

Exiting Syria

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Every so often, an event occurs that reminds me how far I am from the mainstream. This past week provided yet another example.

President Trump announced his intention to remove all U.S. troops from Syria within a month or two. That was followed immediately by a leak to the media that Trump also plans to withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan. These decisions resulted in General James Mattis tendering his letter of resignation as Secretary of Defense, which President Trump then moved up from the end of February to January 1st. The announcements of troop withdrawals were probably not the sole reason that Mattis is stepping down, since Mattis has longstanding and cumulative disagreements with the President, but they were the straw that broke the camel's back. He'd finally had enough and could no longer continue to serve in the administration.

The reaction to these events was a paroxysm of shock, outrage, and protest, from both within and beyond the government — by politicians, pundits, policy wonks, and virtually all the talking heads and expert panels that constitute the mainstream media. Had Trump finally gone stark raving mad? Apparently. Mattis' letter of resignation was read and discussed time after time as an example of sanity and maturity. Across the political spectrum, authorities set their hair on fire, screaming that Trump's decisions represented a grave national security crisis. Removal of our troops from Syria and Afghanistan would represent a defeat for America and a "Christmas Gift" to Vladimir Putin.

According to various international organizations, the war in Syria has claimed anywhere from 200,000 to 500,000 lives since 2011. Much of that death toll has resulted from Syria's becoming a pawn in the tragic and brutal game of global geopolitics. Russia, Iran, Israel, Turkey, and the U.S. are all involved. Afghanistan is a different story. America invaded Afghanistan in 2002 as a response to 9-11. 16 years later, the American military is still there, still fighting, still embroiled in a quagmire that shows no signs of ever being resolved.

I find myself in an awkward position. While I loathe Trump as a person and as President, and although I'm neither an isolationist nor a pacifist, I am firmly opposed to the endless and perpetual American wars waged around the world that are now considered normal. The militarization of our country that has

occurred over my lifetime and constitutes merely the most visible expression of American Imperial geopolitics is horrific to me. Congress currently authorizes a nearly trillion-dollar-per-year budget for the military, plus (if reports are accurate) perhaps trillions more in unaccounted, off-the-books spending over the past decades that has disappeared down the black hole of the Deep State's surveillance and military apparatus. Weaponry and military hardware, both for America and in sales to foreign countries, account for a significant portion of our economy. The Merchants of Death are thriving.

I feel no animus toward soldiers. Quite the contrary, I am sympathetic to the many challenges faced by military personnel and their families, from the obvious terrors of injury, death, debility, and madness that soldiers risk, through the lengthy separations from their loved ones, to the long-term financial difficulties that may result from their participation in what amounts to a mercenary army composed largely of Americans from backgrounds of all-too-modest economic means.

On the other hand, I do not thrill to the displays of American military might that precede outdoor sporting events, particularly NFL football games — the screaming jets overhead, the pious and patriotic flag-waving, the singing of the War Anthem. All that enthusiasm for war is unbearable and hurts my heart.

My distance from the mainstream boils down to the Us-versus-Them dynamic that is so deeply embedded in our biological hard-wiring. We love and support Us, but we do not care about and may even hate Them. That's as close to universal as anything I know in human nature. At one extreme of that reality are people for whom "Us" is only those they love personally — their families and friends. Closer to the middle of the curve are people for whom "Us" consists of all those of similar race, nationality, values, or beliefs. I am at the other end. For me, "Us" includes most human beings, as well as the bulk of all living creatures.

Since war means killing, I am against it. I believe in diplomacy to solve disputes over international sovereignty, with war as the very last resort. Yes, I understand that diplomacy doesn't and will not always succeed, and I even accept that conflicts may exist where killing "Them" is seemingly the only practical way to shield "Us" from harm. I'm not happy about that solution, however, in part because it creates vendettas and vengeance that perpetuate the cycle of violence. The legal rationales for "just war" offered throughout the previous century and into this one do not entirely convince me of war's righteousness. I do, however, understand the urge to protect "Us" and minimize "Our" suffering.

Heck, I'm well aware that my own psyche contains cruel, violent, and murderous motivations. I just don't celebrate them, and I do what I can to keep from acting out such impulses. I accept also that humans are not the only violent species on the planet. Everything eats everything else, and Nature herself is violent. The entire universe is an ongoing act of Creation through violent Destruction.

Am I pleased to see General Mattis step down as Secretary of Defense? No, in part because his replacement will be another loyal servant of the American Empire. Also, Mattis' letter of resignation was remarkably measured and contained affirmations of American ideals, however sullied those ideals may be in fact. A nation of high ideals is simply incompatible with Empire.

When the Twin Towers came down in 2001, I felt certain, along with many other like-minded people, that our government would use the military to wreak vengeance around the world. And we have. The so-called War on Terror has not solved anything, except to increase hatred toward us. I'd argue that America is much worse off as a result, having spent (and wasted) so much in blood and treasure.

Some people would no doubt consider me a hopelessly naïve idealist, a dreamer, damned fool, or even an outright traitor for my anti-war stance. Many might challenge my position with the argument that withdrawing our troops from Syria and Afghanistan will result in greater rather than less suffering and death. That rationale has been offered in every American military incursion since Vietnam. It may even have been accurate at times, but too often the argument results in the continuation of a particular war, whether inadvertently or intentionally.

In all honesty, I do not possess a blueprint for a perfect world. Improving the world we've already got is daunting enough, and our "solutions" tend to produce unforeseen repercussions. My concern, however, is that the elites who do run the world — people who have gone to great lengths to achieve and wield power — may not be any more competent than I am. Sometimes, but not always, and not invariably. Heaven knows that is true of Donald Trump.

Beyond competence is the question of sanity. If the 20th century wasn't enough to convince us that war is insane and bad for everyone involved — not only the victims and the vanquished, but the victors as well, since no one really wins or emerges unscathed — then I don't know what will.

Perhaps Trump's decision (to withdraw the troops from Syria and Afghanistan) will not be implemented in actual policy, simply vanishing into the night as if it had never happened. That wouldn't surprise me.

Still, my Christmas wish is that the troops come home.