

Trump's Air War

Far from being an isolationist, the president is one of the country's most hawkish in modern history.

By **JENNIFER WILSON**

October 17, 2017



Illustration by Martin Elfman

When President Trump decided to commit additional troops to the war in Afghanistan—now entering its seventeenth year—he contradicted his own position on the conflict. After years of deriding the war as a “total disaster” and a “complete waste,” and insisting that it was high time to get out, Trump announced in August that he would instead be deepening America’s involvement. “My original instinct was to pull out, and historically I like following my instincts,” the president told U.S. troops in his address on Afghanistan. “But all my life, I’ve heard that decisions are much different when you sit behind the desk in the Oval Office.”

Despite Trump's seeming reluctance to engage in foreign conflicts, however, he has zealously embraced his role as a wartime president. Since taking office, Trump has dramatically ramped up the use of U.S. military force in a wide range of international hot spots, from Syria and Iraq to Somalia and Pakistan. Far from being an America First isolationist, Trump has already established himself as one of the most hawkish presidents in modern history.

Consider Trump's dramatic increase in the use of air strikes. Through August, the United States dropped 2,487 bombs in Afghanistan—more than Barack Obama dropped in his last two years as president combined. In August, more bombs fell there than in any month since 2012. Trump also dropped the so-called “mother of all bombs,” the largest nonnuclear weapon in the U.S. arsenal, on an Islamic State cave complex—the first time the bomb has ever been used in combat.

Trump has accelerated the pace of air strikes in other conflicts as well. In Iraq and Syria, the American-led coalition has unleashed more bombs each month under Trump than Obama did in any month throughout the entire campaign against ISIS, which began in 2014. In Yemen, Trump has carried out 92 strikes or raids against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula—just shy of the number of attacks that Obama oversaw in his entire second term. In Somalia, the United States is carrying out an average of one strike against the jihadist group Al Shabaab every 15 days—a sharp escalation compared to Obama. And in Pakistan, Trump ended a nine-month pause in drone strikes with four unmanned bombings—more than Obama conducted during his final year in office.

Trump is also putting more boots on the ground. In April, 300 Marines returned to Afghanistan's Helmand Province to assist in the fight against the Taliban—their first deployment there since 2014. The following month, Trump championed a \$110 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia—reversing the Obama administration's decision to curb the sale of precision-guided munitions to Riyadh out of concern over civilian casualties resulting from the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen. And hot on the heels of Trump's vow to unleash “fire and fury” against North Korea over its nuclear provocations, the Air Force is working to replace America's aging stockpile of 400 Minuteman missiles and develop a new nuclear cruise missile—a project estimated to cost more than \$1 trillion.

Even if Hillary Clinton—or nearly anyone else, for that matter—were commander-in-chief, America would likely be ramping up many of its military operations overseas. Expelling ISIS from its stronghold in Mosul, for example, would have required a significant commitment of airpower from any president. Likewise, by renewing America's commitment in Afghanistan and

overhauling the U.S. nuclear arsenal, Trump is following through on plans that his predecessors set in motion.

Get the latest from *TNR*. **Sign up** for the newsletter.

Yet what sets Trump apart, and what is most worrying about his hawkish foreign policy, is that he has put forward no coherent plan to guide his unprecedented use of military force. Far from looking to wind down conflicts, Trump seems to be acting on whatever tough-sounding phrase pops into his head, regardless of its effect

in the real world. In Syria and Iraq, Trump has made good on his vow to “bomb the hell out of ISIS.” But with no plan to create security and stability in the region once ISIS is defeated, his military aggression could wind up rekindling sectarian conflict and opening up the United States to armed confrontation with Iran. Similarly, Trump has failed to spell out how many additional troops he will send to Afghanistan, or how long they will stay there. “In the end, we will win,” he declared in August—without offering any indication of what winning actually looks like. To make matters worse, Trump has failed to fill a raft of senior posts in the State Department, hamstringing America’s ability to exercise the diplomatic power necessary to broker peace and foster stability.

The consequences of Trump’s military aggression can be seen in the number of civilians killed by U.S. air strikes. Since taking office, Trump has overseen nearly 60 percent of all civilian casualties from air strikes in Iraq and Syria since the air war began. In Afghanistan, civilian casualties skyrocketed by 70 percent during the first six months of this year, compared to the same period last year. And in Yemen, Trump’s support for the Saudi-led bombing campaign has exacerbated what has become a staggering humanitarian crisis.

Trump has repeatedly made clear that his foreign policy is not motivated by a desire to enhance global security—it’s driven by his need to burnish his own image as a winner. “We aren’t winning. We are losing,” Trump reportedly complained to his generals in the weeks leading up to his Afghanistan announcement. It’s telling that his national security adviser, H.R. McMaster, apparently helped persuade Trump to remain in Afghanistan by showing him a 1972 photograph of Afghan women in miniskirts—ridiculously suggesting that by sending more troops to fight the

Through August, Trump has dropped 2,487 bombs in Afghanistan—more than Obama dropped in the past two years combined.

Taliban, Trump would be viewed as the hero who ushered in the return of Western norms to Kabul.

Trump's emphasis on "winning" on the military front is especially dangerous for a president who has proved to be such a loser in Congress and the courts. With his legislative agenda in disarray and his administration mired in scandal, military action is the only arena where Trump can portray himself as a decisive, powerful leader. Presidents have often resorted to using military strikes overseas as a way of distracting the public from their failures at home: think Ronald Reagan in Grenada or Bill Clinton in the Balkans. But under Trump, these are not discrete, one-off attacks; instead, he has made bombing other countries a routine and defining element of his administration. The more he fails as president, the more Trump will deepen U.S. military involvement around the world—deploying more troops, wasting more tax dollars, and killing more civilians in the process.

Jennifer Wilson is a foreign policy researcher specializing in national security, military policy, and international law. She holds a master's degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.



US election 2020: Has Trump kept his promises on the military?

(9 16 October 2020)



GETTY IMAGES

By Christopher Giles

BBC Reality Check

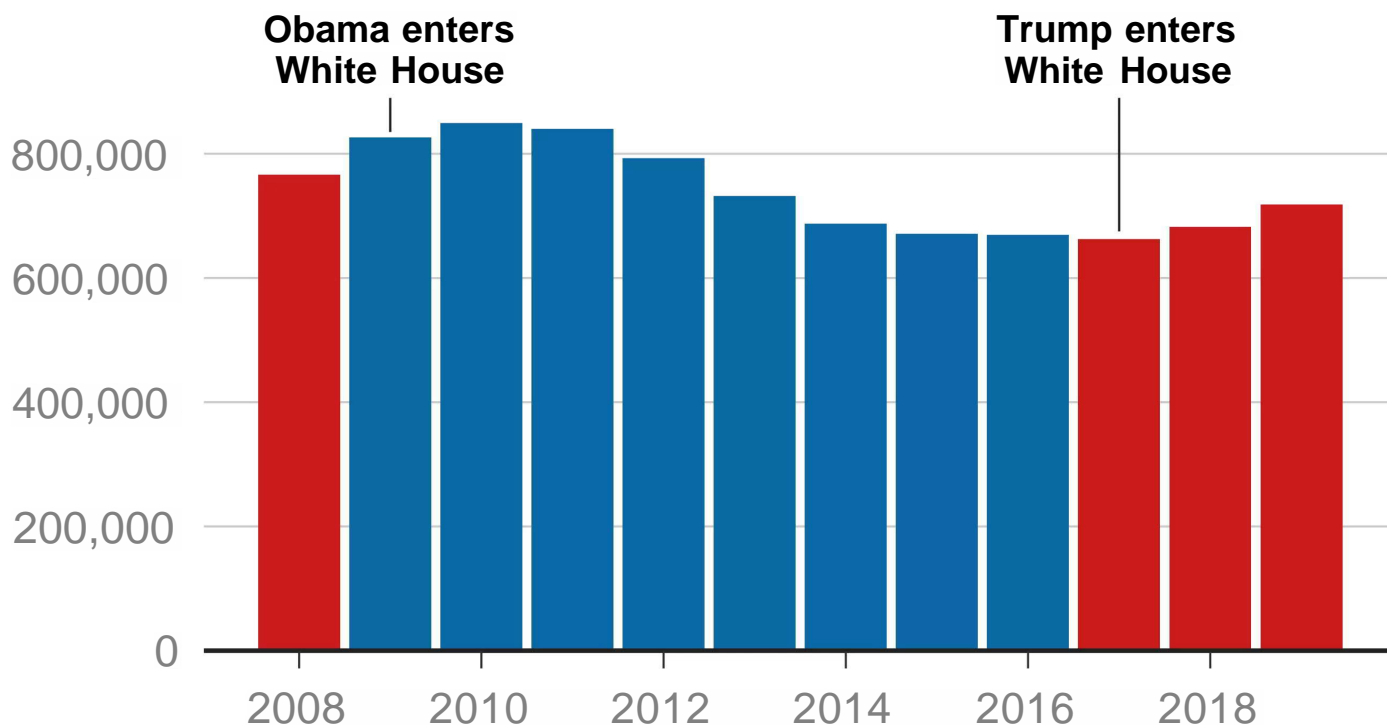
US President Donald Trump has been defending his record on military spending and his pledge to cut back US involvement in foreign wars.

In 2017 he said he would rebuild the country's "depleted military". He has also called for a reduction in US troops serving abroad.

We've taken a look at the president's record on the military.

US military spending, 2008-2019

Figures in \$US millions, adjusted for inflation



Note: Figures are at constant 2018 prices, except for the last figure, which is at 2019 prices and exchange rates.

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute



President Trump's son, Donald Jr, recently wrote on Twitter: "Trump properly funded our military after Obama-Biden decimated it."

The chart shows military spending has steadily increased since President Trump took office in January 2017.

However, this spending is still significantly lower than during the first term of the Obama administration, using figures adjusted for inflation.

"Defence spending did go up quite substantially under President Trump to date. I wouldn't call the growth unprecedented, though," says Michael O'Hanlon, a security fellow at the Brookings Institution.

"Mr Trump can claim credit for a large 'peacetime' increase from a state that was already fairly good under Mr Obama, whose defence budgets were strong by historical standards too - more than \$100bn above the Cold War annual average, once adjusted for inflation," says Mr O'Hanlon.



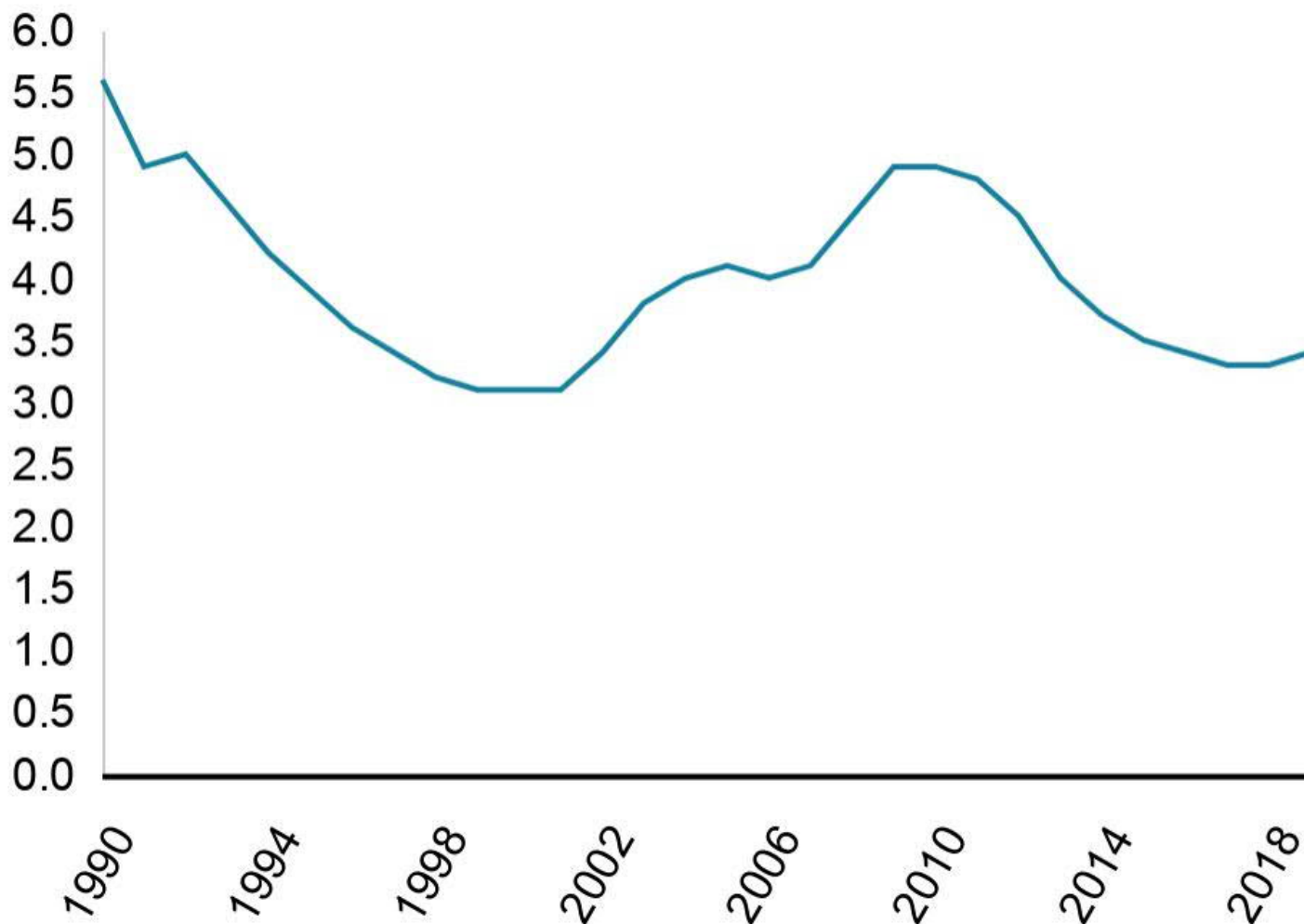
GETTY IMAGES

| US soldier in Germany, where thousands of overseas troops are based

Looking at military spending over the past three decades, comparing it with the size of the US economy, we can see that current spending is at nowhere near record levels.

US military spending 1990-2019

— Military spending as share of GDP



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute **BBC**

Military spending increased dramatically from 2002 as the US entered protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It peaked in 2010 as a percentage of GDP - the value of all goods and services - after which the US began stepping back from its engagement in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Does the US have fewer overseas troops?

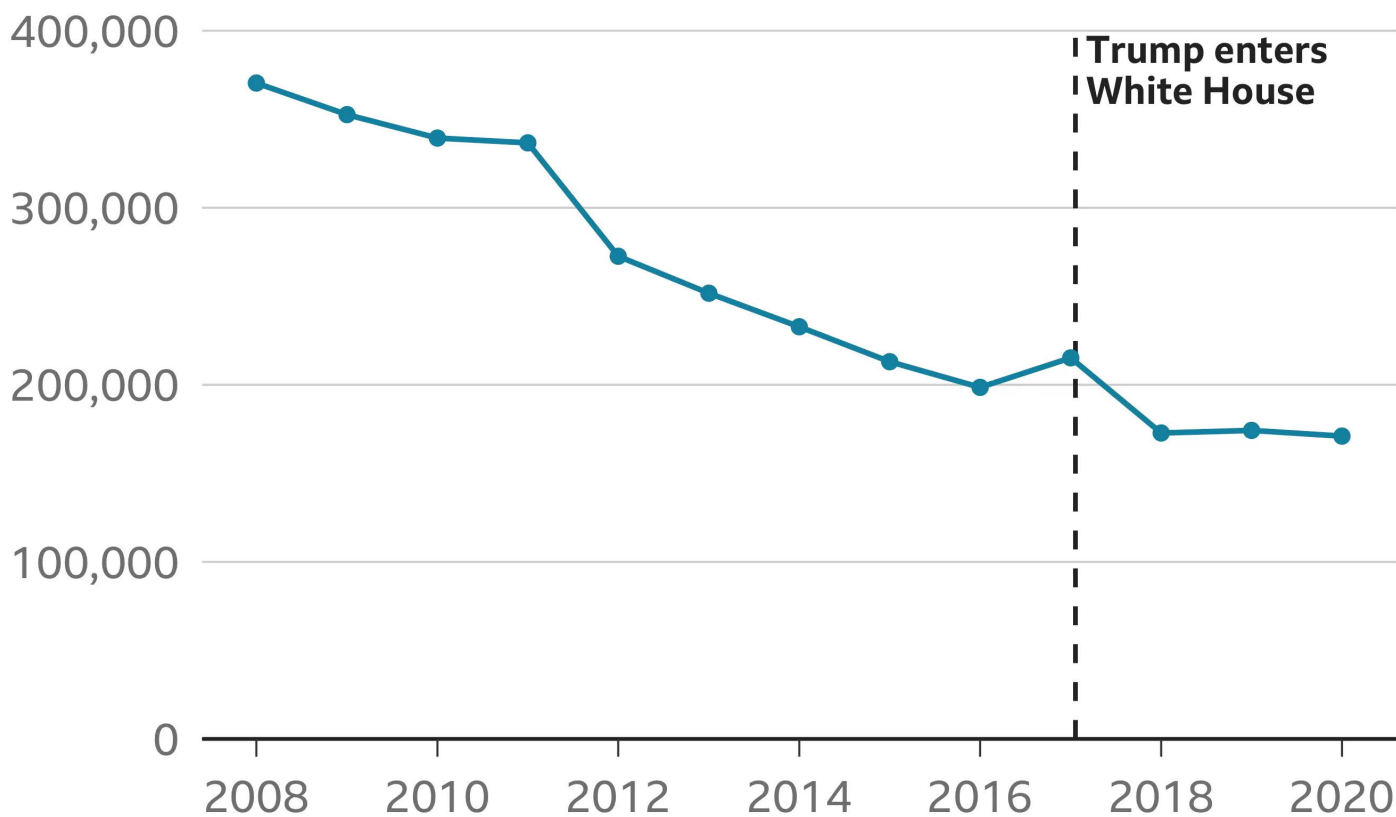
President Trump has long called for troops to come home and has criticised US military interventions for being costly and ineffective.

Mr O'Hanlon says: "Mr Trump has scaled back the presence he inherited in Afghanistan and to a limited extent in Iraq and Syria."

In October 2020, national security adviser Robert O'Brien said the US had less than 5,000 troops in Afghanistan.

But, says Mr O'Hanlon: "He has only moved the needle modestly in terms of global operations and deployments, as we remain everywhere that we were on January 20, 2017 when he took office."

US troops overseas, 2008-2020



Source: US Department of Defense



The reduction of troops was much greater under President Obama, as both large-scale deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan ended during his years in charge.



US Election 2020



- [A simple guide to the US election](#)
- [Where does Donald Trump stand on key issues?](#)