

'The Corrosion of Conservatism!' Why Max Boot broke up with the Republican Party

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Foreign policy expert and military historian Max Boot served as the senior foreign policy adviser for the presidential campaigns of Republican candidates John McCain, Mitt Romney and Marco Rubio, and is a champion of classic Republican ideas.

But during the 2016 election he refused to support Donald Trump, and in a surprising move, supported Hillary Clinton. When Trump was declared the winner, he decided it was time to break up with the Republican Party.

His memoir, "The Corrosion of Conservatism: Why I Left the Right," details his journey into conservatism to help explain his departure. He'll discuss the book on Thursday at the sold-out Rancho Mirage Writers Festival, an annual gathering of writers from politics, history, humor and health to genre and literary fiction. This year's theme is the 2020 election.

Boot, who emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1976 to Los Angeles with his parents, is the Jeane J. Kirkpatrick Senior Fellow in National Security Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, a columnist for the Washington Post and a global affairs analyst for CNN.

As a military historian, he's written several books including "The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power" in 2002, "War Made New: Technology, Warfare, and the Course of History, 1500 to Today" in 2006, and "The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam" in 2018.

In an interview with The Desert Sun, he discussed the personal costs of leaving the Republican Party, being referred to as a "warmonger" by Tucker Carlson, the challenges of cable news and what he sees as the problems with Trump's foreign policy. The following interview was edited for length and clarity.

The Desert Sun: What have been the personal costs for you after releasing "The Corrosion of Conservatism?"

Max Boot: It wasn't so much the release of the book per se, it was the fact I had broken with the Republican Party and President Donald Trump for reasons I disclose in the book. It cost me friends and supporters, and it's certainly led to some nasty attacks on me, online in particular. That's the price you pay for breaking ranks with your political party to oppose a president I believe has no business leading America.

You wrote it like a memoir and you mention this idea of the cool kids liking President Ronald Reagan in the '80s. Was Reagan that popular with the youth of America at the time?

He was certainly popular with me and a lot of young conservatives. There was definitely a sense when I was growing up in the '80s in Southern California that Ronald Reagan was an iconic figure, somebody looked up to and admired, and he and others like William F. Buckley, George Will made conservatism pretty cool in those days. It was a principled and intellectual movement I was proud to be a part of. I look at what the Republican Party has become today and what the conservative movement has become today. It has no resemblance with what I knew growing up. I'm not at all surprised to see that young people today are completely against Trump and the Republican Party.

The news cycle and the focus changes rapidly these days with Trump as president. What recent events have concerned you since the book was published?

The book was published before we found out Trump tried to blackmail Ukraine to have them provide dirt on his political opponent Joe Biden, and before the impeachment scandal, which is something that only came to light last September. It's now led to Trump becoming the third president in history to be impeached. Obviously, I had no idea when I wrote the book that he would go out and try to extort Ukraine into helping his political campaign. Based on everything I described in the book, I'm not at all surprised by his misconduct. In the book, I talk a lot about the way he welcomed Russian interference in the 2016 election, the way it helped him, the way he obstructed justice to cover up the lengths between his campaign and Russia. What we're seeing now is a continuation of that same lawless behavior where the president consistently puts his own interests above the interests of the country.



Max Boot, military historian and foreign policy analyst at the Council on Foreign Relations, looks on as Ari Fleischer, former press secretary under George W. Bush and Fox News contributor, speaks during a panel discussion called "United or Divided: One Year Later" at Westchester Community College Nov. 12, 2017 in Valhalla. *Tania Savayan/The Journal News*

The subject of Israel has come up a lot with Donald Trump as president. There's this consensus now that the right-wing is better with Israel and the left-wing isn't and vice versa. Does anyone in any level of the government oppose Israel?

Traditionally, we've had a policy of bipartisan support for Israel. One of my concerns with Trump, although I support some of the things he's done in Israel such as moving the American embassy to Jerusalem, is he's turning it into such a partisan political issue. We've already seen growing skepticism among many younger Democrats towards Israel and a greater embrace for the Palestinian cause, with Trump turning Israel into a political football will extenuate that partisan division. In the future, when you have another Democratic president come into office, the likelihood is that president will be less friendly to Israel than previous Democratic presidents have been, and that will be a tragedy for Israel and for its supporters. This should not be a matter of partisan division.

I think it's accurate to say that you can oppose the moves that Trump has made about Israel, such as moving the U.S. embassy or if he comes out in favor of Israel annexing a large part of the West Bank, and it's not anti-Israel to oppose his policies because they are controversial and it's a close call. It's deeply unfortunate how Trump tries to paint anyone who criticizes him as being anti-Israel, anti-Semitic and anti-American. That's just not the case and he's poisoning political discourse with his extremist rhetoric.

Cable news is toxic these days and doesn't seem to focus on reporting the news. Do you feel it's nothing but noise?

I'm probably biased because I'm a CNN analyst, but I think we do a pretty good job of commenting on stories as they occur and trying to get to the truth behind them. I think it's hard to do given how much fake news Trump and his supporters spew out there. They have no regard for the truth. You have this inevitable dilemma of how do you report on the news without spreading these lies? I think we do a good job of fact checking at CNN, but I think the real problem is Fox News, which just amplifies Trump's lies and serves as his propaganda arm. The people who get their news from Fox News and no other source are not in touch with reality.

President Trump has a direct line to Fox News over all the other media outlets, which is controversial in media because it's one channel he calls into all the time.

We've never seen anything like it with the way Trump and Fox News have this symbiotic relationship and no regard for the truth. Garry Kasparov makes the point that this is an example of how authoritarianism develops and look at how Trump has brainwashed 40% of the American public simply by having control of one television network. Imagine what it's like in Russia or China where the government controls every television network. This is how propaganda is spread.

You were a vocal supporter of the war in Iraq. Looking back, do you still feel that way?

No, in fact I write in "The Corrosion of Conservatism" that I greatly regret being part of the 70% of Americans who supported the invasion of Iraq. I think in hindsight the critics were right, it was a tragic mistake. I wish I listened some of the voices of caution like Brent Scowcroft and others who argued that this was one military adventure too far.

Do you think the Bush Doctrine made more sense than President Trump's policy?

There's a couple of different things people mean when they talk about a Bush Doctrine, either promoting democracy or launching preemptive conflicts when dangers loom. From what we've seen over the past two decades. I think we need to be more cautious about both those ideas. The Iraq War shows how hard it is to implant democracy in a place like Iraq and shows the dangers of waging preemptive war. So, there's no question President George W. Bush made big mistakes, but he was someone who believed in freedom, democracy, American values and free trade. He basically believed in things America has stood for the past 70 years. Donald Trump does not. He's destroying the world order created by the greatest generation in the 1940s. While Bush made huge mistakes, I think fundamentally he was more in tune with the American foreign policy tradition than President Trump is, who is going back to the isolationism, protectionism of the 1930s.

Tucker Carlson of Fox News has been one of a few people to call you a warmonger. How do you feel about that?

I'm impervious to what I'm called by a white supremacist like Tucker Carlson. Of course, he himself supported the war in Iraq, as did President Trump, but they tend to forget what they did. Whereas I own up to my mistakes and try to grapple with them in the present day.

Do you think any additional figures on the right will denounce President Trump going forward?

I think the only way you're going to see more people on the right denounce Trump is if he loses reelection and takes a lot of Republicans down with him. I think if the course in which he's embarked with the Republican Party results in electoral catastrophe for the GOP, then I think a lot of people who will suddenly forget they supported Trump to begin with. The truism of American politics is they want to be with the winner, and now as long as Trump is in office and has a decent choice of winning reelection, the Republican Party will stick with him beyond the small number of people like me who left in disgust.