Today's Issues 8/16/2020 Coronavirus Update 8/13/2020

The Today's Issues group is meeting Sunday mornings at 9:30 in the parlor of the Religious Education building next to the church following social distancing guidelines. For this Sunday the group will discuss two essays from the August 20th issue of the New York Review of Books.

On Thursday, August 13, there will be a ZOOM discussion of **The Coronavirus: What Have we Learned? Where are we going?** Led by Dr. Paul Haupt and physician and Dr. Ted Goertzel, sociologist. This is a follow-up to a course that the Institute for Learning in Retirement offered in the summer, but it is open to all Click here for information on the discussion.

The readings for the Today's Issues discussion, in the August 20 NYR are:

Page 13. Jonathan Stevenson, Revenge Served Tepid, a review of *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir* by John Bolton. This will be an introduction to a discussion of Trump's foreign policies.

Page 38, Jonathan Freedland, Disinformed to Death, a review of the following three books:

Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare by Thomas Rid

The Hacker and the State: Cyber Attacks and the New Normal of Geopolitics by Ben Buchanan

Lie Machines: How to Save Democracy from Troll Armies, Deceitful Robots, Junk News Operations, and Political Operatives by Philip N. Howard

Disinformed to Death can be read on the NYR site without a password. A copy of Revenge Served Tepid is attached.

Revenge Served Tepid

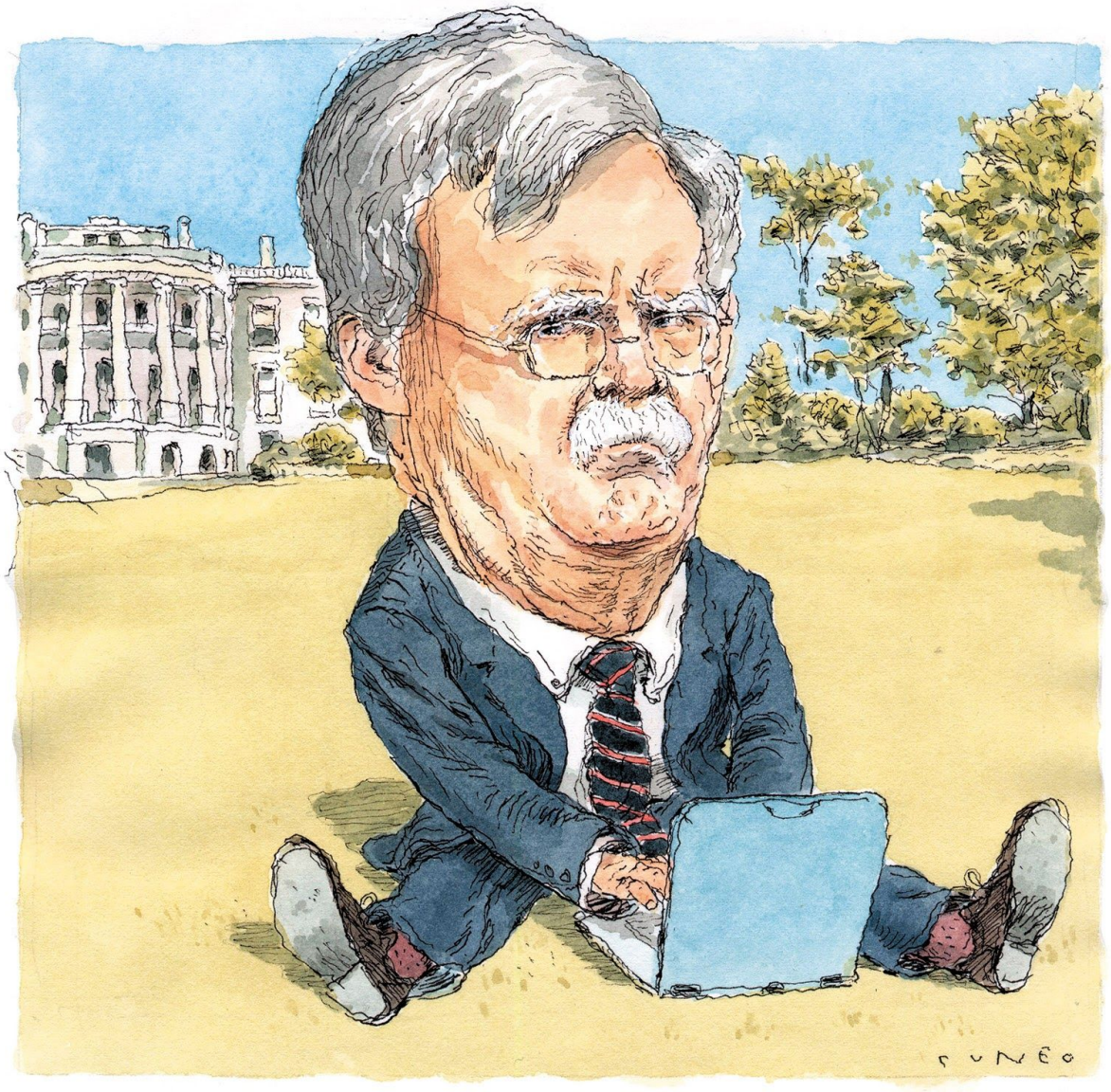
Jonathan Stevenson

AUGUST 20, 2020 ISSUE

The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir

by John Bolton

Simon and Schuster, 577 pp., $32.50



John Bolton; illustration by John Cuneo

Back in January, when it emerged that former national security adviser John Bolton was publishing a book critical of the Trump administration and was willing to testify against President Trump in his Senate impeachment trial if subpoenaed, I speculated in a *New York Times* op-ed that a combination of patriotism, professional principle, payback, and personal ambition must have

motivated him to turn against the president.[1] Having now read Bolton's *The Room Where It Happened*, slogging through almost five hundred pages of bumptious recitation, fatuous braggadocio, and lame attempts at wit, I can confirm that those were his reasons, though I'd change the order. The virtuous ones—patriotism and professional principle—were clearly subordinate to the other two.

It's hard to be cool when you're John Bolton, and evidently almost as hard not to be outright offensive. This emerges in his painfully maladroit efforts to lend color to a turgid narrative preoccupied with self-flattery and score-settling. In a particularly distasteful instance of the latter, he reports that Trump told him that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had called UN ambassador Nikki Haley a "cunt" to her face. The main point that Bolton is developing here is that Trump disliked Tillerson. Yet given what we know of Trump's attitudes toward women, that particular snippet of vicious hearsay—Bolton intimates that Trump may have fabricated it—would have been more likely to endear Tillerson to the president than to offend him, which makes Bolton's retailing of the anecdote especially gratuitous. His likely intent is to underline his own evident disdain for Haley without taking responsibility for vulgar misogyny. Later in the book, he oozes condescension toward her, accusing her of "taking advantage of the very few camera appearances left" before she stepped down as UN ambassador. Perhaps he thinks he's being clever.

Bolton also has an unfortunate penchant for defensive self-justification. In late April 2018, he appeared on a couple of Sunday talk shows and put forward "the Libya model" as suitable for taming North Korea's nuclear ambitions. That example, as an instrument of persuasion, was inane: in October 2011, Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi was overthrown by rebels assisted by US and NATO forces, chased into a drainage pipe, and executed. Many commentators noted that this was hardly a scenario likely to appeal to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, and even Trump agreed. Yet Bolton insists on his rhetorical artfulness, implying that he "didn't get through" because Trump didn't understand that

before the Arab Spring led to Qaddafi's overthrow and death, the United States had successfully weaned Libya off nuclear weapons in 2003 with effective interdiction of necessary materials, prospective international political rehabilitation, implicit security guarantees, and possible sanctions relief. Then he pedantically deigns to school his readers in "the classic logical fallacy of 'post hoc, ergo propter hoc' ('after this, therefore because of this')." They are unlikely to feel edified.

Even more trying are his sour, stilted witticisms, some of which he feels compelled to point out are supposed to be funny—in case any bleeding-heart types are too dumb to realize it. Observing that during the 2019 Ukrainian presidential election campaign the eventual winner, Volodymyr Zelensky, was not taken seriously because he was just an actor, Bolton remarks: "For liberal readers, that's a joke. Ronald Reagan, one of America's greatest Presidents, was also an actor." What a card.

He's (a little) funnier when he caricatures himself by casually playing the curmudgeon. He casts the European Union's statement in response to Russia's seizure of three Ukrainian warships and their crews in the Kerch Strait in November 2018 as "the usual mush." Forays into folksiness land with a thud. He attributes to Yogi Berra the view that the fledgling New York Mets, which Bolton likens to House Democrats, didn't seem to know how to play the game of baseball. It's a strained analogy, and the line was actually Casey Stengel's.

Bolton is a man driven to have it both ways, perpetually on the edge of inconsistency and hypocrisy. That mindset impairs his credibility here. He expresses disdain for Trump yet takes pride in Trump's flattery, casting the president as putty in his hands on Venezuela policy, while bragging that Trump found the statement Bolton had drafted on the National Assembly's rejection of President Nicolás Maduro's rule "beautiful." He rails against the notion of any "axis of adults" attempting to rein in Trump but regards himself as an essential one. He portrays former secretary of defense James Mattis as obstructionist to

the point of treachery. Yet it was Bolton, not Mattis, who wrote the tell-all memoir.

Despite his dyspeptic personality, Bolton has thrived in multiple Republican administrations in positions that gave him primary responsibility for institutions or programs he essentially loathed and has sought to undermine: the UN when he was US ambassador to it, arms control when he was undersecretary of state for that portfolio, and international organizations when he was assistant secretary of state with that brief. This ostensibly made him a natural fit for Trump, whose primary criterion for senior appointments, with few exceptions, has been the willingness of the appointee to subvert the mission of the federal agency that he or she would run. To cultivate this capability, Bolton has self-consciously cast himself as a lonely conservative ideologue amid liberal realists and idealists alike, one who is uniquely cognizant of the dangers they blithely ignore. His singularly aggressive positions on Iran and North Korea—he has advocated coercive regime change for both—are cases in point. So is a retrograde paranoia about Cuba.

Bolton's defiant obstreperousness and his reflexive dismissal of all things Obama—in particular the Iran nuclear deal—appealed to Trump. The president also probably figured that Bolton, as national security adviser, would steamroller the interagency process for formulating and implementing foreign policy that the National Security Council was supposed to coordinate, Bolton was supposed to supervise, and Trump regarded as an obstacle to his exercise of executive power. Bolton does look askance at Trump's obsessive fear of the "deep state" and makes a point of mentioning Principals Committee meetings—the primary drivers of the interagency process—but he also acknowledges the NSC's dysfunction. In absolving himself of responsibility for eliminating the NSC directorate for global health and biodefense—and thus of any responsibility for the administration's inept response to the Covid-19 pandemic—he writes:

The idea that a minor bureaucratic restructuring could have made any difference in the time of Trump reflected how immune bureaucratic pettifoggery is to reality. At most, the internal NSC structure was no more than a quiver of a butterfly's wings in the tsunami of Trump's chaos.

As for the administration's contradictory public statements following Trump's June 2019 visit with the two Korean leaders in the Demilitarized Zone, Bolton snickers, "So much for interagency coordination." Later, he muses that "if the bureaucrats believed that a Principals Committee would change Trump's mind" about releasing security assistance to Ukraine—the issue for which he would be impeached—"they hadn't been paying much attention for two and a half years."

Bolton, of course, knew all of this when he went into the White House in April 2018. "In institutional terms," he acknowledges, "it is undeniable that Trump's transition and opening year-plus were botched irretrievably." In this light, his post hoc lamentations are more than a little rich. In fact, it's probable that he saw a disempowered NSC as a carte blanche to push his own views. He boasts that on his first day as national security adviser, he told NSC staff as well as his British counterpart that the United States would soon be pulling out of the Iran nuclear deal, in mere hours flushing away months of transatlantic diplomatic efforts to save it. It was a presumptuous move even for Bolton, yet he is not sheepish but rather self-congratulatory about the subsequent withdrawal: "It had taken one month to shred the Iran nuclear deal, showing how easy it was to do once somebody took events in hand." His heedlessness of US bona fides and contempt for established process were palpable. And he had anointed himself, for the time being, as the administration's prime Trump-whisperer.

Bolton's predecessor as national security adviser, H.R. McMaster, never achieved that status. He was an active-duty army general and a firm institutionalist who had tried to sustain the systematic procedure for orchestrating consensus among agencies that had evolved since the NSC was established after World War II. But Trump was impatient with McMaster's

lengthy, detailed briefings and threatened by the general's increasingly apparent discomfort with his transactional sensibility, impulsive Twitter policymaking, and disruptive approaches to Iran, North Korea, and NATO.[2] In style if not substance, McMaster hewed to the prevailing model of a robust interagency process for foreign policy, which reached its apotheosis in the Obama administration. Some have plausibly argued that this process vested too much unaccountable authority in NSC staffs increasingly prone to micromanagement.[3] But its marginalization during the Trump administration has rendered such critiques at best outdated. To reestablish genuine interagency consensus after Trump, a powerful NSC will again be needed.

Trump's preference was clearly for a substantially disabled NSC process and a small, unified White House elite that would dictate foreign policy, consisting of Trump himself, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (who replaced Tillerson in April 2018 and had groomed himself as a staunch Trump loyalist), and Bolton.[4] It is clear from Bolton's book that, at least initially, he saw Pompeo as a comrade-in-arms. Although they vied for Trump's esteem, and Bolton frequently slams him in the book, in late 2018 Pompeo called the two of them, along with then White House chief of staff John Kelly, "the real warriors." Bolton writes, "I agreed." Of course he did. And he disparages those who challenged him by way of the interagency process he was supposed to run, casting Mattis as a man who "at best muddied the waters," even though the evidence he adduces is of mainly collegial give-and-take—the essence of that process.

It had been relatively easy for Bolton to appear reasonable in studiously offering policy alternatives from the sidelines, even in bold op-eds advocating unilateral military action.[5] Once in government, however, his pernicious side tended to emerge. During George W. Bush's administration, when he was undersecretary of state for arms control and international affairs, he blew off the Pentagon's admonitions about the enormous fatalities that would result from an armed conflict between the US and North Korea, snapping that he was responsible for

policy, not war.[6] He brought a similarly belligerent attitude to bear on the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" Iran policy, and disapproved of Trump's apparent reluctance to follow through on it. Like most observers across the political spectrum, Bolton found Trump's foreign policy hopelessly incoherent, as the president over time became whipsawed between the macho pretensions of "Make America Great Again" and the near-solipsistic insularity of "America First." Bolton alludes to this syndrome when, aptly enough, he notes "the split between Trump and Trump."

What disturbed Bolton most about Trump's foreign policy, however, was not the occasional recklessness associated with the first theme, but rather the increasing timidity resulting from the second. He recalls with horror Trump's declaration that "I don't care if ISIS comes back" in contemplating the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. Trump's susceptibility to calculated adulation was also a problem, and Bolton registers his intellectual contempt for the president on this score early in the narrative. He describes Trump in September 2018 "reading one oleaginous passage after another" and basking in the flattery that Kim Jong-un had delivered in a letter:

As Kelly and I said later, it was as if the letter had been written by Pavlovians who knew exactly how to touch the nerves enhancing Trump's self-esteem. Trump wanted to meet Kim, and he didn't want to hear anything contrary, which is probably why he didn't want to hear me explaining that another meeting soon was a bad idea.

Trump's adversaries played him; his inner circle managed him. In Bolton's telling, though, it was only he who would persist in speaking truth to power.

Bolton's focus—indeed, his obsession—was Iran. En route to the White House, he found the efforts of Tillerson, Mattis, and McMaster to preserve the Iran nuclear deal, despite Trump's campaign promise to disavow it, the "most palpable manifestation" of the administration's fraught policy. In a comically tendentious assessment of the deal, he characterizes it as "badly conceived,

abominably negotiated and drafted, and entirely advantageous to Iran: unenforceable, unverifiable, and inadequate in duration and scope." Nowhere does he acknowledge that US intelligence agencies, the International Atomic Energy Agency, and even some senior Israeli security officials judged that Iran was complying with the deal and that it was delaying Iran's ability to produce a nuclear bomb before Trump pulled the US out of it and obliterated what modicum of trust and good will existed between Washington and Tehran.

Bolton's bellicosity extended even further. He calls Trump's last-minute decision in June 2019 not to retaliate against Iran for downing an unmanned drone that was allegedly flying in Iranian airspace, so as to avoid killing 150 Iranians, "the most irrational thing I ever witnessed any President do." That forbearance, of course, was one of Trump's few rational moments, forestalling the potential escalation of a victimless incident into another major war in the Middle East. But it set Bolton on a course out of the White House. Unreasonable men had differed.

Long before that episode, Bolton had been privy to Trump's ethical deficits. At the G20 summit in December 2018, seeking to burnish his strongman credentials and rekindle what Bolton calls a "bromance" with a fellow autocrat, Trump assured the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, that he would make sure "his people" in the US attorney's office for the Southern District of New York would end the prosecution of the Turkish state-run Halkbank for violating Iran sanctions, in exchange for the release of Andrew Brunson, an evangelical minister whom Turkey had jailed for allegedly conspiring with the exiled cleric Fethullah Gulen to overthrow Erdoğan. To Bolton this was just one of several examples of Trump's "penchant" for "giv[ing] personal favors to dictators he liked" and reflected a "pattern" of "obstruction of justice as a way of life."

Bolton first fingers Trump for importuning foreign leaders to secure his reelection about three fifths of the way through the book. At the June 2019 G20

summit in Osaka, during Trump's bilateral meeting with Chinese president Xi Jinping, Bolton witnessed him "pleading with Xi to ensure he'd win," emphasizing the need for China to buy US soybeans to woo American farmers to support him. Later, cajolery morphed into outright extortion, which clearly exceeded Bolton's ethical boundaries. Amid swirling conspiracy theories falsely implicating Ukraine in 2016 and 2020 US election interference, Bolton "hoped to avoid getting into" what he famously (and metaphorically) characterized as a "drug deal" orchestrated by Rudolph Giuliani, Trump's personal lawyer, who had no official capacity to represent the United States.

Following Trump's infamous telephone conversation with Zelensky on July 25, 2019, the administration withheld nearly $400 million in congressionally authorized military assistance, which Ukraine urgently needed to resist ongoing Russia-backed destabilization operations, and conditioned its release on the Ukrainian government's initiation of investigations into Burisma Holdings (a Ukrainian natural gas company of which Hunter Biden had been a board member), Joe Biden's alleged effort to suppress an earlier investigation of Burisma, and chimerical Ukraine-based US election interference. Pompeo, Defense Secretary Mark Esper (who had replaced Mattis), and Bolton repeatedly asked Trump to order the funds released, but he did not agree until September 11, after the administration's failure to do so became public.

Aday earlier, Bolton either resigned or was fired, depending on whether you believe him or Trump. When the House of Representatives impeached Trump in December, Bolton hoped to seize a propitious moment to appear virtuous. In publicly lodging criticisms of Trump's quid pro quo with Ukraine, Bolton did seem to care to some degree about the integrity of policy implementation, over which Trump and his minions have run roughshod, and about upholding fundamental American foreign policy with respect to alliances and great-power threats that he now sees Trump as imperiling. Bolton had an opportunity to look like a central player again, and one, improbably, with a conscience. In agreeing to provide details to Congress only if subpoenaed, however, he squandered that

opportunity with gross disingenuousness. It was clear that House Democrats would not move forward with a subpoena because their congressional opponents would surely contest it in court, delaying the proceedings, and that the Senate would decline even to call witnesses.

Bolton pronounces harsh judgment, stating that he is “hard-pressed to identify any significant Trump decision during my tenure that wasn’t driven by reelection calculations.” But he did not assume the inconvenient burden of confronting Trump in the moment. While he had urged the president to release the aid to Ukraine, and had conveyed his concerns to White House Counsel Pat Cipollone and Attorney General William Barr, Bolton concedes that neither he nor his fellow principals ever argued to Trump that it was “impermissible to leverage US government authorities for personal political gain” because they “almost certainly would have failed.”

The explanation in the book for continuing his reticence in the absence of a subpoena is an elaborate cop-out, tortured to the point of parody. As a first line of defense, he resorts to deflection by way of overweening haughtiness:

What little sense of complexity and intellectual rigor political debate in America still retains was quickly lost in the impeachment struggle, and trying to explain my views didn’t pass my cost-benefit analysis of time and effort expended.

In other words, his “howling” audience was too crazed and stupid to understand his sophisticated mind.

Hedging against the remote possibility that some readers are smart enough to decipher spuriousness, Bolton then defaults to the inevitable futility of the impeachment trial given the pro-Trump bias of the Senate majority. Yet he also accuses House Democrats of “committing impeachment malpractice” by rushing to judgment and limiting the inquiry to Ukraine. To make this argument, Bolton has to draw on uncommon reserves of chutzpah. If, as he claims, acquittal was a foregone conclusion, those pushing impeachment in the House

would have been wasting their time in pursuing other avenues. (His jarringly unsupported and self-contradictory assertion that acquittal "was not inevitable ab initio" was apparently interjected to preserve some semblance of logic in his argument.) Moreover, as Trump's national security adviser, Bolton presumably possessed some of the most damning information about Trump's additional foreign policy transgressions, and he confirms as much in the book. In standing largely mute during the trial, Bolton himself deprived House Democrats of the ammunition they needed to expand the inquiry.

His testimony was never going to sway Senate Republicans, but a former national security adviser speaking candidly about Trump's misbehavior seven months ago, during the impeachment proceedings, might well have amplified their political impact. Now his revelations seem almost anticlimactic, or at best a useful addition to the historical record, adding color and detail rather than substance to what was already known or strongly suspected.

When all of his malarkey is unpacked, it's hard to escape the obvious conclusion: Bolton didn't want to jeopardize his book profits—which the Trump administration is still trying to confiscate—by giving his story away. In the publicity events for the book, he has been scathing in his assessment of Trump, telling ABC's Martha Raddatz, "I don't think he's fit for office. I don't think he has the competence to carry out the job."

It's still not clear that Bolton has salvaged his bona fides with *The Room Where It Happened*. In that January op-ed, I said that he was one of the cagiest guys in Washington, but his awkward striptease over the book doesn't bear out this appraisal. If Bolton has shown a dash of rectitude, he has also revealed a surfeit of blinding egomania. It is possible that he wished to cultivate Republicans more moderate and upright than Trump in anticipation of his defeat for reelection, but such a group would be disinclined to embrace Bolton's outré policies and style. Democrats who might accord Bolton grudging appreciation for confirming Trump's impeachable self-dealing would still spurn him for any

other purpose. He portrays himself as analytically infallible, and those who disagree with him as "intellectually lazy," using that term twice in the book's first five pages. Yet there seem to be precious few he would exclude from that judgment.

At this point, Covid-19 and George Floyd's death may already have spelled Trump's political demise. In June, when Mattis felt compelled to break his long post-government silence, he published a forthright and passionate 650-word statement in *The Atlantic* opposing Trump's attempt to use the military to suppress civil rights protests, which did far more to tear down Trump's legitimacy than Bolton's nearly five hundred pages are likely to do. Bolton waited too long and played it too cute to be a big part of history. Both he and Trump are demonstrably unreasonable, Trump merely more so.

1

"The Method in John Bolton's Madness," *The New York Times*, January 28, 2020. ↩

2

See my "Dereliction of Duty?," *The New York Review*, March 22, 2018. ↩

3

For a critical account of the NSC's evolution, see John Gans, *White House Warriors: How the National Security Council Transformed the American Way of War* (Liveright, 2019). ↩

4

See my "The Failure of H.R. McMaster," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2018. ↩

5

See, for example, John Bolton, "The Legal Case for Striking North Korea First," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 28, 2018, and John R. Bolton, "To Stop Iran's Bomb, Bomb Iran," *The New York Times*, March 26, 2015. ↩

6

See Dexter Filkins, "John Bolton on the Warpath," *The New Yorker*, May 6, 2019. ↩