THE PRESIDENT'S CHOICE · THE SECOND TERM · BOOK THREE

Marco Rubio

Secretary of State and the America First Foreign Policy

by Robert Miller

Free Sample · Author's Preface, Prologue, and Chapter One

The President's Choice · The Second Term · Book Three

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Author's Preface

This is a book about leadership, and about the most important decision any leader makes: choosing the people who will carry out his vision.

When Donald J. Trump returned to the White House in January 2025, he came back with a clear idea of what American foreign policy should be. It should serve the American people first. It should be judged by results rather than by the approval of foreign capitals or the comfort of the Washington establishment. It should secure the nation's borders, restore its industrial strength, demand that allies carry their share of the burden, confront adversaries with strength, and end wars rather than start them. He had articulated that vision in his first term and had been told by experts in both parties that it could not work. He returned determined to prove them wrong.

A vision, however, is only as good as the people charged with executing it. President Trump understood this better than most. In his first term he had learned, sometimes painfully, that officials who did not share his goals could slow, dilute, or quietly obstruct them. For his second term, he chose differently. And no choice illustrates his judgment more clearly than his selection of Marco Rubio, a former rival, as Secretary of State, and later as National Security Advisor as well.

The pages that follow tell the story of that choice and its consequences. They describe how President Trump set the direction of American foreign policy and how Secretary Rubio translated that direction into agreements, institutions, and results: a reorganized State Department, a new approach to foreign assistance, a hemisphere-first strategy that brought down the Maduro regime in Venezuela, peace agreements from the Caucasus to Central Africa, a historic security arrangement in Greenland, a NATO alliance spending more on its own defense than at any time since the Cold

War, and a sustained campaign of pressure on the regimes in Tehran and Havana. In every case the initiative began with the President. In every case it was Rubio who helped turn the President's intention into reality.

The book also tells Rubio's own story, because it explains why President Trump chose him. The son of Cuban immigrants who worked as a bartender and a hotel maid, Rubio rose from the West Miami city commission to become Speaker of the Florida House and then a United States Senator, building a fourteen-year record on national security, China, human rights, and small business. He brought to the President's service a deep knowledge of the world, a disciplined work ethic, and, crucially, a willingness to subordinate his own ambitions to the President's agenda. Only one other American, Henry Kissinger, has ever served simultaneously as Secretary of State and National Security Advisor. That President Trump entrusted both posts to one man speaks to the confidence he placed in him.

A book with a clear point of view still owes its readers honesty. The Administration's foreign policy has been controversial, and its decisions have drawn serious criticism from career diplomats, members of Congress, foreign governments, humanitarian organizations, and commentators across the spectrum. Several of the efforts described here, in Venezuela, Iran, Ukraine, and Gaza, remain unfinished. The November 2026 midterm elections, in which Republicans lost both houses of Congress, have changed the political landscape for the President's final two years. A chapter near the end sets out the principal criticisms as fairly as I can state them, along with the answers the Administration's defenders give. Readers can weigh them for themselves.

The account draws on the public record: official statements and testimony, congressional documents, contemporaneous reporting, and the speeches of the President and the Secretary. It covers events through late November 2026.

I came to this subject as a veteran and a publisher. I have written elsewhere about President Trump's gift for selecting the right people. This book examines that gift through the lens of a single, remarkable partnership.

Robert Miller
Washington, D.C.
November 2026

Prologue

The President Calls Marco

On May 1, 2025, President Donald J. Trump made a personnel announcement that surprised Washington. His National Security Advisor, Mike Waltz, would be nominated as Ambassador to the United Nations. In the interim, the President said, the job of National Security Advisor would be performed by the Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, who would keep his existing post. Asked about the arrangement, the President offered an explanation that was characteristically direct and that would be quoted for years afterward. When he had a problem, he said, he called up Marco, and Marco got it solved.

By that point Rubio was already carrying an extraordinary load. In February the President had made him acting Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development, charged with carrying out the President's order to bring foreign assistance into line with American interests. Within weeks he had also become acting Archivist of the United States. Now he would run the National Security Council as well, sitting at the center of every major foreign policy decision the President made. Sixteen months later, on September 22, 2026, the President signed a commission making the arrangement permanent. Rubio became only the second person in American history, after Henry Kissinger, to hold both offices at once.

The President's confidence was all the more remarkable given the history between the two men. In 2016 they had been bitter rivals for the Republican presidential nomination. The President had defeated Rubio decisively, including in Rubio's home state of Florida. The campaign had been personal and, at times, harsh. Many in Washington assumed the relationship could never be repaired.

They underestimated the President. Donald Trump has always judged people by results, and in the years after 2016 he watched Rubio become one of the most effective allies of his first-term agenda, especially on China, Venezuela, and Cuba. When the time came to assemble a second-term national security team, the President looked past old grievances and chose the man he believed could best execute his vision. On January 20, 2025, the day the President took the oath of office for the second time, the Senate confirmed Rubio as Secretary of State by a vote of ninety-nine to zero. He was the first member of the new Cabinet to be confirmed.

That unanimous vote was a tribute to Rubio's reputation in the Senate. But it was also a tribute to the President's judgment. In a capital divided on almost everything, President Trump had found a nominee whom every senator of both parties could support, and who would nonetheless carry out the President's agenda without hesitation.

This is the story of that partnership: of a President who set a bold course for American foreign policy, and of the Secretary he chose to help him steer it.

Part One

The President's Vision

Every great enterprise begins with a vision and a decision about who will carry it out. Part One examines both. It describes the America First foreign policy that President Donald J. Trump brought back to Washington in January 2025, the American traditions on which that policy draws, the national security team he assembled to execute it, and the decision, made a week after his 2024 victory, to entrust the State Department to his former rival, Marco Rubio.

Chapter One

America First

A Different Kind of President

When Donald J. Trump descended the escalator at Trump Tower in June 2015 to announce his candidacy for President, almost no one in the foreign policy establishment took him seriously. He had never held public office. He had never served in the military or the diplomatic corps. He spoke about the world in plain, blunt language that offended the experts who had managed American foreign policy for decades. He said that America's allies were taking advantage of it, that its trade deals had hollowed out its industrial heartland, that its wars in the Middle East had cost trillions of dollars and thousands of American lives with little to show for it, and that its political class had forgotten whom it was supposed to serve.

The experts dismissed these views as naive, isolationist, or dangerous. Millions of American voters recognized them as the truth. They had watched factories close in their towns while Washington celebrated free trade. They had sent their sons and daughters to fight in wars that seemed never to end. They had seen their government spend lavishly abroad while their own communities struggled. Trump spoke to them directly, and in November 2016 they made him President.

What Trump offered was not isolationism. It was a reordering of priorities. He called it America First, and the phrase captured a simple proposition: the purpose of American foreign policy is to protect and advance the interests of the American people. Not the interests of international institutions. Not the preferences of foreign governments. Not the theories of academics or the comfort of bureaucracies. The safety, strength, and prosperity of the American people would be the measure of every decision.

That proposition sounds obvious. In practice, it represented a sharp break with the consensus that had governed Washington since the end of the Cold War. That consensus held that America's interests were best served by sustaining a liberal international order: expanding free trade, spreading democracy, building multilateral institutions, and policing the world's conflicts. Whatever its merits in theory, the consensus had produced, by 2016, a set of results that many Americans found intolerable: a deindustrialized middle of the country, a rising China enriched by access to American markets and technology, open-ended military commitments in the Middle East, and allies who spent a fraction of what America spent on their own defense.

The First Term Record

President Trump's first term demonstrated that his approach could work. He renegotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement, replacing it with the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, which strengthened protections for American workers and manufacturers. He confronted China over its unfair trade practices, imposing tariffs that Washington experts predicted would be catastrophic and that instead forced Beijing to the negotiating table and produced the Phase One trade agreement in January 2020. More importantly, he changed the terms of the national debate. By the end of his first term, both parties accepted that China was a strategic competitor rather than a benign partner, a shift that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier.

In the Middle East, the President moved the American embassy in Israel to Jerusalem in 2018, fulfilling a promise that his predecessors had made and broken. He withdrew from the Iran nuclear agreement, which he regarded as a disastrously weak deal that funneled money to the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, and replaced it with a campaign of maximum pressure. He presided over the destruction of the Islamic State's territorial caliphate. He ordered the strike that

killed Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force and the architect of attacks that had killed hundreds of American service members. And in 2020 he brokered the Abraham Accords, normalizing relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, a breakthrough that the experts had said was impossible without first resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In Europe, the President pressed NATO allies relentlessly to meet their commitment to spend two percent of their gross domestic product on defense. He was criticized for his tone. He was proven right on the substance. Allied defense spending rose substantially during his first term, and the number of allies meeting the two percent target grew.

In the Western Hemisphere, the President reversed the Obama Administration's opening to the Castro regime in Cuba, recognized the democratic opposition in Venezuela as that nation's legitimate government in January 2019, and imposed sweeping sanctions on the Maduro regime. He made migration a central issue in relations with Mexico and Central America, securing cooperation that his predecessors had never obtained.

On the Korean Peninsula, he became the first sitting American President to meet with North Korea's leader, holding summits in Singapore and Hanoi and stepping across the demilitarized zone in 2019. Critics mocked the diplomacy. Yet during that period North Korea suspended its nuclear and long-range missile tests, and the President demonstrated a willingness to talk directly to adversaries that would become a hallmark of his second term.

Lessons Learned

For all these achievements, the first term also taught the President hard lessons. Many of the officials he appointed did not share his vision. Some regarded it as their duty to restrain him. Some leaked to the press, slow-walked his directives, or resigned in protest when he made decisions they disliked. Departments and agencies, staffed by career officials accustomed to the old consensus, often resisted change. The President later spoke candidly about the mistakes he believed he had made in choosing people who did not truly support his agenda.

He resolved not to repeat those mistakes. When he returned to office in January 2025, he brought with him a team chosen for its alignment with his vision and its capacity to execute it. The second Trump Administration would not be a government of rivals pulling in different directions. It would be a team with a clear mission and clear lines of authority.

The Mandate of 2024

The 2024 election gave the President a powerful mandate. He won the popular vote and every one of the major battleground states, a decisive victory that confounded the predictions of many analysts. Foreign policy was central to his campaign. He promised to end the war in Ukraine, which had begun under his predecessor and had killed hundreds of thousands. He promised to bring peace to the Middle East, where the Hamas attack on Israel of October 7, 2023 had ignited a regional war. He promised to secure the southern border, which had seen record levels of illegal crossings. He promised to confront the cartels flooding American communities with fentanyl. He promised to restore American strength so that adversaries would once again fear and respect the United States.

His slogan for foreign policy was the one Ronald Reagan had made famous: peace through strength. The idea was that a strong America,

clear about its interests and willing to defend them, would deter conflict rather than invite it. Weakness, in the President's view, was provocative. The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East had broken out, he argued, because adversaries had perceived American weakness. A strong President would prevent such wars, and end those already underway.

The Second-Term Doctrine

In his second term, the President's foreign policy rested on a handful of core principles, each of which would shape the work of his Secretary of State.

The first was that every action of the government abroad must make America safer, stronger, or more prosperous. This standard would be applied not only to diplomacy but to foreign assistance, which the President believed had grown into a vast, unaccountable enterprise serving the priorities of bureaucrats and contractors rather than the American people.

The second was that the Western Hemisphere is America's neighborhood and its first priority. For decades, Washington had focused on distant regions while neglecting the countries closest to home, allowing China to expand its influence, cartels to grow into transnational armies, and hostile regimes in Caracas, Havana, and Managua to entrench themselves. The President was determined to reverse that neglect, and he made clear that he regarded the security of the hemisphere as a matter of direct national interest.

The third was that allies must carry their share of the burden. America would remain committed to its alliances, but it would no longer subsidize wealthy nations that refused to invest in their own defense.

The fourth was that China is the defining strategic challenge of the century, and that America must compete with it economically,

technologically, and militarily while maintaining channels of communication to manage the rivalry responsibly.

The fifth was that the President is a peacemaker. He believed that his personal relationships with world leaders, his willingness to use American leverage, and his unpredictability gave him unique power to end conflicts. He would put that power to use across the globe.

And the sixth was that the national security apparatus must answer to the President. The elected leader of the nation, not unelected officials, would set the course.

The Need for an Executor

A doctrine is not self-executing. The President needed people who understood his vision, believed in it, and had the skill to carry it out across a sprawling bureaucracy and a complicated world. He needed a Secretary of State who could negotiate with foreign leaders, testify before Congress, manage a department of tens of thousands of employees, and explain the Administration's policy to the American people and the world. He needed someone who would not try to manage the President but would serve him.

Of all the decisions the President made in assembling his second-term team, none would prove more consequential than his choice for that role. The next chapter tells how he made it.

CONTINUE READING

The President’s Choice

Portraits of the people who served
President Donald J. Trump.

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