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Donald Trump's Fake Isolationism

Donald Trump was never coy about how he'd Make America Great Again, abroad. He'd carpet-bomb the terrorists, kill their families, and maybe do a straight-up, throwback war for oil in Iraq.

The manufactured crisis with Iran in 2019 follows from the erratic militarism suggested at every stop on the 2016 campaign trail, where Trump repeatedly pledged to tear up the product of diplomacy and double down on a strategy of tweeted threats.

Somehow, in the popular media, this hawk who is president became but a bellicose peacenik. Maureen Dowd, The New York Times' political gossip columnist, went all in and called him a "dove," while The Guardian's Simon Jenkins argued, glass half full, that he would at least ground the drones. The New Republic, only half in jest, declared him the voice of the anti-war movement. And so on. It was less a commentary on Trump, these opinions, than on his opponent, the winner of the popular vote who most everyone thought would be the next commander in chief. Hillary Clinton, a liberal interventionist to be sure, nonetheless campaigned against doing what this administration is doing right now.

Within days of taking office, Trump made a fool of those who penned the above opinions. He ordered a disastrous raid in Yemen in which U.S. soldiers killed an eight-year-old girl, a U.S. citizen, and as many as two dozen local villagers. Dozens more innocents were killed just weeks later when U.S. airpower was deployed against worshippers at a mosque in rebel-held Aleppo, "collateral damage" from an attempt to take out an al-Qaeda meeting that wasn't.

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The so-called deep state did not thrust this lethal expansion of covert state murder on President Trump. The man running foreign policy from the shadows is Trump's own son-in-law, Jared Kushner, not the agents of Henry Kissinger (the famed coddler of dictators is merely a trusted advisor).

From the start, Trump sought to unleash the American empire's capacity for indiscriminate firepower, growing impatient, hours into his presidency, when shown footage of a CIA drone in Syria holding its fire and sparing a family. "Why did you wait?" the incurious head of state inquired. Drone strikes, an issue under the last president, immediately surged. The new administration dispensed with targeting guidelines intended to protect civilians, inadequate enough under a predecessor who won a Nobel Prize for peace, enabling CIA drone strikes from Africa to Central Asia to be carried out with ever more reduced concern for the lives of women and children.

That's what it means to put country first. And drones are just one accessory in his arsenal. At a minimum, U.S.-led conventional airpower killed over 5,000 civilians in Iraq and Syria in the first two years of MAGA foreign policy, according to the monitoring group Airwars. In the fight for Mosul alone, U.S.-led forces killed 3,200 civilians, per the Associated Press. According to Amnesty International, U.S.-led air and artillery strikes killed 1,600 civilians in the final battle for Raqqa. In 2018, there was a tripling of airstrikes in Afghanistan, contributing to the worst year on record for Afghan civilians. The previous year, Trump dropped the largest non-nuclear bomb in history.

Another president may well have overseen mass casualties. But a Democrat who did the same thing—while not threatening a new front against Iran—would not likely benefit from media coverage suggesting humanitarianism where there is evidently none. And there is no question that, rather than arrest U.S. intervention, Trump has escalated every conflict. But in the wake of Trump's suspended threat to bomb Iran, media coverage, much of it based on official leaks from within an administration that employs uber-hawk John Bolton, painted the U.S. commander in chief as admirably reluctant to kill 150 civilians in retaliation for a downed drone his administration chose to fly off the coast of Iran.

In her Sunday column, Maureen Dowd once again offered eye-rolling praise for Trump's "isolationist instincts," lauding the president for ultimately deciding not to launch a war desired only by the extreme Iran hawks that he appointed (even the neoconservative

Foundation for Defense of Democracies politely advised against the military option). Fox News' Tucker Carlson, who likewise advocated exiting the Iran Deal—the very act that, along with the subsequent reimposition of crippling sanctions, “set a spark to the escalatory cycle we’re seeing today,” in the words of the RAND Corporation’s Dalia Dassa Kaye—was also credited for advising his president not to do the thing no one outside of his White House wanted (“the man standing between us and another world war,” is how Dowd described the Fox personality).

But it’s not just the opinion page crediting arsonists for getting cold feet (after they’d earlier doused multilateral diplomacy in America First gasoline). No, conventional wisdom has, as it often does, bled into the liberal media’s straight-news division.

In the immediate aftermath of the non-bombing, The New York Times’ White House correspondent, Peter Baker, framed the matter of whether or not to kill Iranians as a question of judgment thrust upon a conflicted president. Such an attack, he wrote, “could lead to the kind of war he came to office vowing not to wage.” What of all the promises to be as belligerent as he has been? “Mr. Trump has always been a commander in chief of contradictions,” he continued, “He talks like a bellicose warmonger but acts like an isolationist peacenik.”

This is the victory of a false, ostensibly contrarian but very much conventional narrative. It is true that Donald Trump has not launched a new, 100,000-strong ground war in Central Asia. Neither did Barack Obama, who was likewise reticent to deploy U.S. military power but who, early Peace Prize aside, was dogged by seven years of criticism over his extensive reliance on remotely controlled killing devices and the institutionalization of the Bush-Cheney war on terror. This is also not the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, when another president—who ran on a professed hesitation to intervene abroad—enjoyed near-universal approval domestically and a regrettable mandate to launch a war on terror.

Today there’s no broad public support for another invasion. Within that context, the president is indeed on the hawkish end of the spectrum, a dove only compared to the discredited hyper-nationalist he appointed his top national security advisor. An “isolationist,” commonly understood, he is not. Trump, like George W. Bush before him, is an America-First unilateralist who has already killed thousands. Let’s hope he never

gets a chance, after an attack on U.S. soil, to reveal exactly how much of a militarist he really is.

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