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Happy New Year, Riyadh!

'Tis the season for giving. Accordingly, the US has given the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia a gift in the form of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) which President Donald Trump signed into law on December 21.

The NDAA is not only a gift to the Saudis. The \$738 billion in new defense spending the NDAA authorizes means a very Merry Christmas for the Pentagon and for Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and the like. The NDAA's creation of a sixth branch of the armed forces, the Space Force, also guarantees a huge market for military contractors' high-tech toys.

President Trump had Merry Christmas, too. Trump tweeted: "Wow! All of our priorities have made it into the final NDAA." Trump couldn't be happier if he found a pony—or a porn star—under his tree.

Progressives got coal in their stockings. Several urgently needed antiwar amendments which the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives had inserted in its version of the NDAA were thrown out during the reconciliation process. The House amendments would have ended US assistance to the Saudi-UAE coalition attacking Yemen; ended arms sales to the Saudis; required Congress' assent to a US attack on Iran; and would have revoked the by now long in the tooth 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for the Use of Military Force which the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations have stretched far beyond their original purposes to make war anywhere they choose.^[1]

Tossing out the amendments means Congress and the President have given the Saudis gifts of incalculable value. The US will continue to provide arms to the Saudis and assist Saudi aggression in Yemen. And Trump can start a war with the Saudis' hated rival Iran at any time without having to bother with Congress.

Denouncing the NDAA's "astonishing moral cowardice," Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Representative Ro Khanna (D-CA) urged "every member of Congress" to vote against the NDAA. Fat chance. Only 48 members of the House and 8 senators voted against the NDAA. Adam Smith, Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and a co-author of the axed Khanna-Smith-Schiff-Jayapal amendment which would have terminated US involvement in Yemen, went off his head entirely and praised the NDAA as "the most progressive defense bill in the history of the country."

Trump's Gifts to the Saudis

Under Trump, what Riyadh wants, Riyadh gets. The president remains slavishly loyal to the Saudis and, in particular, to the kingdom's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. Trump's man crush on bin Salman continued unabated even after the October 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi, the dissident Washington Post columnist who the Saudis murdered and then carved up with a bone saw in their consulate in Istanbul.

President Trump did grudgingly issue economic sanctions against 17 Saudis alleged to have been involved in the murder. Not against the kingdom itself, you understand, and certainly not against Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman.

Measures with real bite, such as an arms embargo on the Saudis, were rejected. So was the so-called No Nuclear Weapons for Saudi Arabia Act of 2018. The Trump Administration has been trying to negotiate a sale of two nuclear reactors to the Saudis, because apparently just giving the Saudis a nuclear bomb might raise eyebrows. The Act would not have barred the prospective sale, but would have hemmed it in with safeguards which the Saudis have been resisting. The Act expired without being voted on and has not been reintroduced.

Hail, Caesar!

The slap on Bin Salman's wrist contrasts jarringly with US treatment of another international outlaw: Syria. The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act became law on December 21 as part of the NDAA. Named after a pseudonymous Syrian military photographer who defected to the West, bringing with him 55,000 photographs of Syrians tortured and murdered by the criminal regime of President Bashar al-Assad, the Act

ramps up economic sanctions on Syria, Iran, and Russia, each of which has contributed to the 110,000 to 220,000 civilian deaths during the Syrian Civil War.

Economic sanctions are problematic for the left. Too often, sanctions inflict suffering on ordinary citizens rather than their leaders. They are a weapon used by large, powerful states like the US against smaller, weaker states. Sanctions may not even work. Despite being buried under US sanctions, Iran has not abandoned its nuclear weapons program, probably because Iran does not have a nuclear weapons program. Sanctions are often promoted as an alternative to war, but in the case of Iran the purpose of US sanctions seems to be to soften up Iran for the kill.

Still, if anyone deserves sanctions—and I emphasize if—Assad, Iran, and Russia do. But what about the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia? Does anyone else sniff a little bit of hypocrisy here? Saudi Arabia is one of the worst violators of human rights in the world. The US overlooks Saudi crimes because of oil and US arms sales. But even if morality weren't a concern (as, in statecraft, it almost never is), there is less reason than formerly to coddle the Saudis. The US imports less and less Saudi oil each year as US production of shale oil climbs. The US is on track to become a net exporter of oil. The Devil's bargain the US struck in the 1945 Quincy Agreement, in which the US would provide Saudi Arabia with protection in exchange for Saudi oil, may been justifiable in the past. It isn't anymore. The US no longer needs the Saudis. It's time for the US to back away from one of the most hateful nations on the planet.