



James Mattis. (photo: Aaron P. Bernstein/Reuters)

We Know How Trump's War Game Ends

By Matt Taibbi, Rolling Stone

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Nothing unites our political class like the threat of ending our never-ending war

So we're [withdrawing troops from the Middle East](#).

GOOD!

What's the War on Terror death count by now, a [half-million](#)? How much have we spent, \$5 trillion? [Five-and-a-half](#)?

For that cost, we've destabilized the region to the point of [abject chaos](#), inspired millions of Muslims to hate us, and torn up the Geneva Convention and half the Constitution in pursuit of policies like torture, kidnapping, assassination-by-robot and warrantless detention.

It will be difficult for each of us to even begin to part with our share of honor in those achievements. This must be why all those talking heads on TV are going crazy.

Unless Donald Trump decides to reverse his decision to begin withdrawals from Syria and Afghanistan, cable news for the next few weeks is going to be one long [Scanners](#) marathon of exploding heads.

"Today's decision would cheer Moscow, ISIS, and Iran!" [yelped](#) Nicole Wallace, former George W. Bush communications director.

"Maybe Trump will bring Republicans and Democrats together," [said Bill Kristol](#), on MSNBC, that "[liberal](#)" [channel](#) that somehow seems to be populated round the clock by ex-neocons and Pentagon dropouts.

Kristol, who has rarely ever been in the ballpark of right about anything — he once told us Iraq was going to be a “[two month war](#)” — might actually be correct.

Trump’s decisions on Syria and Afghanistan will lay bare the real distinctions in American politics. Political power in this country is not divided between right and left, and not even between rich and poor.

The real line is between a war party, and everyone else.

This is why Kristol is probably right. The Democrats’ plan until now was probably to [impeach Trump in the House](#) using at minimum some material from the Michael Cohen case involving campaign-finance violations.

That plan never had a chance to succeed in the Senate, but now, who knows? Troop withdrawals may push a collection of hawkish Republicans like Lindsey Graham, Marco Rubio, Ben Sasse and [maybe even Mitch McConnell](#) into another camp.

The [departure of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis](#) — a standard-issue Pentagon toady who’s never met an unending failure of a military engagement he didn’t like and whose resignation letter is now being celebrated as inspirational literature on the order of the Gettysburg Address or a lost epic by Auden or Eliot — sounded an emergency bell for all these clowns. The letter by Mattis, [Rubio said](#):

“Makes it abundantly clear we are headed towards a series of grave policy errors which will endanger our nation, damage our alliances & empower our adversaries.”

Talk like this is designed to give political cover to Republican fence-sitters on Trump. That wry smile on Kristol’s face is, I’d guess, connected to the knowledge that Trump put the Senate in play by even threatening to pull the plug on our Middle Eastern misadventures.

You’ll hear all sorts of arguments today about why the withdrawals are bad. You’ll hear Trump has no plan, which is true. He never does, at least not on policy.

But we don’t exactly have a plan for *staying* in the Middle East, either, beyond installing a permanent garrison in [a dozen countries](#), spending assloads of money and making ourselves permanently despised in the region as civilian deaths pile up through drone-bombings and other “surgical” actions.

You’ll hear we’re abandoning allies and inviting massacres by the likes of Turkish dictator Recep Tayyip Erdogan. If there was any evidence that our presence there would do anything but screw up the situation even more, I might consider that a real argument. At any rate, there are other solutions beyond committing American lives. We could take in more refugees, kick Turkey out of NATO, impose sanctions, etc.

As to the argument that we’re abandoning Syria to Russians — anyone who is interested in reducing Russian power should be cheering. If there’s any country in the world that equals us in its ability to botch an occupation and get run out on a bloody rail after squandering piles of treasure, it’s Russia. They may even be better at it than us. We can ask the Afghans about that on our way out of there.

The Afghan conflict became the longest military engagement in American history [eight years ago](#). Despite myths to the contrary, Barack Obama did not enter office gung-ho to leave Afghanistan. He felt he [needed to win there first](#), which, as anyone who's read *The Great Game* knows, proved impossible. So we ended up staying throughout his presidency.

We were going to continue to stay there, and in other places, forever, because our occupations do not work, as everyone outside of Washington seems to understand.

TV talking heads will be unanimous on this subject, but the population, not so much. What polls we have suggest voters [want out of the region](#) in [increasing numbers](#).

A Morning Consult/*Politico* poll from last year showed a plurality [favored a troop decrease](#) in Afghanistan, while only 5 percent wanted increases. Polls consistently show the public thinks our [presence in Afghanistan](#) has been a failure.

There's less about how the [public feels](#) about Syria, but even there, the data doesn't show overwhelming desire to put boots on the ground.

When Trump first ordered airstrikes in Syria over Assad's use of chemical weapons, 70 percent favored sanctions according to *Politico*, [while 39 percent](#) favored sending troops. A CBS poll around that time found [45 percent wanted either no involvement period, or airstrikes and no ground troops](#), versus 18 percent who wanted full military involvement.

Trump is a madman, a far-right extremist and an embarrassment, but that's not why most people in Washington hate him. It's his foreign-policy attitudes, particularly toward NATO, that have always most offended DC burghers.

You could see the Beltway beginning to lose its mind back in the Republican primary race, when then-candidate Trump belittled America's commitment to Middle Eastern oil states.

"Every time there's a little ruckus, we send those ships and those planes," he said, [early in his campaign](#). "We get nothing. Why? They're making a billion a day. We get nothing."

As he got closer to the nomination, he went after neoconservative theology more explicitly.

"I don't think we should be nation-building anymore," he said, in March of 2016. He went on: "I watched as we built schools in Iraq and they're blown up. We build another one, we get blown up."

Trump was wrong about a thousand other things, but this was true. I had done a story about how military contractors [spent \\$72 million](#) on what was supposed to be an Iraqi police academy and delivered a pile of rubble so unusable, pedestrians made it into a toilet.

The Special Inspector General for Iraqi Reconstruction [noted](#), "We witnessed a light fixture so full of diluted urine and feces that it would not operate."

SIGIR found we spent over \$60 billion on Iraqi reconstruction and [did not significantly improve](#) life for Iraqis. The parallel body covering Afghanistan, the Special Inspector General for Afghan

Reconstruction, [concluded last year](#) that at least \$15.5 billion had been wasted in that country between 2008 and 2017, and this was likely only a “fraction” of financial leakage.

Trump, after sealing the nomination, upped the ante. In the summer of 2016 he said he [wasn't sure he'd send troops](#) to defend NATO members that didn't pay their bills. NATO members are supposed to kick in 2 percent of GDP for their own defense. At the time, only [four NATO members](#) (Estonia, Poland, the U.K. and the U.S.) were in compliance.

Politicians went insane. How dare he ask countries to pay for their own defense! Republican House member Adam Kinzinger, a popular guest in the last 24 hours, said in July 2016 that Trump's comments were “[utterly disastrous.](#)”

“There's no precedent,” said Thomas Wright, a “Europe scholar” from the Brookings Institute.

When the news came after Trump's election that he'd [only read his intelligence briefings once a week](#) instead of every day as previous presidents had dutifully done, that was it. The gloves were off at that point.

“The open disdain Trump has shown for the agencies is unprecedented,” said [Patrick Skinner](#), a former CIA official for both George W. Bush and Obama.

All that followed, through today, has to be understood through this prism.

Trump dumped on basically every segment of the political establishment en route to Washington, running on a classic authoritarian strategy — bash the elites, pose as a populist.

However fake he was, there were portions of the political establishment that deserved abuse, the Pentagon most of all.

The Department of Defense has been a money pit for decades. It has [trillions in expenditures](#) it can't account for, refused an audit for nearly 30 years and then [failed this year](#) (as in *failed completely*, [zero-point-zero](#), not producing any coherent numbers) when one was finally funded.

We have brave and able soldiers, but their leaders are utter tools who've left a legacy of massacres and botched interventions around the world.

NATO? That's an organization whose mission stopped making sense the moment the Soviet Union collapsed. We should long ago have repurposed our defense plan to focus on terrorism, cyber-crime and cyber-attacks, commercial espionage, financial security, and other threats.

Instead, we continued after the Soviet collapse to maintain a global military alliance fattened with increasingly useless carriers and fighter jets, designed to fight archaic forms of war.

NATO persisted mainly as a PR mechanism for a) justifying continued obscene defense spending levels and b) giving a patina of internationalism to America's essentially unilateral military adventures.

We'd go into a place like Afghanistan with no real plan for leaving, and a few member nations like Estonia and France and Turkey would send troops to get shot at with us. But it was always basically

[Team America: World Police](#) with supporting actors. No wonder so few of the member countries paid their dues.

Incidentally, this isn't exactly a secret. Long before Trump, this is what Barney Frank [was saying](#) in 2010: "I think the time has come to reexamine NATO. NATO has become an excuse for other people to get America to do things."

This has all been a giant, bloody, expensive farce, and it's long since time we ended it.

We'll see a lot of hand-wringing today from people who called themselves anti-war in 2002 and 2003, but now pray that the "adults in the room" keep "boots on the ground" to preserve "credibility."

Part of this is because it's Trump, but a bigger part is that we've successfully brainwashed big chunks of the population into thinking it's normal for a country to exist in a state of permanent war, fighting in [seven countries at once](#), spending [half of all discretionary funding](#) on defense.

It's not. It's insane. And we'll never be a healthy society, or truly respected abroad, until we stop accepting it as normal.

Incidentally, I doubt Trump really follows through on this withdrawal plan. But until he changes (what passes for) his mind, watch what happens in Washington.

We're about to have a very graphic demonstration of the near-total uniformity of the political class when it comes to the military and its role. The war party is ready for a coming-out party.