

THE
ROOM
WHERE IT
HAPPENED

A White House Memoir

JOHN
BOLTON

Former National Security Advisor
of the United States

Thank you for downloading this Simon & Schuster ebook.

Get a FREE ebook when you join our mailing list. Plus, get updates on new releases, deals, recommended reads, and more from Simon & Schuster. Click below to sign up and see terms and conditions.

[CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP](#)

Already a subscriber? Provide your email again so we can register this ebook and send you more of what you like to read. You will continue to receive exclusive offers in your inbox.

THE ROOM WHERE IT HAPPENED

A White House Memoir

JOHN
BOLTON

Former National Security Advisor
of the United States

Simon & Schuster

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

For Gretchen and Jennifer Sarah

*Hard pounding, this, gentlemen. Let's see who will
pound the longest.*

—THE DUKE OF WELLINGTON,

RALLYING HIS TROOPS AT WATERLOO, 1815

THE LONG MARCH TO A WEST WING CORNER OFFICE

One attraction of being National Security Advisor is the sheer multiplicity and volume of challenges that confront you. If you don't like turmoil, uncertainty, and risk—all while being constantly overwhelmed with information, decisions to be made, and the sheer amount of work, and enlivened by international and domestic personality and ego conflicts beyond description—try something else. It is exhilarating, but it is nearly impossible to explain to outsiders how the pieces fit together, which they often don't in any coherent way.

I cannot offer a comprehensive theory of the Trump Administration's transformation because none is possible. Washington's conventional wisdom on Trump's trajectory, however, is wrong. This received truth, attractive to the intellectually lazy, is that Trump was always bizarre, but in his first fifteen months, uncertain in his new place, and held in check by an "axis of adults," he hesitated to act. As time passed, however, Trump became more certain of himself, the axis of adults departed, things fell apart, and Trump was surrounded only by "yes men."

Pieces of this hypothesis are true, but the overall picture is simplistic. The axis of adults in many respects caused enduring problems not because they successfully managed Trump, as the High-Minded (an apt description I picked up from the French for those who see themselves as our moral betters) have it, but because they did precisely the opposite. They didn't do nearly enough to establish order, and what they did do was so transparently

self-serving and so publicly dismissive of many of Trump's very clear goals (whether worthy or unworthy) that they fed Trump's already-suspicious mind-set, making it harder for those who came later to have legitimate policy exchanges with the President. I had long felt that the role of the National Security Advisor was to ensure that a President understood what options were open to him for any given decision he needed to make, and then to ensure that this decision was carried out by the pertinent bureaucracies. The National Security Council process was certain to be different for different Presidents, but these were the critical objectives the process should achieve.

Because, however, the axis of adults had served Trump so poorly, he second-guessed people's motives, saw conspiracies behind rocks, and remained stunningly uninformed on how to run the White House, let alone the huge federal government. The axis of adults is not entirely responsible for this mind-set. Trump is Trump. I came to understand that he believed he could run the Executive Branch and establish national-security policies on instinct, relying on personal relationships with foreign leaders, and with made-for-television showmanship always top of mind. Now, instinct, personal relations, and showmanship are elements of any President's repertoire. But they are not all of it, by a long stretch. Analysis, planning, intellectual discipline and rigor, evaluation of results, course corrections, and the like are the blocking and tackling of presidential decision-making, the unglamorous side of the job. Appearance takes you only so far.

In institutional terms, therefore, it is undeniable that Trump's transition and opening year-plus were botched irretrievably. Processes that should have immediately become second nature, especially for the many Trump advisors with no prior service even in junior Executive Branch positions, never happened. Trump and most of his team never read the government's "operators' manual," perhaps not realizing doing so wouldn't automatically make them members of the "deep state." I entered the existing chaos, seeing problems that could have been resolved in the Administration's first hundred days, if not before. Constant personnel turnover obviously didn't help, nor did the White House's Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*

(“war of all against all”). It may be a bit much to say that Hobbes’s description of human existence as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” accurately described life in the White House, but by the end of their tenures, many key advisors would have leaned toward it. As I explained in my book *Surrender Is Not an Option*,¹ my approach to accomplishing things in government has always been to absorb as much as possible about the bureaucracies where I served (State, Justice, the United States Agency for International Development) so I could more readily accomplish my objectives.

My goal was not to get a membership card but to get a driver’s license. That thinking was not common at the Trump White House. In early visits to the West Wing, the differences between this presidency and previous ones I had served were stunning. What happened on one day on a particular issue often had little resemblance to what happened the next day, or the day after. Few seemed to realize it, care about it, or have any interest in fixing it. And it wasn’t going to get much better, which depressing but inescapable conclusion I reached only after I had joined the Administration.

Former Nevada Senator Paul Laxalt, a mentor of mine, liked to say, “In politics, there are no immaculate conceptions.” This insight powerfully explains appointments to very senior Executive Branch positions. Despite the frequency of press lines like “I was very surprised when President Smith called me...,” such expressions of innocence are invariably only casually related to the truth. And at no point is the competition for high-level jobs more intense than during the “presidential transition,” a US invention that has become increasingly elaborate in recent decades. Transition teams provide good case studies for graduate business schools on how not to do business. They exist for a fixed, fleeting period (from the election to the inauguration) and then disappear forever. They are overwhelmed by hurricanes of incoming information (and disinformation); complex, often

competing, strategy and policy analyses; many consequential personnel decisions for the real government; and media and interest-group scrutiny and pressure.

Undeniably, some transitions are better than others. How they unfold reveals much about the Administration to come. Richard Nixon's 1968–69 transition was the first example of contemporary transitions, with careful analyses of each major Executive Branch agency; Ronald Reagan's in 1980–81 was a landmark in hewing to the maxim "Personnel is policy," intently focused on picking people who would adhere to Reagan's platform; and Donald Trump's 2016–17 transition was... Donald Trump's.

I spent election night, November 8–9, in Fox News's Manhattan studios, waiting to comment on air about "the next President's" foreign-policy priorities, which everyone expected would occur in the ten p.m. hour, just after Hillary Clinton was declared the winner. I finally went on the air around three o'clock the next morning. So much for advance planning, not only at Fox, but also in the camp of the President-Elect. Few observers believed Trump would win, and, as with Robert Dole's failed 1996 campaign against Bill Clinton, Trump's pre-election preparations were modest, reflecting the impending doom. In comparison with Hillary's operation, which resembled a large army on a certain march toward power, Trump's seemed staffed by a few hardy souls with time on their hands. His unexpected victory, therefore, caught his campaign unready, resulting in immediate turf fights with the transition volunteers and the scrapping of almost all its pre-election product. Starting over on November 9 was hardly auspicious, especially with the bulk of the transition staff in Washington, and Trump and his closest aides at Trump Tower in Manhattan. Trump didn't understand much of what the huge federal behemoth did before he won, and he didn't acquire much, if any, greater awareness during the transition, which did not bode well for his performance in office.

I played an insignificant part in Trump's campaign except for one meeting with the candidate on Friday morning, September 23, at Trump Tower, three days before his first debate with Clinton. Hillary and Bill were a year ahead

of me at Yale Law School, so, in addition to discussing national security, I offered Trump my thoughts on how Hillary would perform: well prepared and scripted, following her game plan no matter what. She hadn't changed in over forty years. Trump did most of the talking, as in our first meeting in 2014, before his candidacy. As we concluded, he said, "You know, your views and mine are actually very close. Very close."

At that point, I was widely engaged: Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute; Fox News contributor; a regular on the speaking circuit; of counsel at a major law firm; member of corporate boards; senior advisor to a global private-equity firm; and author of opinion articles at the rate of about one a week. In late 2013, I formed a PAC and a SuperPAC to aid House and Senate candidates who believed in a strong US national-security policy, distributing hundreds of thousands of dollars directly to candidates and spending millions in independent expenditures in the 2014 and 2016 campaigns, and preparing to do so again in 2018. I had plenty to do. But I had also served in the last three Republican Administrations,² and international relations had fascinated me since my days at Yale College. I was ready to go in again.

New threats and opportunities were coming at us rapidly, and eight years of Barack Obama meant there was much to repair. I had thought long and hard about America's national security in a tempestuous world: Russia and China at the strategic level; Iran, North Korea, and other rogue nuclear-weapons aspirants; the swirling threats of radical Islamicist terrorism in the tumultuous Middle East (Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen), Afghanistan and beyond; and the threats in our own hemisphere, like Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. While foreign-policy labels are unhelpful except to the intellectually lazy, if pressed, I liked to say my policy was "pro-American." I followed Adam Smith on economics, Edmund Burke on society, *The Federalist Papers* on government, and a merger of Dean Acheson and John Foster Dulles on national security. My first political campaigning was in 1964 on behalf of Barry Goldwater.

I knew senior Trump campaign officials like Steve Bannon, Dave Bossie, and Kellyanne Conway from prior associations, and had spoken to them about joining a Trump Administration should one happen. Once the transition began, I thought it reasonable to offer my services as Secretary of State, as did others. When Chris Wallace came off the Fox set early on November 9, after the race was called, he shook my hand and said, smiling broadly, “Congratulations, Mr. Secretary.” Of course, there was no dearth of contenders to lead the State Department, which generated endless media speculation about who the “front-runner” was, starting with Newt Gingrich, proceeding to Rudy Giuliani, then Mitt Romney, and then back to Rudy. I had worked with and respected each of them, and each was credible in his own way. I paid special attention because there was constant chatter (not to mention pressure) that I should settle for being Deputy Secretary, obviously not my preference. What came next demonstrated Trumpian decision-making and provided (or should have) a cautionary lesson.

While all the early “leading contenders” were broadly conservative philosophically, they brought different backgrounds, different perspectives, different styles, different pluses and minuses to the table. Among these possibilities (and others like Tennessee Senator Bob Corker and former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman), were there common, consistent attributes and accomplishments Trump sought? Obviously not, and observers should have asked: What is the real principle governing Trump’s personnel-selection process? Why not have Giuliani as Attorney General, a job he was made for? Romney as White House Chief of Staff, bringing his undeniable strategic planning and management skills? And Gingrich, with decades of creative theorizing, as White House domestic policy czar?

Was Trump looking only for people from “central casting”? Much was made of his purported dislike of my moustache. For what it’s worth, he told me it was never a factor, noting that his father also had one. Other than shrinks and those deeply interested in Sigmund Freud, which I assuredly am not, I don’t really believe my looks played a role in Trump’s thinking. And if they did, God help the country. Attractive women, however, fall into a

different category when it comes to Trump. Loyalty was the key factor, which Giuliani had proved beyond peradventure in the days after the *Access Hollywood* tape became public in early October. Lyndon Johnson once reportedly said of an aide, “I want real loyalty. I want him to kiss my ass in Macy’s window at high noon and tell me it smells like roses.” Who knew Trump read so much history? Giuliani was later extremely gracious to me, saying after he withdrew from the Secretary of State melee, “John would probably be my choice. I think John is terrific.”³

The President-Elect called me on November 17, and I congratulated him on his victory. He recounted his recent calls with Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, and looked ahead to meeting that afternoon with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. “We’ll have you up here in the next couple of days,” Trump promised, “and we are looking at you for a number of situations.” Some of the new President’s first personnel announcements came the next day, with Jeff Sessions picked as Attorney General (eliminating that option for Giuliani); Mike Flynn as National Security Advisor (appropriately rewarding Flynn’s relentless campaign service); and Mike Pompeo as CIA Director. (A few weeks after Flynn’s announcement, Henry Kissinger told me, “He’ll be gone within a year.” Although he couldn’t have known what was about to happen, Kissinger knew Flynn was in the wrong job.) As the days passed, more Cabinet and senior White House positions emerged publicly, including, on November 23, South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley as Ambassador to the UN, with Cabinet rank, a bizarre step to take with the Secretary of State still unchosen. Haley had no qualifications for the job, but it was ideal for someone with presidential ambitions to check the “foreign policy” box on her campaign résumé. Cabinet rank or no, the UN Ambassador was part of State, and coherent US foreign policy can have only one Secretary of State. Yet here was Trump, picking subordinate positions in State’s universe with no Secretary in sight. By definition, there was trouble ahead, especially when I heard from a Haley staff person that Trump had considered her to be Secretary. Haley, her staffer said, declined the offer

because of lack of experience, which she obviously hoped to acquire as UN Ambassador.⁴

Jared Kushner, whom Paul Manafort had introduced me to during the campaign, called me over Thanksgiving. He assured me I was “still very much in the mix” for Secretary of State, and “in a whole bunch of different contexts. Donald is a big fan of yours, as we all are.” Meanwhile, the *New York Post* reported on decision-making at Mar-a-Lago at Thanksgiving, quoting one source, “Donald was walking around asking everybody he could about who should be his secretary of state. There was a lot of criticism of Romney, and a lot of people like Rudy. There are also many people advocating for John Bolton.”⁵ I knew I should have worked the Mar-a-Lago primary harder! Certainly, I was grateful for the considerable support I had among pro-Israel Americans (Jews and evangelicals alike), Second Amendment supporters, Cuban-Americans, Venezuelan-Americans, Taiwanese-Americans, and conservatives generally. Many people called Trump and his advisors on my behalf, part of the venerable transition lobbying process.

The transition’s spreading disorder increasingly reflected not just organizational failures but Trump’s essential decision-making style. Charles Krauthammer, a sharp critic of his, told me he had been wrong earlier to characterize Trump’s behavior as that of an eleven-year-old boy. “I was off by ten years,” Krauthammer remarked. “He’s like a one-year-old. Everything is seen through the prism of whether it benefits Donald Trump.” That was certainly the way the personnel-selection process appeared from the outside. As one Republican strategist told me, the best way to become Secretary of State was to “try to be the last man standing.”

Vice President–Elect Pence called on November 29 to ask to meet in Washington the next day. I knew Pence from his service on the House Foreign Affairs Committee; he was a solid supporter of a strong national-security policy. We conversed easily about a range of foreign and defense policy issues, but I was struck when he said about State: “I would not characterize this decision as imminent.” Given subsequent press reports that

Giuliani withdrew his candidacy for Secretary at about that time, it could be the entire selection process for State was starting all over again, an almost certainly unprecedented development that far into the transition.

When I arrived at the transition offices the next day, Representative Jeb Hensarling was leaving after seeing Pence. Hensarling, it was reported, was so sure of getting Treasury that he told his staff to begin planning. His not being named matched Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers's finding she was not to be Interior Secretary after being told she would, as well as former Senator Scott Brown's learning he would not become Secretary of Veterans Affairs. The pattern was clear. Pence and I had a friendly half-hour talk, during which I recounted, as I had several times with Trump, Acheson's famous remark when asked why he and President Truman had such an excellent working relationship: "I never forgot who was President, and who was Secretary of State. And neither did he."

Trump announced Jim Mattis as Defense Secretary on December 1, but the uncertainty about State continued. I arrived at Trump Tower the next day for my interview and waited in the Trump Organization lobby with a State Attorney General and a US Senator also waiting. Typically, the President-Elect was behind schedule, and who should emerge from his office but former Defense Secretary Bob Gates. I surmised later that Gates was there to lobby for Rex Tillerson as Secretary of Energy or State, but Gates gave no hint of his mission, just exchanging pleasantries as he left. I finally entered Trump's office, for a meeting lasting just over an hour, also attended by Reince Priebus (soon to become White House Chief of Staff) and Bannon (who would be the Administration's Chief Strategist). We talked about the world's hot spots, broader strategic threats like Russia and China, terrorism, and nuclear-weapons proliferation. I started with my Dean Acheson story, and, in contrast with my previous Trump meetings, I did most of the talking, responding to questions from the others. I thought Trump listened carefully; he didn't make or receive any phone calls, and we weren't interrupted until Ivanka Trump came in to discuss family business, or perhaps try to get Trump vaguely back on schedule.

I was describing why State needed a cultural revolution to be an effective instrument of policy when Trump asked, “Now, we’re discussing Secretary of State here, but would you consider the Deputy job?” I said I would not, explaining that State could not be run successfully from that level. Moreover, I was uneasy about working for someone who knew I had competed for his job and who might wonder constantly if he needed a food taster. As the meeting ended, Trump took my hand in both of his and said, “I am sure we will be working together.”

Afterward, in a small conference room, Priebus, Bannon, and I caucused. Both of them said the meeting had gone “extremely well,” and Bannon said Trump had “never heard anything like that before” in terms of the scope and detail of the discussion. Nonetheless, they pressed me to take Deputy Secretary, which told me they were not optimistic I would get the top job. I explained again why the Deputy idea was unworkable. The next day, I learned Trump would interview Tillerson for State, the first time I heard Tillerson’s name raised, which likely explained why Priebus and Bannon asked me about being nominated for Deputy. Neither Trump nor the others raised the issue of Senate confirmation. Most Trump nominees could expect significant or even unanimous Democratic opposition. Rand Paul’s well-known isolationist views meant he would be a problem for me, but several Republican Senators (including John McCain, Lindsey Graham, and Cory Gardner) told me his opposition would be overcome. Nonetheless, after this meeting, there was silence from Trump Tower, convincing me that I would remain a private citizen.

Tillerson’s December 13 nomination, however, only unleashed another wave of speculation (for and against) about my becoming Deputy. One Trump advisor encouraged me, saying, “In fifteen months, you’ll be Secretary. They know his limitations.” One of those limitations was Tillerson’s relationship from his years at ExxonMobil with Vladimir Putin and Russia, precisely at a time Trump was coming under early but steadily increasing criticism for “colluding” with Moscow to defeat Clinton. While Trump was ultimately vindicated on collusion, his defensive reaction

willfully ignored or denied that Russia was meddling globally in US and many other elections, and public-policy debate more broadly. Other adversaries, like China, Iran, and North Korea, were also meddling. In comments at the time, I stressed the seriousness of foreign interference in our politics. McCain thanked me in early January, saying I was a “man of principle,” which likely wouldn’t have endeared me to Trump had he known.

At Defense, there was also turmoil over the Deputy Secretary job, as Mattis pushed for Obama-era official Michèle Flournoy. Flournoy, a Democrat, might have been Secretary of Defense herself had Clinton won, but why Mattis wanted her in a Republican Administration was hard to fathom.⁶ Subsequently, Mattis also pressed for Anne Patterson, a career Foreign Service officer, to fill the critical job of Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. I had worked several times with Patterson and knew her to be philosophically compatible for a senior policy position in a liberal Democratic Administration, but hardly in a Republican one. Senator Ted Cruz questioned Mattis about Patterson, but Mattis was unable or unwilling to explain his reasons, and the nomination, under increasing opposition from Republican Senators and others, ultimately collapsed. All this turmoil led Graham and others to counsel that I stay out of the Administration in its early days and wait to join later, which I found persuasive.

For a time, there was consideration of my becoming Director of National Intelligence, to which former Senator Dan Coats was ultimately named in early January. I thought that the office itself, created by Congress after the 9/11 attacks to better coordinate the intelligence community, was a mistake. It became simply a bureaucratic overlay. Eliminating or substantially paring back the Director’s Office was a project I would have enthusiastically undertaken, but I concluded quickly Trump himself was insufficiently interested in what would necessarily be a hard slog politically. Given the ensuing, prolonged, almost irrational war between Trump and the intelligence community, I was lucky the Director’s job didn’t come my way.

And so the Trump transition ended with no visible prospect of my joining the Administration. I rationalized the outcome by concluding that if Trump’s

post-inaugural decision-making process (using that word loosely) was as unconventional and erratic as his personnel selections, I was fine staying outside. If only one could say that for the country.

Then, less than a month into the Administration, Mike Flynn self-destructed. It started with Flynn's facing criticism for alleged remarks to Russian Ambassador Sergei Kislyak, someone I knew well; he had been my Moscow counterpart for a time when I was Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security in the Bush 43 Administration. The criticism intensified dramatically when Flynn seemingly lied to Pence and others about the Kislyak conversation. Why Flynn would lie about an innocent conversation, I never understood. What senior Administration aides, and indeed Trump himself, told me a few days later made more sense, namely, that they had already lost confidence in Flynn for his inadequate performance (much as Kissinger had predicted), and the "Russian issue" was simply a politically convenient cover story. Flynn resigned late on February 13, after a day of White House Sturm und Drang, just hours after Kellyanne Conway unhappily received the unfair and unfortunate job of telling the ravenous press corps that Flynn had Trump's full confidence. This is the very definition of confusion and disorder.

Confusion and disorder unfortunately also marked the NSC staff in the Administration's first three weeks. Personnel choices were in disarray, as CIA Director Mike Pompeo personally took the stunning, nearly unprecedented step of denying "sensitive compartmented information" clearance to one of Flynn's choices to be a Senior Director, one of the top-rung NSC jobs.⁷ Denying this critical clearance, as everyone knew, effectively barred that person from working at the NSC, a stinging blow to Flynn. He also faced innumerable battles with career officials detailed to the NSC during Obama's tenure but, as is customary, still there as the Trump presidency began. These battles provided frequently leaked accounts of

bureaucratic blood on the floor at the White House and the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, the great gray granite Victorian pile across West Executive Avenue housing the bulk of the NSC staff.

Similarly, on one of Trump's signature campaign issues—stemming illegal immigration—the White House stumbled through one mistake after another in the early days, trying to craft Executive Orders and policy directives. Judicial challenges were inevitable, and likely to be hotly litigated in a judiciary filled with eight years of Obama appointees. But the White House entirely owned the initial immigration debacles, betraying a lack of transition preparation and internal coordination. A “dissent channel” cable at State, intended to be internal, found its way onto the Internet, signed by over a thousand employees, criticizing the immigration initiative. The press feasted on it, although the cable's arguments were weak, disjointed, and poorly presented. But somehow the cable, and similar arguments by media commentators and Hill opponents, went unanswered. Who was in charge? What was the plan?

Surprisingly, Tillerson called three days after the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved his nomination on January 23 by an 11–10 party-line vote, pulling me from a corporate board meeting. We talked for thirty minutes, mostly about State organizational issues and how the interagency decision-making process worked. Tillerson was gracious and professional, and utterly uninterested in having me as his Deputy. Of course, had I been in his shoes, I would have felt the same way. Tillerson later told Elliott Abrams, whom he also considered, that he wanted someone who would work behind the scenes supporting him, not someone who had gained public attention, as I had at the UN and as a Fox commentator. Tillerson asked if I was interested in anything at State other than Deputy, and I said no, having already had the second-best job as UN Ambassador. Tillerson laughed, and we talked about the often-fraught relations between Secretaries and UN Ambassadors. It was clear he had not spoken with Haley about their relationship and that he had no idea how to handle this ticking time bomb.

I worried that Tillerson was susceptible to capture by the State Department bureaucracy. He had spent his entire forty-one-year career at Exxon, in an environment where there were clear metrics for performance, profit-and-loss statements being harsh taskmasters, and where the corporate culture was hardly subject to revolutionary change from within. After years of perching at the top of Exxon's hierarchy, believing that all his subordinates were on the same team, it would have been remarkable for Tillerson, sitting in the Secretary's seventh-floor suite, to assume anything else about the careerists on the floors below him or posted around the world. Precisely because of his background, Tillerson should have surrounded himself with people familiar with the Foreign and Civil Services' strengths and weaknesses, but he went a very different way. He neither sought a cultural revolution (as I would have done), nor embraced "the building" (as all who worked there referred to it), nor sought to control the bureaucracy without fundamentally changing it (as Jim Baker did). Instead, he isolated himself with a few trusted aides, and paid the inevitable price.

But with Flynn, fairly or unfairly, crashing and burning, the National Security Advisor job, which I hadn't previously considered because of Flynn's closeness to Trump, was now open. The press speculated that Flynn's successor would be another general, mentioning David Petraeus, Robert Harwood (formerly Navy, now at Lockheed, pushed vigorously by Mattis), or Keith Kellogg (a longtime Trump supporter and now NSC Executive Secretary). Tillerson seemed to be uninvolved, another sign of trouble, both because he was not in the loop and because he didn't seem to realize the potential problem for him if a Mattis ally got the job, potentially making Tillerson's relations with the White House more difficult. Indeed, news stories were noting Tillerson's low profile generally.⁸

Bannon texted me on Friday, February 17, asking me to come to Mar-a-Lago to meet Trump over President's Day weekend. That day, MSNBC's Joe Scarborough tweeted, "I strongly opposed @AmbJohnBolton for SecState. But the former UN ambassador is Thomas Jefferson in Paris compared to Michael Flynn." In Trumpworld, this could be helpful. During the Mar-a-

Lago primary that weekend, a guest told me he had heard Trump say several times, “I’m starting to really like Bolton.” Hadn’t I concluded before that I needed to work that crowd harder? Trump interviewed three candidates: Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster, author of *Dereliction of Duty*, a superb study of civil-military relations in America; Lieutenant General Robert Caslen, Commandant of West Point; and me. I had met and spoken with McMaster years before and admired his willingness to espouse controversial positions. Meeting Caslen for the first time, I saw him as a personable and highly competent official. Both were in full-dress uniform, immediately demonstrating their marketing skills. Me, I still had my moustache.

Trump greeted me warmly, saying how much he respected me and that he was happy to consider me to be National Security Advisor. Trump also asked if I would consider a “title like Bannon’s” (who was also present in the private bar on Mar-a-Lago’s first floor, along with Priebus and Kushner), covering strategic issues. Thus, apparently, I could be one of many generic “Assistants to the President,” of which there were already too many in Trump’s White House, with only slapdash efforts at defining their roles and responsibilities. This was a complete nonstarter for me, so I politely declined, saying I was only interested in the National Security Advisor job. As Henry Kissinger once reportedly said, “Never take a government job without an inbox.”

The President assured me that Flynn’s successor would have a free hand in organizational and personnel matters, which I believed essential in running an effective NSC staff and interagency process. We covered the full range of world issues, a tour d’horizon, as the State Department loves to call it, and Trump interjected at one point, “This is so great. John sounds just like he does on television. I could just keep listening. I love it.” Kushner asked, “How do you handle the point that you’re so controversial, that people either love you or hate you?” As I was opening my mouth to answer, Trump said, “Yeah, just like me! People either love me or hate me. John and I are exactly alike.” I added only that one should be judged on performance, listing a few of what I considered to be my foreign-policy achievements. The