

Chapter 9 — Shocking The Conscience

A VERY STABLE GENIUS: Donald J Trump's Testing Of America
Philip Rucker Carol Leonig PenguinRandomHouse 2020 pp 129-139

There Is No More Sacred Military Space Than Room 2E924 Of The Pentagon. A Windowless And Secure Vault Of A Conference Room Where The Joint Chiefs Of Staff Meet Regularly To Wrestle With Classified Matters, It's More Common Name Is "The Tank." It Got Its Name From The Joint Chiefs' Original Meeting Location During World War II, In The Basement Of A Federal Building On Constitution Avenue In Washington, Where Attendees Had To Walk Through An Austere Arched Portal With Exposed Wires That Gave The Impression Of Entering A Tank. Unlike The Command Centers Conjured In Hollywood Thrillers, The Tank At The Pentagon Resembles A Small Corporate Boardroom, With Midcentury Stylings Including A Gleaming Golden Oak Table And Leather Swivel Armchairs. The Room, Saturated By History, Also Is Known As The Gold Room For Its Thick Carpeting And Ornate Drapery.

Uniformed Officers Think Of The Tank A Bit Like A Church. Inside Its Walls, Flag Officers Observe A Reverence And Decorum For The Wrenching Decisions That Have Been Made Here. To Sit At Its Table Is A *Great Honor*. The Room Is Controlled By Four-Star Generals, Not The President's Civilian Appointees, And It Is A Safe Space For Them To Speak Candidly Without Intrusions From The Political Dramas Of The Day. The Tank Is Reserved For Serious Discussions Of Military Tactics. Here Is Where Matters Of War And Peace Are Determined, Where The Joint Chiefs Decide To Send Young Men And Women To Their Deaths.

Hanging Prominently On One Of The Walls, Along With American Flag And The Banners Of The Military Branches, Was *The Peacemakers*, A Painting That Depicted A Historic Meeting Of A President And His Three Service Chiefs: An 1865 Civil War Strategy Session With President Abraham Lincoln, Lieutenant General Ulysses S Grant, Major General William Tecumseh Sherman, And Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter. One Hundred Fifty-Two Years Later After Lincoln Hatched Plans To Preserve The Union, President Trump's Advisers Staged An Intervention Inside The Tank To Preserve World Order. The *July 20, 2017*, Meeting In The Tank Has Been Documented Numerous Times, Most Memorably By Bob Woodward In *Fear*, But Subsequent Reporting Reveals A More Complete Picture Of The Moment And The Chilling Effect Trump's Comments And Hostility Had On The Nation's Military And National Security Leadership.

Secretary Of Defense Jim Mattis, Director Of The National Economic Council Gary Cohn, And Secretary Of State Rex Tillerson Had Grown Alarmed Over The First Six Months Of The Trump Administration By *Gaping Holes In The President's Knowledge Of History* And Of The Alliances Forged In The Wake Of World War II That Served As The Foundation Of America's Strength In The World. Trump Had Unnerved Trusted Friends By Dismissing Existing Relations With Western Democracies As Worthless, Including By Questioning The Value Of NATO, While Cultivating Friendlier Ones With Russia And Other Authoritarian Regimes. He Wanted To Tear Up Trade Deals To Squeeze More Out Of Partners. And He Advocated Withdrawing Troops Not Only From Active Theaters Like Afghanistan But Also From Strategic Outposts Like South Korea, Where U.S. Forces

Were Helping Keep The Peace, Complaining That The Military Presence Around The World Was A Waste Of Billions Of Dollars.

Trump Organized His Unorthodox Worldview Under The Simplistic Banner Of “America First,” But Mattis, Tillerson, And Cohn Feared His Proposals Were Rash, Barely Considered, And A Danger To America’s Superpower Standing. They Also Felt That Many Of Trump’s Impulsive Ideas — And Their Continuing Difficulty Communicating U.S. Interests Abroad With The President — *Stemmed From His Lack Of Familiarity With U.S. History, And Even With The Map Of The World.* Cohn Had Confided To His Peers He Had Been Surprised *At The Many Gaps* In Trump’s Understanding Of World Affairs. To Have A Useful Discussion With Him, The Trio Agreed, They Had To Lay A Foundation With Trump And Create A Basic Knowledge, A Shared Language. So On July 20, Mattis Invited Trump To The Tank For What He, Tillerson, And Cohn Had Carefully Organized As A Tailored Tutorial On The State Of The World And America’s Interests Abroad.

The Meeting Was Billed As A Briefing On Afghanistan, Because Trump Was In The Midst Of Developing A Long-Term Strategy To Defeat The Islamic State There, But In Reality The Session Was To Be A Gentle Lesson On American Power, With The President As A Student. The Organizers Viewed It As A Course Correction, An Intervention To Educate Trump And Give Him Some Fundamentals For Analyzing The World.

The Tank Was Selected As The Venue Because Trump Was Impressed By The Room When He First Visited It In January 2017, Telling Advisers That It Was Cool And Classic, A Relic

From An Earlier Era. He Marveled At The Idea That He, Donald Trump, Sat In The Same Room Where Commanders In Chief Before Him Had Drawn Up War Plans. If It Hadn't Across The Potomac River In Virginia And Such A Schlep From The White House, Trump Would Have Liked To Have Held All Of His National Security Meetings There.

On July 20, Just Before 10:00 A.M. On A Scorching Summer Thursday, Trump Arrived At The Pentagon. He Stepped Out Of His Motorcade, Walked Along A Corridor With Portraits Honoring Former Chairmen Of The Joint Chiefs, And Stepped Inside The Tank. The Uniformed Officers Greeted Their Commander In Chief. Chairman Of The Joint Chiefs Joseph Dunford Sat In The Seat Of Honor Midway Down The Table, Because This Was His Table, And Trump Sat At The Head Of The Table Facing A Projection Scree. Mattis And The Newly Confirmed Deputy Defense Secretary, Patrick Shanahan, Sat To The President's Left, With Vice President Pence And Tillerson To His Right. Down The Table Sat The Leaders Of The Military Branches, Along With Cohn And Secretary Of The Treasury Mnuchin. Steve Bannon Was In The Outer Ring Of Chairs With Other Staff, Taking His Seat Just Behind Mattis And Directly In Trump's Line Of Sight.

At One End Of The Room, Opposite Trump, An Opaque Screen Hung On The Wall For The Slide Projections To Come, With Another Sliding Screen Showing Maps Of Different Parts Of The World. Mattis, Cohn, And Tillerson And Their Aides Decided To Use Maps, Graphics, And Charts To Tutor The President, Figuring They Would *Help Keep Him From Getting Bored.*

In His Regular Intelligence Briefings, Trump Would Ravenously Ingest Glinting Nuggets And Latch Onto Names He Recognized Or Hot Spots He Knew From The News, But He

Would Not Read Written Materials Or Have The Patience For Lectures. So His Briefers Would Huddle Around The Resolute Desk And Show Trump Maps And Charts And Pictures And Videos, As Well As “Killer Graphics,” As CIA Director Mike Pompeo Described Them. One Surefire Way To Get Trump’s Attention, They Found, Was To *Feature His Name Somewhere In The Text.* “That’s Our Task, Right? To Deliver The Material In A Way That He Can Best Understand The Information We’re Trying To Communicate,” Pompeo Said.

Mattis Opened The July 20 Tank Meeting With A Slideshow, Sprinkled With Charts And Maps And Punctuated By Lots Of Dollar Signs. Mattis Devised A Strategy To Use Terms The Impatient President, Schooled In Real Estate, Would Appreciate To Impress Upon Him The Value Of U.S. Investments Abroad. He Sought 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. Normally, Trade Wouldn’t Be Considered Relevant To A National Security Briefing, But Trump, Unlike Past Presidents, Directly Connected Trade Agreements And Treaties With Foreign Countries To The Overall Power Dynamic. To Trump, America’s Economic Power Was Part Of Its Military Might. If Another Country Was Imposing Tariffs On U.S. Goods, He Reasoned, It Was Taking Advantage Of And Disrespecting The United States And Therefore Should Lose The Security Blanket That U.S. Troops Provided. An Opening Line Flashed On The Screen, Setting The Tone: “The Post-War International Rules-Based Order Is The Greatest Gift Of The Greatest Generation.” Mattis Then Gave A Twenty-Minute Briefing On The Power Of The NATO Alliance To Stabilize Europe And Keep The United States Safe.

Bannon Thought To Himself, “Not Good. Trump Is Not Going To Like That One Bit.” The Internationalist Language Mattis Was Using Was A Trigger For Trump.

“Oh, Baby, This Is Going To Be Fucking Wild,” Bannon Thought. “If You Stood Up And Threatened To Shoot [Trump], He Couldn’t Say ‘Postwar Rules-Based International Order.’ It’s Just Not The Way He Thinks.”

For The Next Ninety Minutes, Mattis, Tillerson, And Cohn Took Turns Trying To Emphasize Their Points, Pointing To Their Charts And Diagrams. They Showed Where U.S. Personnel Were Positioned, At Military Bases, CIA Stations, And Embassies, And How U.S. Deployments Fended Off The Threats Of Terror Cells, Nuclear Blasts, And Destabilizing Enemies In Places Including Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, The Korean Peninsula, And Syria. Cohn Spoke For About Twenty Minutes About The Value Of Free Trade With America’s Allies, Emphasizing How He Saw Each Trade Agreement Working Together As Part Of An Overall Structure To Solidify U.S. Economic And National Security.

Trump Appeared Peeved By The Schoolhouse Vibe But Also Allergic To The Dynamic Of His Advisers Talking At Him. His *Ricocheting Attention Span* Led Him To Repeatedly Interrupt The Lesson. He Heard An Adviser Say A Word Or Phrase And Then Seized On That To Interject With His Take. For Instance, The Word “Base” Prompted Him To Launch In To Say How “Crazy” And “Stupid” It Was To Pay For Bases In Some Countries.

Trump's First Complaint Was To Repeat What He Had Vented About To His National Security Adviser Months Earlier: South Korea Should Pay For A \$10 Billion Missile Defense System That The United States Built For It. The System Was Designed To Shoot Down Any Short-And Medium-Range Ballistic Missiles From North Korea To Protect South Korea And American Troops Stationed There. But Trump Argued That The South Koreans Should Pay For It, Proposing That The Administration Pull U.S. Troops Out Of The Region Or Bill The South Koreans For Their Protection.

“We Should Charge Them Rent,” Trump Said Of South Korea. “We Should Make Them Pay For Our Soldiers. We Should Make Money Off Of Everything Of Everything.”

Trump Said U.S. Troops And Defense Systems In South Korea Did Not Make Americans Safer. He Said He Could Eliminate The Nuclear Threat On The Peninsula By Striking A Deal With North Korean Dictator Kim Jong Un. “This Is All About Leader Versus Leader. Man Versus Man. Me Verses Kim,” He Said.

Trump Proceeded To Explain That NATO, Too, Was Worthless. U.S. Generals Were Letting The Allied Member Countries Get Away With Murder, He Said, And They Owed The United States A Lot Of Money After Not Living Up To Their Promise Of Paying Their Dues.

“They’re In Arrears,” Trump Said, Reverting To The Language Of Real Estate. He Lifted Both His Arms At His Sides In Frustration. Then He Scolded Top Officials For The Untold Millions Of Dollars He Believed They Had Let Slip Through Their Fingers By Allowing Allies To Avoid Their Obligations.

“We Are Owed Money You Haven’t Been Collecting!” Trump Told Them. “You Would Go Totally Bankrupt If You Had To Run Your Own Business.”

Mattis Wasn’t Trying To Convince The President Of Anything, Only To Explain And Provide Facts. Now Things Were Devolving Quickly. The General Tried To Calmly Explain To The President That He Was Quite Not Right. The NATO Allies Didn’t Owe The United States Back Rent, He Said. The Truth Was More Complicated. NATO Had A Nonbinding Goal That Members Should Pay At Least 2% Of Their Gross Domestic Product On Their Defenses. Only Five Of The Countries Currently Met That Goal, But It Wasn’t As If They Were Shorting The United States On The Bill.

More Broadly, Mattis Argued, The NATO Alliance Was Not Serving Only To Protect Western Europe. It Protected America, Too. “This Is What Keeps Us Safe,” Mattis Said. Cohn Tried To Explain To Trump That He Needed To See The Value Of The Trade Deals. “These Are Commitments That Help Keep Us Safe,” Cohn Said.

Bannon Interjected. “Stop, Stop, Stop,” He Said. “All You Guys Talk About All These Great Things, They’re All Our Partners, I Want You To Name Me Now One Country And One Company That’s Going To Have His Back.”

Trump Then Disputed Every Point Cohen Had Made Advocating The Benefits Of Existing Trade Agreements.

“Gary, I Don’t Want To Hear About Free Trade,” Trump Said. “We’re Upside Down. They’re Ripping Us Off. All The Jobs Are Gone. They’re Ripping Us Off.”

The President Added, “I Want Reciprocal Trade Deals Where Its Balanced. I Want These Guys To Start Picking Up The Load. We Can’t Keep Doing This.”

Trump Then Repeated A Threat He’d Made Countless Times Before. He Wanted Out Of The Iran Nuclear Deal That President Obama Had Struck In 2015, Which Called For Iran To Eliminate Its Uranium Stockpile And Cut Its Nuclear Weaponry.

“It’s The Worst Deal In History!” Trump Declared.

“Well, Actually...” Tillerson Interjected.

“I Don’t Want To Hear It,” Trump Said, Cutting Off The Secretary Of State Before He Could Explain Some Of The Benefits Of The Agreement. “They’re Cheating. They’re Building. We’re Getting Out Of It. I Keep Telling You, I Keep Giving You Time, And You Keep Delaying Me. I Want Out Of It.”

Before They Could Debate The Iran Deal, Trump Erupted To Revive Another Frequent Complaint: The War In Afghanistan, Which Was Now America's Longest War. He Demanded An Explanation For Why The United States Hadn't Won In Afghanistan Yet, Now Sixteen Years After The Nation Began Fighting There In The Wake Of The 9/11 Terror Attacks. Trump Unleashed His Disdain, Calling Afghanistan A "Loser War." That Phrase Hung In The Air And **Disgusted** Not Only The Military Leaders At The Table But Also The Men And Women In Uniform Sitting Along The Back Wall Behind Their Principals. They All Were Sworn To Obey Their Commander In Chief's Commands, And Here He Was Calling The War They had Been Fighting A Loser War.

You're All Losers," Trump Said. "You Don't Know How To Win Anymore."

Trump Questioned Why The United States Couldn't Get Some Oil As Payment For The Troops Stationed In The Persian Gulf. "We Spent \$7 Trillion; They're Ripping Us Off," Trump Boomed. "Where Is The Fucking Oil?"

Trump Seemed To Be Speaking Up For The Voters Who Elected Him, And Several Attendees Thought They Heard Bannon In Trump's Words. Bannon Had Been Trying To Persuade Trump To Withdraw Forces By Telling Him, "The American People Are Saying We Can't Spend A Trillion Dollars A Year On This. We Just Can't. It's Going To Bankrupt Us. And Not Just That, The Deplorables Don't Want Their Kids In The South China Sea At The 38th Parallel Or In Syria, In Afghanistan, In Perpetuity."

Trump Mused About Removing General John Nicholson, The U.S. Commander, The U.S. Commander In Charge Of Troops In Afghanistan. I Don't Think He Knows How To Win," The President Said, Impugning Nicholson, Who Was Not Present At The Meeting.

Dunford Tried To Come To Nicholson's Defense, But The Mild-Mannered General Struggled To Convey His Points To The Irascible President.

"Mr President, That's Just Not...," Dunford Started. "We've Been Under Different Orders."

Dunford Sought To Explain That He Hadn't Been Charged With Annihilating The Enemy In Afghanistan But Was Instead Following A Strategy Started By The Obama Administration To Gradually Reduce The Military Presence In The Country In Hopes Of Training Locals To Maintain A Stable Government So That Eventually The United States Could Pull Out. Trump Shot Back In More Plain Language.

"I Want To Win," He Said. "We Don't Win Wars Anymore... We Spend \$7 Trillion, Everybody Else Got The Oil And We're Not Winning Anymore."

Trump Was Now In One Of His Rages. He Was So Angry That He Wasn't Taking Many Breaths. All Morning, He Had Been Coarse And Cavalier, But The Next Several Things He Bellowed Out Went Beyond That Description. They Stunned Nearly Everyone In The Room, And Some Vowed That They Would Never Repeat Them.

*“I Wouldn’t Go To War With You People,” Trump Told The Assembled Brass.
Addressing The Room, The Commander In Chief Barked,
“You’re A Bunch Of Dopes And Babies.”*

*For A President Known For Verbiage He Euphemistically Called “Locker Room Talk,”
This Was The Gravest Insult He Could Have Delivered To These People, In This Sacred
Space. The Flag Officers In The Room Were Shocked. Some Staff Began Looking Down At
Their Papers, Rearranging Folders, Almost Wishing Themselves Out Of The Room. They
Tried Not To Reveal Their Revulsion On Their Faces, But Questions Raced Through Their
Minds. How Does The Commander In Chief Say That?” One Thought. “What Would Our
Worst Adversaries Think If They Knew He Said This?”*

*This Was A President Who Had Been Labeled A “Draft Dodger” For Avoiding
Service In The Vietnam War Under Questionable Circumstances. Trump Was
A young Man Born Of Privilege And In Seemingly Perfect Health: Six Feet
Two Inches With A Muscular Build And A Flawless Medical Record. He
Played Several Sports, Including Football. Then, In 1968 At Age Twenty-
Two, He Obtained A Diagnosis Of Bone Spurs In His Heels That Exempted
Him From Military Service Just As The United States Was Drafting Men His
Age To Fulfill Massive Troop Deployments To Vietnam.*

Tillerson In Particular Was Stunned By Trump's Diatribe And Began Visibly Seething.

For Too Many Minutes, Others In The Room Noticed, He Had Been Staring Straight, Dumbfounded, At Mattis, Who Was Speechless, His Head Bowed Down Toward The Table. "Gosh Darn It, Jim, Say Something. Why Aren't You Saying Something?" But, As He Would Later Tell Close Aides, Tillerson Realized In That Moment That Mattis Was Genetically A Marine, Unable To Talk Back To His Commander In Chief, No Matter What Nonsense Came Out Of His Mouth.

The More Perplexing Silence Was From Pence, A Leader Who Should Have Been Able To Stand Up To Trump. [Ed. Note: Shit. From Brown Nose/Boy Scout Mikey, Who Was TERRIFIED Of Trump Throughout Their Term? At Least His Wife Had The Principles If Not Tenor Cojones To H-A-T-E Trump Right From The Get Go When He Was Tapped To Be The Running Mate.] Instead, One Attendee Thought, "He's Sitting There Frozen Like A Statue. Why Doesn't He Stop The President?" Another Recalled The Vice President Was A "*Wax Museum Guy*." From The Start Of The Meeting, Pence Looked As If He Wanted To Escape And Put An End To The President's Torrent. Surely, He Disagreed With Trump's Characterization Of Military Leaders As "Dopes And Babies," Considering His Son, Michael, Was A Marine First Lieutenant Then Training For His Naval Aviator Wings. But Some Surmised Pence Feared Getting Crosswise With Trump. "A Total Deer In The Headlights," Recalled A Third Attendee.

Others At The Table Noticed Trump's Stream Of Venom Had Taken An Emotional Toll. *So Many People In That Room Had Gone To War And Risked Their Lives For Their Country, And Now They Were Being Dressed Down By A President Who Had Not. They Felt Sick To Their Stomachs. Tillerson Told Others He Thought He Saw A Woman In The Room*

Silently Crying. He Was Furious And Decided He Couldn't Stand It Another Minute. His Voice Broke Into Trump's Tirade, This One About Trying To Make Money Off U.S. Troops.

"No, That's Just Wrong. None Of That Is True.

Tillerson's Father And Great-Uncle Had Both Been Combat Veterans, And He Was Deeply Proud Of Their Service.

"The Men And Women Who Put On The Uniform Don't Do It To Become Soldiers Of Fortune," Tillerson Said. "That's Not Why They Put On A Uniform And Go Out And Die... They Do It To Protect Our Freedom."

There Was Silence In The Tank. Several Military Officers In The Room Were Grateful To The Secretary Of State For Defending Them When No One Else Would. The Meeting Soon Ended And Trump Walked Out, Saying Goodbye To A Group Of Servicemen Lining The Corridor As He Made His Way To His Motorcade Waiting Outside. Mattis, Tillerson, And Cohn Were Deflated. Standing In The Hall With A Small Cluster Of People He Trusted, Tillerson Finally Let Down His Guard.

"He's A Fucking Moron,"

The Secretary Of State Said Of The President.

The Plan By Mattis, Tillerson, And Cohn To Train The President To Appreciate The Internationalist View Had Clearly Backfired.

“We Were Starting To Get Out On The Wrong Path, And We Really Needed To Have A Course Correction And Needed To Educate, To Teach, To Help Him Understand The Reason And The Basis For A Lot Of These Things,” Said One Senior Official Involved In The Planning. “We Needed To Change How He Thinks About This, To Course Correct. Everybody Was On Board, 100 Percent Agreed With That Sentiment. [But] They Were Dismayed And In Shock When Not Only Did It Not Have The Intended Effect, But He Dug In His Heels And Pushed It Even Further On The Spectrum, Further Solidifying His Views.”

A Few Days Later, Pence’s National Security Adviser, Andrea Thompson, A Retired Army Colonel Who Had Served In Afghanistan And Iraq, Reached Out To Thank Tillerson For Speaking Up On Behalf Of The Military And Public Servants Who Had Been In The Tank. By September, She Would Leave The White House And Join Tillerson At Foggy Bottom As His Undersecretary Of State For Arms Control And International Security Affairs.

The Tank Meeting Had So Thoroughly Shocked The Conscience Of Military Leaders That They Tried To Keep It Secret. At The Aspen Security Forum Two Days Later, Longtime NBC News Correspondent Andrea Mitchell Asked Dunford How Trump Had Interacted During The Tank Meeting. The Joint Chiefs Chairman Misleadingly Described The Meeting, Skipping Over The Fireworks.

“He Asked A Lot Of Hard Questions, And The One Thing He Does Is Question Some Fundamental Assumptions That We Make As Military Leaders — And He Will Come In And Question Those,” Dunford Told Mitchell On July 22. “It’s A Pretty Energetic And An Interactive Dialogue.”

One Victim Of The Tank Meeting Was Trump’s Relationship With Tillerson, Which Forever After Was Strained. The Secretary Of State Came To See It As The Beginning Of The End. It Would Only Worsen When News That Tillerson Had Called Trump A “Moron” Was Reported In October By NBC News.

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