

John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened. A White House Memoir*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Simon & Schuster, 2020, 592.

Memories are usually composed before academic historical narratives are formalized, making them invaluable and irreplaceable sources. They provide insights that are frequently missing from official sources, giving a distinct viewpoint on historical events. Memoirs, in particular, reveal not only the author's personal experiences and perspectives, but also the larger social and political milieu in which they lived. The significance of such stories is greatly increased when the writer holds a prominent political or social position, as this standing often allows access to crucial events and decision-making procedures.

Following this premise, John Bolton is an ideal candidate for attracting the attention of both academia and the general public worldwide. A graduate of Yale University Law School, he has held high-level roles in the administrations of Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush, served as President Trump's National Security Advisor, and was the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations from 2005 to 2006. In addition to his public service, Bolton has worked as a private attorney since 1974 and gained recognition as a prominent foreign policy pundit in the media.

John Bolton's memoirs, published in 2020, joined a long tradition of insider accounts but were soon overshadowed by new works that expanded on the portrayal of American high-level administration. Some notable examples include *Midnight in Moscow: A Memoir from the Front Line of Russia's War Against the West* (2024) by John J. Sullivan, former U.S. Ambassador to Moscow, and *At*

*War with Ourselves: My Tour of Duty in the Trump White House* (2024) by Herbert Raymond McMaster, a retired general, Hoover Fellow, and National Security Adviser to Trump from 2017 to 2018. McMaster's book became a bestseller just months before the presidential election, in which his former boss, Donald Trump, reemerged as a leading candidate.

It is no coincidence that Bolton dedicated several pages of his memoir to his predecessor, General McMaster, a role that Bolton was eager to assume, either as National Security Advisor or as Secretary of State. McMaster eventually left the administration due to his opposition, along with two other senior aides, to withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal, a position that sharply contrasted with Bolton's views. Bolton strongly supported the decision to exit the agreement and argued that military action against Iran's nuclear facilities could provide the only lasting solution. He also praised President Trump for withdrawing the United States from the Paris Climate Accord, reflecting his broader skepticism toward multilateral agreements.

Bolton used the debate over Robert M. Gates' memoirs (*Duty. Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, New York: Penguin Random House, 2014) to discuss the morality of publishing the memoirs of the highest representatives of the administration while the president's and the same administration's mandates are still in effect. Critics chastised Gates for improperly referencing an administration in which Hillary Clinton was a potential presidential candidate and for betraying the trust

of President Obama and other senior colleagues by revealing their private conversations, positions, and emotions. At this point Bolton defends Gates's work, arguing that senior officials have a duty to explain their actions while in government. Bolton believes the criticism of Gates' memoir's timing is unfounded, suggesting that one should write when the memory is still fresh. Bolton thinks that if the timing does not suit the present administration or former colleagues, it is their problem, not the writer's. In certain respects, it provided justification for his decision to begin articulating his views on the President and his associates following his departure from the White House. *The New York Times* reported that the book's publication has been repeatedly delayed, with the Trump Administration filing a lawsuit to further postpone its release, while *The Washington Post* noted that the White House's strong determination to ban the book came as no surprise. Bolton's book demolishes Trump's foreign policy, documenting and exposing him as stunningly ignorant. In his book, the *British Guardian* recognized Trump's Caesarism and that of his authoritarian allies in Turkey, Brazil, Russia, and China.

As for Gates, it is worth mentioning that he is the author of an equally valuable study *Exercise of Power American Failures, Successes, and a New Path Forward in the Post-Cold War World*, (New York: Penguin Random House, 2021).

Bolton's book provides a detailed account of the inner operations of the White House, shedding light on how decisions of global significance, as well as those impacting individual careers, are made. It explores the dilemma of whether to confront the president who appointed you, reflecting on Bolton's own strug-

gles during his seventeen months in office before his dismissal by Trump. The book delves into Trump's personality, knowledge, temperament, and work habits, highlighting the challenges of his presidency. Bolton testifies that Trump had ambitious goals but often lacked clear strategies to achieve them, as seen in his handling of issues such as withdrawing from Iraq and Afghanistan, securing U.S. borders, and addressing the pandemic. The book also provides intriguing insights into how key decisions were made, including the selection of officials and the restructuring of bodies to deal with critical challenges.

In his most important conclusion, which he will reiterate in public even after the book is published, Bolton feels that his President harmed American interests during his first term, and that achieving a new mandate could cause much more damage.

The author has organized the manuscript into fifteen chapters: The Long March to a West Wing Corner Office, Cry "Havoc" and Let Slip the Dogs of War, America Breaks Free, The Singapore Sling: A Tale of Three Cities – Summits in Brussels, London, and Helsinki, Thwarting Russia, Trump Heads for the Door in Syria and Afghanistan and Can't Find It, Chaos as a Way of Life, Venezuela Libre, Thunder out of China, Checking into the Hanoi Hilton, Then Checking Out, The Panmunjom Playtime, Trump Loses His Way, and Then His Nerve, From Afghanistan Counterterrorism Mission to the Camp David Near Miss, The End of the Idyll, and Epilogue. The book also includes notes and an index.

The chapter "Thwarting Russia" is likely the most widely read, and certainly has been the most frequently read, alongside chapters that explore Trump's selec-

tion of associates (*The Long March to a West Wing Corner Office*), his personality, and the reasons behind his dismissal of Bolton or Bolton's subsequent resignation (*Chaos as a Way of Life, Trump Loses His Way, and Then His Nerve, The End of the Idyll*).

Bolton accused the Biden administration of failing to implement a deterrence doctrine (Sic!). However, it demonstrates Trump's contradiction in opposing public criticism of Russia while also supporting sanctions. By the way, the scissors of sanctions, which cause issues not only for the target country but also for the allied countries, are nicely depicted. It describes the difficult conversations with allies over not only Russia, but also Iran.

Bolton omits a significant portion of the chronology of the two superpowers' relationship, focusing on the specifics of "Russian violations" of the agreed-upon arms limitation agreements while ignoring the underlying reasons for Russia's concerns about the US's true intentions. He ignores not only the broken promises of 1990, but also the threats posed in 2008.

If we compare Bolton's memoirs to those of Colin Powell, Richard Holbrooke, Madeleine Albright, James Baker, Bill Clinton, Wesley Clark, John Matlock Jr., and others, we will notice differences, but also a respect for certain clichés or, more precisely, the political correctness that is prevalent in the West today. Some people jumped out of it, including Matlock Jr., the last US Ambassador to the Soviet Union, and US Ambassador Jack Freeman. Matlock is a strong critic of NATO's eastward expansion. He witnessed firsthand how the Soviets were told that NATO would not expand (*Regan and Gorbachev, How the Cold War Ended*, New York: Random House, 2004,

or his most recent book, *Superpower Illusions. How Myths and False Ideologies Led America Astray - And How to Return to Reality*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010). The political testimonies of Secretary of Defense and former CIA Director Robert Gates are consistent in their attempt to clarify how NATO enlargement triggered Russia's reactions and heightened security concerns, noting that promises regarding East Germany, former Warsaw Pact members, and former Soviet republics were broken. However, Gates contends that pledges were made solely concerning East Germany, excluding other considerations, such as those presented in Michael E. O'Hanlon's *Beyond NATO: A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2017). Former Secretary of Defense William J. Perry regarded O'Hanlon's report as deserving serious attention, particularly highlighting his proposals for concrete steps to reduce the risk of escalating hostilities between the United States and Russia, such as withdrawing certain states from NATO membership. Perry affirmed that O'Hanlon's recommendations were well-argued and worthy of consideration.

Bolton's hawkish attitude (*cliché*) in regards to US-Russia-Ukraine nexus, one could find in the following lines on his judgements:

"Moscow orchestrated the illegitimate annexation of Crimea after intervening militarily, the first change in European borders due to military forces since 1945. Russian troops remained deployed across the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine, supporting and in fact directing separatist forces there. This major Russian-American dispute proves that

failing to act earlier to bring Ukraine into NATO, left this large, critically important country vulnerable to Putin's effort to re-established Russian hegemony within the space of the former Soviet Union. At the NATO's April 2008 Bucharest Summit, the Bush 43 Administration tried to put Georgia and Ukraine on path to NATO membership, which the Europeans, especially Germany and France, opposed. The tragic consequences were made plain that August, when Russian troops invaded Georgia, effectively placing two provinces under Moscow's control, which remain so to this day, Ukraine's suffering began later, but the pattern was the same (p. 445)."

One might notice that Bolton's memory has faded away, especially about the invasion of Cyprus in 1974 or, the aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999. The chronology applied is also a weak point of Bolton's testimony. For example, he puts the reaction to the cause as a proven beginning (Georgia case). Furthermore, many in the United States, including experienced diplomats such as Henry Kissinger, would undoubtedly disagree with Bolton's position on NATO enlargement.

John Bolton clearly follows politically correct clichés at many crucial points. It is difficult to discern when Bolton's "deeply held beliefs" are sincere or, he puts that correctness only as a necessary fence to slip through something that is far more important. Upon reading the book, it appears that both components exist. Bolton continues to endorse the highly discredited narrative of chemical weapons strikes in Syria in 2017 and 2018. However, there is no mention of Condoleezza Rice's 2006 projection of a "new Arab world" or the idea of redrawing borders, which implied the fragmentation of exist-

ing states, including Syria. He defended involvement in Libya by citing the country's lack of a functional, competent government, while clichés were employed to describe the origins of the Iraq and Afghanistan crises. The message to North Korea was a direct provocation, asserting that Korea should be united under the leadership of South Korea. The message to South America was equally inflammatory, as he argued that the Monroe Doctrine should continue to be enforced. Concerning Venezuela, he maintained that Juan Guaidó remained the legitimate president and attributed the country's hardships solely to Nicolás Maduro's regime, overlooking the impact of long-term economic sanctions. The issues of Iran and Ukraine, as previously mentioned, fall into the category of clichés in his analysis.

Bolton's book is undoubtedly important for analyzing the practice of decision-making at the highest levels of the United States. It reveals internal interactions in which people bring their individual traits or limitations, education, ideology, health, and physical capacities. The book has been properly examined by state security officials to guarantee that no critical information is disclosed prematurely. It is also important to note that the president and his adviser parted ways, with Bolton claiming to have resigned and Trump asserting that he was fired. This book was translated into Serbian in 2024 and published by *Čigoja Štampa* in Belgrade, allowing readers in Serbia and the former Yugoslavia to gain insights into Bolton's views on former president and presidential candidate Donald Trump ahead of the November elections in the United States.

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