

# Trump against empire: is that why they hate him?



**CHRISTIAN PARENTI** · FEBRUARY 15, 2023

<https://thegrayzone.com/2023/02/15/trump-empire-they-hated-him/>

(click the link to see videos)

**Trump was ideologically incoherent and crassly transactional. But the threat he posed to American empire and thus the gargantuan security state helps establish a motive for why US intelligence intervened in both the 2016 and 2020 elections.**

As president, Donald Trump lavished the rich with tax cuts and deregulation. Yet, contradictorily, he also threatened the structure of American global hegemony that does so much to keep the American one percent tremendously wealthy. In fact, Trump undertook the most momentous rollback of American military and diplomatic power since the current architecture of American informal empire first took form at the end of World War II.

Trump campaigned on an end to “nation building” and then, amazingly, set about actually winding down America’s “forever wars” by simply packing up and leaving. Nor did he start any new wars. Trump cut the number of US troops in Iraq by almost **half**. In Afghanistan, he cut the US occupation force by half and negotiated a framework for total **withdrawal**. He tried to end US combat deployments in both Somalia and Syria, and in both cases, despite Pentagon opposition and slow-walking noncompliance, Trump did manage to withdraw the majority of US personnel. In Syria, bases abruptly abandoned by US special forces were taken over by Russians - a development that prompted the New Yorker to accuse Trump of the **“abandonment of Syria.”**

Worse yet in the eyes of the national security state, Trump went after US operations in Germany and South Korea, threatening highly strategic lynchpins in the global system of US military power. He also made great

strides towards normalizing relations with North Korea and producing a peace treaty on the Korean peninsula. In Libya, he declined to escalate and worked with Russia towards a peace settlement. In Venezuela, he first allowed John Bolton and the CIA to attempt a color revolution-style coup fronted by pretty-boy Juan Guaidó. But when that effort faced resistance Trump grew bored, started making flattering remarks about “tough” Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro and his “good looking generals,” while complaining that his National Security Council director John Bolton wanted to get him “in a war.”

Understanding how Donald Trump threatened American empire and thus the gargantuan security state and its associated industrial complex of contractors and think tanks helps establish a motive for why the FBI and over 50 former intelligence officials actively attempted to suppress the Hunter Biden laptop story, thereby putting their thumbs on the scale during the 2020 election.

It also helps us understand why, in 2016, the CIA, FBI, NSA, and the Director of National Intelligence all signed off on the Russiagate narrative despite the lack of credible evidence. And it helps us understand why, as Matt Taibbi has reported, over 150 private philanthropic foundations came together to create and fund the intelligence-adjacent Alliance for Securing Democracy, which in turn funded the spooky outfit Hamilton 68 which pushed the Russiagate hoax. In short, it helps explain why they hate him.

Trump described his foreign policy as “America First,” thus tapping into a more-than-century-long strain of American isolationism, or conservative anti-war sentiment. But his attacks on American empire were not ideologically coherent. He hated NATO but he loved Israel. He increased pressure in Cuba, but did the opposite with North Korea. He increased the military budget even as he attempted to withdraw troops all over the planet. His reasoning, when given, was crassly transactional.

For example, six months into his administration, Trump met with the increasingly worried Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon in a super-secure meeting room called “the Tank.” The meeting was an attempt to talk sense into the new president. As the *Washington Post* described it, the Joint Chiefs tried to “explain why U.S. troops were deployed in so many regions and why America’s safety hinged on a complex web of trade deals, alliances, and bases across the globe.” The presentation involved maps and graphics intended to make the issue clear and simple.

Unimpressed, Trump called his generals “dopes and babies” and “losers” who “don’t know how to win anymore.” As his anger rose, he demanded to know why the United States was not receiving free oil as tribute for the US military presence in the Middle East. “We spent \$7 trillion; they’re ripping us off,” Trump bellowed. “Where is the fucking oil?”

Despite active opposition from within his administration, Trump also attacked important treaties, ordering the United States withdrawal from: the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR); the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); the Paris Climate Agreement; and the World Health Organization (because Trump saw the WHO as soft on China at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic). He withdrew the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a corporate free trade deal which had taken two years to craft and would have been the centerpiece of a US “pivot toward Asia.” With a barrage of punitive tariffs, Trump launched a trade war against China. Although it continued under Biden, Trump’s destabilizing economic confrontation with China came as a shock to business and political leaders around the world.

Accusing Russia of cheating, Trump terminated the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. But he also held a cordial face-to-face summit with Putin in Helsinki that took his opposition’s Russiagate paranoia to unprecedented heights. Trump withdrew from the Treaty on Open Skies, an almost 20-year-old mechanism for preventing weapons proliferation. He started to scrap the hard-won nonproliferation treaty with Iran and revised America’s Nuclear Posture Review to, insanely, allow an atomic response in case of cyber-attack!

Most shocking of all, Trump repeatedly expressed his wish to remove the US from NATO, which would have destroyed NATO if it had been done. If NATO fell apart, the entire US-centered global system - that is, the largest, most effective, complex, and expensive imperial project in world history - would undergo a seismic destabilization. American empire is not inevitable, it is not natural, and it is widely resented. It only continues to exist because of constant, diligent, sophisticated leadership. Trump, like a toddler wielding a hammer, spent four years almost randomly smashing holes in that delicate structure.

**What is American power?**

Since 1945, American global hegemony has rested on a vast system of infrastructure: embassies, listening posts, 800-plus military bases, naval assets, satellite networks, undersea cables, etc. It also rests on an array of long-standing, multi-national relationships involving state institutions, politicians, diplomats, military officers, contractors, intelligence networks, corporations, business executives, humanitarian professionals, academic specialists, and journalists.

Central in all this, yet often overlooked, is the role of building consent for American power among allies. This consent allows Washington to use allies against adversaries. But it is also a form of control over those same allies. Thus, NATO is about keeping the Russians out of Western Europe, but it is also about controlling Europe, one of the most powerful centers of global capitalism.

The importance of US power to the management of global capitalism as a *whole*, was described well by Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin in their **book** *The Making of Global Capitalism*:

*“The American state, in the very process of supporting the export of capital and the expansion of multinational corporations, increasingly took responsibility for creating the political and juridical conditions for the general extension and reproduction of capitalism internationally.... As with the informal regional empire that the US established in its own hemisphere at the beginning of the twentieth century, a proper understanding of the informal global empire it established at mid-century requires... [identifying] the international role of the American state in setting the conditions for capital accumulation.”*

Trump, it seems, never understood this big picture stuff. Instead, he saw the raft of relationships, alliances, institutions, and programs that comprise the post-1945 American-led global order as little more than a poorly run security business. Consider his view of NATO:

*“I met them last year. Stoltenberg, Secretary General, great guy, of NATO. Big fan. No one was paying their bills. Last year I went, a year ago. We picked up \$44 billion. Nobody reports it. I just left recently and we’re going to pick up at least another, close to a \$1 billion extra. I said to him, ‘you got to pay your **bills.**’”*

Trump treated powerful allies as poorly as he treated subcontractors during his real estate days. Recall the G-7 summit of 2018: Trump arrived late, left

early, and refused to sign a joint communiqué reaffirming the G-7's commitment to a "rules based international order." When then-German Prime Minister Angela Merkel pressured him to sign, Trump took two Starburst candies from his pocket, tossed them across the conference table and sneered, "Here, Angela, don't say I never give you **anything**."

In 2020, the US Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations described Trump's foreign policy as "marked by chaos, neglect, and diplomatic failures." The President's "impulsive, erratic approach has tarnished the reputation of the United States as a reliable partner and led to disarray in dealing with foreign governments.... Critical neglect of global challenges has endangered Americans, weakened the U.S. role in the world, and squandered the respect it built up over decades. Sudden pronouncements, such as the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, have angered close allies and caught U.S. officials **off-guard**."

Mark Esper, who spent a year and half as Trump's second Secretary of Defense, made an art of blocking implementation of Trump's empire-wrecking directives. When Trump demanded that one third of the American military personnel in Germany come home, Esper drew up a plan to instead "redeploy" 11,500 troops with more than half of these remaining in the European theater. Indeed, Esper even managed to spin the redeployment as advancing America's traditional agenda of threatening Russia.

Esper's memoir portrays Trump as easily distracted: "A discussion would stop stone cold and pivot as a new thought raced through his head — he saw something on TV, or somebody made a remark that threw him off track." Yet Trump was also consistent in his foreign policy sentiments. "Somehow, we often ended up on the same topics, like his greatest hits of the decade: NATO spending; Merkel, Germany, and Nord Stream 2 [Trump wanted it stopped]; corruption in Afghanistan; U.S. troops in Korea; and, closing our embassies in Africa, for example."

Trump's foreign policy team worked to actively thwart him. Gary Cohn, Trump's top economic advisor, went so far as twice **stealing** from the president's desk important documents awaiting presidential signature. One would have withdrawn the United States from a trade agreement with South Korea. The other would have unilaterally pulled the US out of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Later, Trump did renegotiate NAFTA, transforming it into the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), which did, in fact, include higher wages for Mexican autoworkers.

Trump regularly demeaned and insulted his foreign policy team. In a conversation that included the Irish Prime Minister, Trump called across the room to his National Security Adviser, the dementedly bellicose John Bolton, “John, is Ireland one of those countries you want to **invade?**” In 2019, Trump unceremoniously fired Bolton by tweet.

Trump’s first Defense Secretary, Jim “Mad Dog” Mathis, openly opposed most of the administration’s foreign policy moves. Displeased, Trump started calling **Mathis** “Moderate Dog.” In January 2019, when Trump ordered US troops withdrawn from Syria, Moderate Dog resigned.

A “shaken” Nancy Pelosi declared the turn of events “very serious for our country.” Republican Senator Ben Sasse called it “a sad day for America” while a “particularly distressed” Mitch McConnell worried openly about “key aspects of America’s global leadership.”

## Vandalizing NATO

Most alarming to the national security establishment was Trump’s 2020 attempt to cut by one-third the US military presence in Germany. Considered the “bedrock” of NATO, Germany hosts 35,000 American military personnel stationed across 40 different installations. The air components for both U.S. European Command and U.S. Africa Command are headquartered at Germany’s Ramstein Air. These German-based assets – bombers, fighters, drones, helicopters, AWAC surveillance planes, as well as associated radar, air traffic control, and signals intelligence infrastructure – cover 104 countries ready to provide “expeditionary base support, force protection, construction, and resupply operations” even in “austere conditions.” Germany also hosts an estimated 150 US nuclear armed **missiles**.

Surprisingly far-flung US military operations depend on German bases. When American soldiers were wounded by roadside bombs in Iraq, their first stop was a local Combat Support Hospital, but once stabilized the wounded were immediately flown to the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center at the U.S. Army post in Landstuhl, Germany, near Ramstein Air Base. Yet, in the summer of 2020 Trump ordered the Germany deployment cut by 12,000, or **one-third**.

“We don’t want to be the suckers anymore,” Trump told reporters when announcing the move. “We’re reducing the force because they’re not paying their bills; it’s very simple.” When Esper tried to spin the drawdown as a



mere redeployment, Trump corrected him: “Germany’s delinquent, they haven’t paid their NATO **fees.**”

The redeployment reportedly “blindsided” both German officials and some American military leaders because neither group was properly consulted in the process, nor was there much planning of any sort associated with the momentous move. As already mentioned, Esper did all he could to distort and block Trump’s order.

More important than the *quantity* of troops Trump sought to withdraw is the *qualitatively greater damage* of those withdrawals from one of the most critical, high-tech logistics hubs in the entire imperial apparatus. The Council on Foreign Relations worried aloud about the “message to allies and adversaries alike that the United States is no longer committed to European **defense.**”

## Final Assault

By November 2019, as Trump’s friendship with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un was in full blossom, the American president started musing about withdrawing troops from South Korea and demanded that South Korea - and all other allies hosting US military personnel - pay “cost plus 50%” for American **protection.**

Trump started by ordering withdrawal of 4,000 of the 28,000 US military personnel in South Korea. As in Germany, American soldiers, sailors, air personnel, and intelligence officers in South Korea do much more than merely guard the country. Indeed, they project American power into the entire East Asian and Pacific region. The US military footprint in South Korea is spread across fifteen bases; one of these, Camp Humphreys, is the largest military base in the world. As with Germany, the US presence in South Korea is the high-tech fulcrum of a region-wide system of bases, air wings, and naval fleets. American Navy assets in South Korea support the Japan-headquartered US Seventh Fleet which contains 50 to 70 ships, 150 aircraft, and 27,000 Sailors and Marines.

In 2020, Trump announced that he wanted all US troops out of Iraq and **Afghanistan.** The latter half of Trump’s term also saw the beginning of the end of the Afghan war. Even though it was Biden who presided over the final US withdraw from Afghanistan, the conditions for that withdraw were negotiated by the Trump administration. American agreement with the

Taliban stipulated that US troops would be out of Afghanistan in 18 months, provided that the Taliban fought to contain terrorist groups such as the Islamic State.

Those who dismiss Trump's treaty with the Taliban do not understand how the US withdrawal from Afghanistan unfolded. While thirteen American soldiers were killed in an Islamic State suicide bombing at the gates of the Kabul airport and the United States left vast amounts of hardware such as Humvees and helicopters - in large part because the Pentagon refused to cooperate until it was too late - had the Trump Administration not reached an agreement with the Taliban, the US withdrawal would have been a desperate fight to escape.

In 2019, Trump momentarily took an interest in the Libya debacle. In typical fashion he started courting Khalifa Haftar, a US-groomed warlord who came to oppose the US and United Nations-backed Libyan "government." But then, despite considerable pressure from American allies like Turkey, Egypt, and others to commit more resources, Trump backed off and, once again surprising allies, called for a cease **fire**.

The United States mission in Somalia, which began in 2007, has been described as "a cornerstone of the Pentagon's global efforts to combat al Qaeda." Anyone looking at a map can see the country's strategic importance: at the tip of the Horn of Africa, jutting into the Arabian Sea, not far from the mouth of the Persian Gulf, with a shoreline along one side of the Gulf of Aden which leads north to the Suez Canal. But in early December 2020, Trump (who in a crude display had referred to Haiti and African states as "shithole countries") pulled the plug, ordering a near total withdrawal of the 700 US special forces, military advisors, and CIA operatives in **Somalia**.

## The view from inside

Put yourself for a moment in the position of people like FBI director Christopher Wray, or his predecessor, James Comey. Looking out upon Trump's foreign policy vandalism, you would feel deep concern. If, like the majority of DC elites, you see American global leadership as fundamentally moral, even vital and indispensable, then Trump's brazen attacks upon it are extremely dangerous. From such a vantage point, the truly responsible thing to do would be to sabotage Trump's policy, his legitimacy, his base, and the possibility of his reelection.



Worse yet, Trump is a demagogue. He has created a grassroots movement of deeply devoted followers: the America First movement that subscribes to his Make America Great Again, or MAGA, slogan. They also demand containment; their neo-isolationist politics need to be discredited lest they spread and become mainstream.

The FBI and the CIA have illegally **intervened** in domestic politics, historically by targeting left-wing social movements. We know they infiltrated Trump's 2016 campaign, then worked to paint him as a Russian puppet throughout his presidency. Are we to believe that the intelligence agencies would not and could not have intervened to prevent the reelection of Donald Trump? Or that they would not have attempted to entrap, then hound and severely punish the MAGA that that rioted for several hours at the US Capitol on January 6th 2021? Such a proposition strikes me as ridiculous. Yet, many of my left-wing friends refuse to explore the mounting evidence suggesting that such agencies moved against Trump and his base because they cannot see *why* the intelligence agencies might have pressing reasons to do so.

But look abroad. Trump threatened the entire system of US global hegemony. He threatened it for different reasons and in different ways than might grassroots, socialist, anti-imperialists, but he threatened US empire nonetheless.