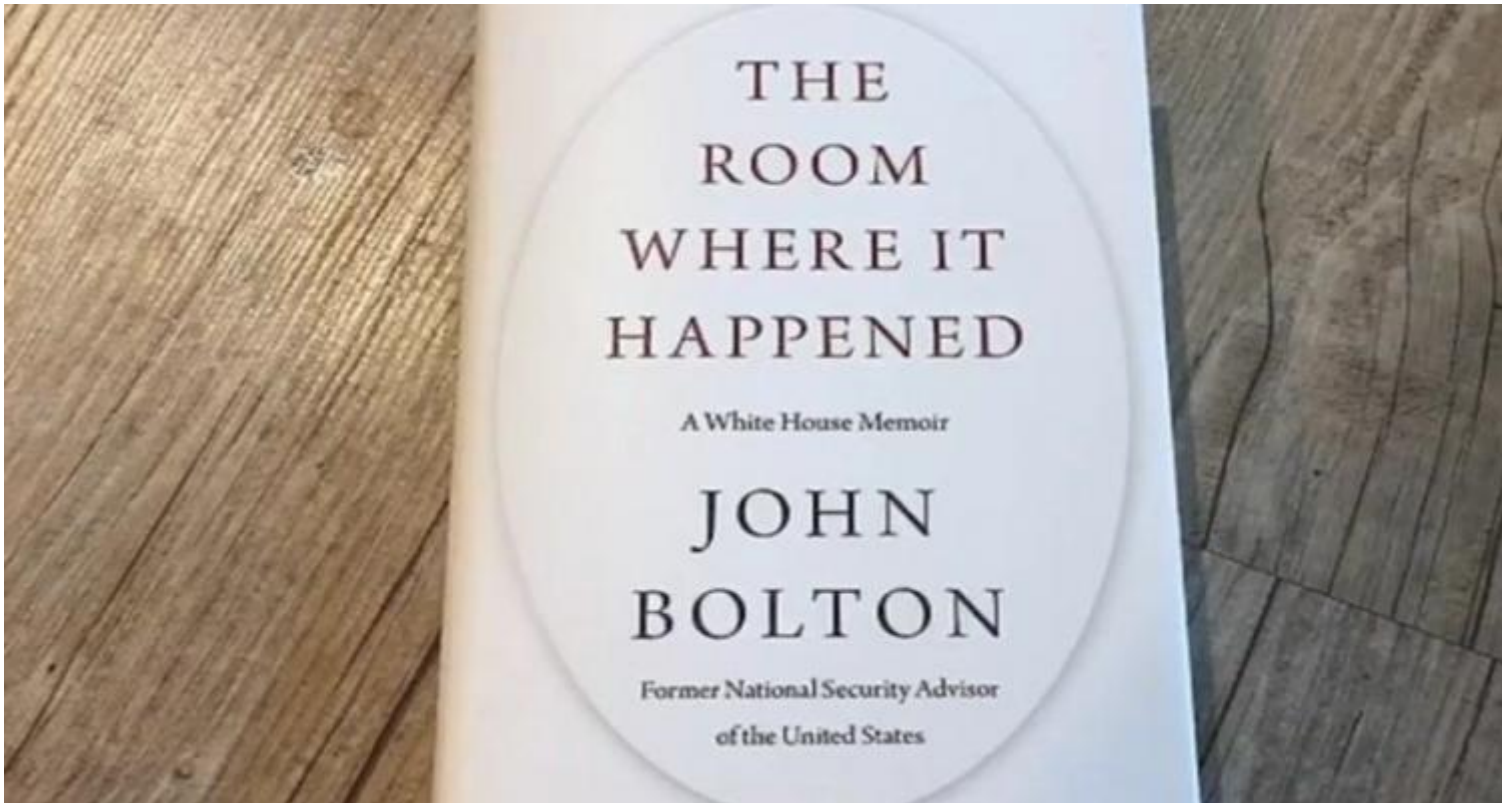


Bolton, Trump, and Venezuela



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By Charles McKelvey

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There is between the global North and the global South a fundamental difference in world views. The view from the South is historical, and it is unable to set aside the historical facts of colonialism, neocolonialism, imperialism, and more recently, neoliberalism; while the view of the North is ahistorical.

This leads to not merely differences in opinions and political views, but also differences in degrees of understanding that are rooted in different human needs. The South needed to understand the sources of its underdevelopment, poverty, and powerlessness; in order to emancipate itself. The North needed to not understand the causes of its material wealth, in order to arrive to a moral justification of itself.

The difference between North and South in levels of understanding is evident in *The Room Where It Happened*, John Bolton's memoir of his experiences as National Security Advisor in the Trump administration. Bolton appears to have genuinely believed that Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro is a tyrant with little popular support who had ruined the Venezuelan economy. His perception of Venezuela, by his own acknowledgement, was developed through conversations with the Venezuelan opposition and with "many members of Congress and private U.S. citizens, especially members of the Cuban-American and Venezuelan-American communities in Florida."

The book does not indicate any understanding of the historic and political context of these conversations, a context defined by a history of Spanish colonialism, British semi-colonialism, and U.S. imperialism, and the emergence during the course of the twentieth century of anti-imperialist popular movements, of which the Chavist revolution, which his sources are disparaging, is the twenty-first century culmination. Having limited awareness of this political context, he appears not sensitive to the inherent internal weakness of any political force that stands against a popular nationalist and anti-imperialist project in Latin America in the twenty-first century, making it dependent on the backing of powerful external actors. Bolton appears to have accepted at face value the claims of the Venezuelan opposition, including its exaggerated claims of having the support of 90% of the people, not appreciating that this level of opposition to the Chavist government was a political impossibility, regardless of the impact on the Venezuelan economy of the fall in oil prices and the effects of the unpatriotic economic war carried out by Venezuelan importers. And he apparently believed that the military would break with Maduro, perhaps not knowing that Chávez, a military officer before surging into prominence in the Latin American project of union and integration, had worked for twenty years forging a progressive reform movement among Venezuelan military officers. Understanding little of the political context in which he was involving himself, Bolton does not consider, even in retrospect, that he was being played by the Venezuelan opposition.

Bolton begins the book by observing that Trump believes it possible to establish national security policy on the basis of instinct as well as personal relations with leaders of other nations, supplemented by showmanship. In contrast, Bolton favors intellectual discipline, analysis, and evaluation of results. However, it turns out that Trump's instincts with respect to Venezuela were on more solid ground than Bolton's analysis. Trump's instincts told him that the opposition figure Guaidó was weak and that Maduro was "too smart and too tough", and therefore Bolton's strategy of supporting the opposition and imposing economic sanctions was not going to work. Following his instincts, Trump was inclined toward a military option, not appreciating that direct U.S. military intervention in Latin America is more complicated today than a century ago. Bolton, with the support of most members of the administration team, persuaded Trump to go along with the Venezuelan opposition strategy. In the end, Trump blamed Bolton for the failure of the strategy to accomplish regime change.

The opposition strategy involved, first, U.S. and international recognition of the President of the suspended National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, who had declared himself interim president on January 11, 2019, falsely claiming that the 2018 election of Nicolas Maduro to a second term was fraudulent. Bolton says that he played no role in Guaidó's declaration, but he believed that the United States should come quickly to Guaidó's support. Secondly, the strategy involved depriving the Venezuelan state-owned oil company, PDVSA, of assets and income. Thus, the plan was to put the country in an economic stranglehold, provoking popular discontent, and to work on getting key defections from the military and the government, so that Maduro would be forced to resign.

Bolton blames others for the failure of the strategy. He blamed the Venezuelan opposition for not always making the most strategically intelligent decision to advance its cause. He blamed the U.S. Department of the Treasury for not applying sanctions massively, swiftly, and decisively. He blamed the State Department for closing the U.S. Embassy in Caracas, concerned with the safety of U.S. personnel; which had the consequence that U.S. diplomatic staff was not present on the ground to advise the Venezuelan opposition. And he blamed Trump for not having consistent resolve for the strategy, thus sending the wrong signals to the bureaucrats in the departments of State and Treasury. He appears not to have considered that the strategy, formulated without intelligent integration in Venezuelan political reality, had low probability for success, as Trump sensed from the beginning.

However limited the understanding of the U.S. political right with respect to Latin America, it always gets one thing right. It understands that the purpose of the game is to control the natural resources of the region, and in the case of Venezuela, this means petroleum. Bolton reports that Trump wanted to ensure that the United States would have access to Venezuela's oil resources after Maduro; he wanted it made clear to Guaidó that he was expected to be "extremely loyal to the United States and no one else." Bolton

followed up on Trump's concern. He met with U.S. executives of CITGO, the U.S. subsidiary of PDVSA, assuring them that they would be able to maintain control of CITGO refineries and service stations in the United States; and explaining that the administration was advising Guaidó, at Guaidó's request, concerning whom to nominate for the PDVSA board of directors, once he became president.

Bolton's involvement in the affairs of the PDVSA board of directors constituted an effort to reverse the results of a political battle won by Chávez following his election in 1999. Prior to Chávez, the state-owned oil company, established by the nationalization of petroleum in 1976, had operated as a state within a state, responding to its own interests in accordance with the culture of the international petroleum industry, disdaining involvement in a national plan for development. Chavez dismissed the board members of PDVSA and appointed directors who would manage the company in accordance with the principles established by a national development project.

Here we arrive to the essence of the U.S. conflict with the three nations that comprise what Bolton calls the "troika of tyranny," Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua. Their alleged tyranny is nothing but convenient political invention. Their true crime is to insist on their sovereign right to control their natural resources. But this audacity stands against the structures of the neocolonial world order and against the intention of a declining superpower that falsely believes that it still is the owner of the natural resources of Latin America, which is expected to bleed with open veins.

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