5 Bolton is a controversial figure. This paper relies heavily on his memoir, which is extremely detailed. His judgment and positions on policy are open to debate. This paper is focusing on process and Bolton was, by all accounts an extraordinarily diligent note-taker. In terms of factual accounts of what happened and when, he is presumed to be generally accurate. For Bolton's note-taking see <https://www.axios.com/john-bolton-impeachment-testimony-secret-notes-8a2f8417-67f3-4a8c-9693-643ff347ede9.html>



On December 18, the senior foreign policy advisors met at “the Tank” in the Pentagon, rather than at the White House, to avoid attracting attention (which highlights the foreign policy team countered presidential monitoring efforts). They agreed to start contacting their counterparts in allied nations, some of whom then contacted the White House to express their displeasure.<sup>26</sup> The next day Trump made his withdrawal order public, (possibly attempting to forestall the growing resistance.) Although Trump believed he was fulfilling a promise made to his base, the media and Capitol Hill response was extremely critical – including long-time allies such as Sen. Lindsey Graham. Concerns about abandoning the Kurds, who had done much of the fighting against ISIS were central to this criticism.<sup>27</sup> This was the first salvo in the attack on the presidential decision, using well-known bureaucratic tactics of “going to the hill” and “going to a foreign government.” These moves had limited procedural efficacy, as the president did not require congressional approval or foreign collaboration (except for Turkey, which supported the move).<sup>28</sup> But the opposition did concern Trump, and this was merely the first skirmish.

The Pentagon exacerbated the White House’s haphazard effort to explain the withdrawal to the American people by refusing to cooperate. The Pentagon’s communications chief was instructed not to provide spokespeople or statements – only providing the White House basic talking points.<sup>29</sup> This distanced the Pentagon from a decision it opposed, without openly defying a presidential order. It effectively undermined Trump’s effort to enforce compliance with his order by making a statement and making the order public through his December 19 tweets.<sup>30</sup> Halperin et al write that a presidential statement to the American public is “combining the roles of decisionmaker and practitioner in a way that gives him maximum leverage over the implementing process.” This however is only part of the strategy for asserting president control that Halperin et al describe as “Taking Over as Desk Officer.” To fully enact this strategy requires extensive presidential time and energy, getting deeply into the details of operations. Trump however, failed to engage in the details, which merely shifted the bureaucratic battle into the Pentagon’s home turf of military operations.

Mattis played the time-honored bureaucratic maneuver of offering his resignation (accompanied by a lengthy letter intended to reach the public), which Trump readily accepted. In conventional Washington politics, a senior official resigning is a sign of an administration in trouble and a headache presidents prefer to avoid. According to Halperin et al, this applies even more so when military officers make this

---

<sup>26</sup> Bolton 195-6

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/us/politics/trump-syria-turkey-troop-withdrawal.html>

<sup>28</sup> Halperin 266-269

<sup>29</sup> Rucker 337

<sup>30</sup> Halperin 299-300

move.<sup>31</sup> Although technically a civilian, Mattis had spent decades in uniform. Mattis also sought to stay at the Pentagon through February to ensure a smooth transition. Trump – not wanting the most prominent member of his cabinet to be in a position to undermine his authority – ordered him to leave within a few days. Besides his apparently strained relations with Mattis, Trump, who had been the host of a TV game show in which his catch phrase was, “You’re fired” may not have felt subject to the traditional pressure associated with a cabinet member’s resignation. In further illustration of this, the resignation of Brett McGurk, the special envoy for fighting the Islamic State was all but ignored by the president.<sup>32</sup> Mattis sought to use conventional methods to win bureaucratic fights against an unconventional president.

Rucker writes, “In the weeks that followed, Trump’s remaining national security advisers, buttressed by the pleas of foreign leaders and Republican allies on Capitol Hill, engaged in a tug-of-war with the president to reverse or alter his decision to withdraw from Syria. As was often the case with his rash decisions, Trump would ultimately backtrack.”<sup>33</sup> The initial frontal assaults to change the president’s mind either through direct appeals or through backlash of poor public reaction did not succeed, but the bureaucratic battle shifted to ground more favorable to maneuvers of delay and obstruction.

The challenges faced by the military in executing a rapid withdrawal were discussed at the Pentagon the next day. There were questions about the sequence of troop withdrawal, whether air support would continue, how to support other members of the coalition against IS who deployed forces in northeastern Syria, and even whether the U.S. should collect weapons it had provided the Kurds.<sup>34</sup> Halperin et al note that the two key factors for presidential success in implementing a decision are presidential time and the degree of presidential control. In the case of the latter, the more people required to cooperate and the greater their distance from Washington, DC the former, Trump’s indiscipline was a significant barrier to policy implementation. In the case of the latter, it provided greater scope to ignore or modify presidential instructions. Military operations in the field are solid ground from which to resist presidential commands.<sup>35</sup>

The day after Trump’s tweets, the Turkish military called for talks with the U.S. to coordinate with the U.S. Bolton saw this as a lifeline, knowing that such talks would take time, giving those in the administration opposed to the Syria withdrawal a credible excuse for not fulfilling the president’s order and opportunities to change the president’s mind or the situation.<sup>36</sup> Delay is a long-standing tactic in

---

<sup>31</sup> Halperin 232-5

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/us/politics/trump-syria-turkey-troop-withdrawal.html>

<sup>33</sup> Rucker 345

<sup>34</sup> Rucker 338-9

<sup>35</sup> Halperin 305-6

<sup>36</sup> Bolton 197

bureaucratic maneuver, and it served the partisans who wanted to maintain the U.S. presence in Syria well.

General Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, proposed a NATO led monitoring force for northeastern Syria to protect the Kurds. When Dunford and Bolton travelled to Turkey *three weeks* after Trump's order, they learned that the Turkish military was not as enthused about entering northern Syria as President Erdogan. The Turkish brass were receptive to the proposal of the monitoring force, which would limit their operations in Syria while allowing Erdogan to claim he was acting against Kurdish terrorists. Bolton wrote, "We now had to convince the Europeans to agree... 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."<sup>37</sup> This combination of delay and cosmetic changes, enabled Trump's advisors to blunt the president's orders and maintain their preferred status quo.<sup>38</sup>

Bolton also found an opportunity to influence Trump's views on the U.S. presence in Syria when he joined the president on a secret Christmas visit to al-Asad Air Base in Iraq. At Bolton's urging, the field commanders and the U.S. ambassador emphasized the role their forces played countering Iranian influence. Trump's mind was not permanently changed, and he continued to ask for a U.S. withdrawal from Syria (and Erdogan continued to press him for it.)<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, Bolton and Dunford's maneuvers had sufficiently distracted and re-oriented the president that troops remained. Little came of the mooted international monitoring force, and on February 21 (now a full two months after the president's order) Trump agreed with Bolton's explanation that a modest U.S. force was necessary for the multilateral force to be viable. That day, when Erdogan again pressed for a U.S. withdrawal, Bolton advised Trump to tell his Turkish counterpart that the military-to-military talks were handling it. With that the withdrawal order effectively died and U.S. troops remained in place.

But Trump never gave up on his core belief that he wanted U.S. troops out of Syria. In another off-the-cuff decision, again after a call with Erdogan, on October 9, 2019, Trump ordered a complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from northeastern Syria.<sup>40</sup> Erdogan told Trump that a Turkish military operation was imminent. It was in many ways a replay of events in December, catching the Secretary of Defense and other U.S. officials by surprise. Troops were re-deployed. One source stated, "POTUS went rogue."<sup>41</sup> With U.S. troops out of the way, Turkish forces launched an offensive against the Kurds, who in turn allied with the Syrian government (and their Russian and Iranian supporters.) In Washington, the

---

<sup>37</sup> Bolton 209

<sup>38</sup> Halperin et al 260-63

<sup>39</sup> Bolton 201-203

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/us/politics/mark-esper-syria-kurds-turkey.html>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/10/07/trump-syria-turkey-national-security-leaders-037958>

decision was criticized by Trump’s allies on Capitol Hill.<sup>42</sup> Only weeks later, the Pentagon stated that a contingent of U.S. troops had remained in Syria to ensure ISIS was defeated, which Trump then explained was “to protect the oil.”<sup>43</sup> Defense Secretary Mark Esper had suggested this line of argument, finding a rationale that to prevent a full withdrawal that resonated with Trump’s worldview.<sup>44</sup> U.S. troops have remained in Syria since.

## Conclusions

Truman famously said of his successor, “He’ll sit here and say, ‘Do this! Do that!’ *And nothing will happen.* Poor Ike—it won’t be a bit like the Army. He’ll find it very frustrating.”<sup>45</sup> This characterization was unfair to Eisenhower, who was in fact subtle and devious. But it does appear to apply to Trump, who having come from a small family run business expected his orders to be carried out directly. His lack of experience – not only in foreign affairs but with complex organizations and politics – undermined his ability to monitor subordinates. There was no suggestion that he effectively followed-up or asked the types of probing detailed questions that could elicit options or force action. Similarly, believing his orders would be executed, he was all too inclined to fully delegate his instructions, and would simply repeat his demands when nothing happened. Beyond tirades, he appeared unwilling to engage in the persuasion and negotiation that have been the stock and trade of other presidents facing recalcitrant cabinet members.<sup>46</sup> Finally, given his limited contacts, he had difficulty diversifying his sources of advice. While Trump regularly spoke with many people from old friends to media personalities, they rarely possessed the type of expertise needed to inform policymaking and implementation. One White House figure, after the Syria withdrawal was announced, stated, “They don’t give him the kinds of options that he wants, and then he lashes out.”<sup>47</sup> Experienced bureaucratic operators know how to reach beyond their direct reports to obtain better options. To take one example, Dick Cheney, an experienced bureaucratic operator, was famous for “pulsing the system” to generate additional options. As Secretary of Defense under Bush 41, when he was dissatisfied with the options presented after Iraq invaded Kuwait, asked his military assistant, a naval officer, to generate immediate options to respond to Saddam’s aggression.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/10/09/syria-backlash-trump-042654> -

<https://www.politico.com/news/2019/10/11/lindsey-graham-trump-syria-044470>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/11/10/joint-chiefs-milley-us-presence-middle-east-068696>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/07/20/esper-defense-yes-man-reputation-370248>

<sup>45</sup> Neustadt *Presidential Power*, p. 9

<sup>46</sup> Halperin 295-7

<sup>47</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/they-screwed-the-whole-thing-up-inside-the-attempt-to-derail-trumps-erratic-syria-withdrawal/2019/01/13/0ae1149c-1365-11e9-803c-4ef28312c8b9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/they-screwed-the-whole-thing-up-inside-the-attempt-to-derail-trumps-erratic-syria-withdrawal/2019/01/13/0ae1149c-1365-11e9-803c-4ef28312c8b9_story.html)

<sup>48</sup> Woodward, *The Commanders*

Between his lack of experience and limited self-discipline Trump was neither able to enforce his preferred policies on the bureaucracy or learn on the job (as other presidents with limited experience in national security and foreign policy did – including George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama.) Instead, Trump was the perfect target for an array of bureaucratic tactics of delay and redirection.

This work seeks to better understand bureaucratic politics, in effect, by looking at an amateur in the arena and seeing how more experienced fighters manage him. It is an opportunity to study both the tactics of bureaucratic politics but also its broader implications. To what extent to the verities of bureaucratic politics and organizational dynamics hold against a president unconstrained by convention. The immediate conclusion, based on the Syria case study presented here, is that organizational dynamics and bureaucratic politics do appear to operate on an unconventional president and may in some ways be even more effective at hindering their policy ambitions. Most significant policies are carried out by large, complex organizations. Directing these organizations requires significant skill, and delegating this oversight is a recipe for drift or obstruction.

While bureaucracy can act as a constraint on irresponsible politicians, it raises larger questions about the legality of and legitimacy of these actions by unelected advisors.

### **Future Work**

There are a trio of additional case studies in draft looking at ending the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, Trump's trade policy with China, and immigration policy under the Trump administration. It will be useful to look at additional cases that address each of the quadrants. While Bolton provides the most detail, it will also be important to find cases that include the many different teams of advisors who served in the Trump administration. In some cases, the advisor teams may be inexperienced which could reveal new insights about the mechanisms of bureaucratic conflict in the Trump administration.