Who Is Matt Duss and Can He Take On "The Blob"?

Bernie's foreign-policy adviser is doing just that.

DAVID KLION
Forty-five years after Congress passed the War Powers Resolution over Richard Nixon’s veto, the Senate finally invoked its power to end a war. This past December, 56 senators voted to cut off all US support for Saudi Arabia’s horrific military campaign in Yemen, which began in the final years of the Obama administration, sharply escalated under Donald Trump, and has led to the deaths of an estimated 85,000 children due to starvation.

The morning of the vote, Bernie Sanders addressed his Senate colleagues next to a photo of an emaciated Yemeni child and urged them to pass the resolution, which he’d introduced along with co-sponsors Mike Lee, a Republican, and Chris Murphy, a Democrat. “We have been providing the bombs the Saudi-led coalition is using, refueling their planes before they drop those bombs, and assisting with intelligence,” Sanders said. “In too many cases, our weapons are being used to kill civilians.”

As the Vermont senator spoke, a 6-foot-5, bespectacled bear of a man sat quietly beside him. Matt Duss, 46, has recently become one of the most significant figures reshaping progressive foreign policy in the Trump era. Since February 2017, when Sanders hired him as his foreign-policy adviser, Duss has played a key role in advancing the Yemen resolution and has deeply informed Sanders’s growing emphasis on international affairs.

“I give Matt an extraordinary amount of credit on Yemen,” says Representative Ro Khanna, who introduced the joint resolution in the House. “He’s the principal reason that Sanders took this huge risk in introducing the War Powers Resolution in the Senate and agreeing to [support] what we had introduced in the House.”

Sanders is reportedly about to announce a second presidential run, and attention is already turning to his foreign-policy views. In his 2016 campaign, Sanders’s primary focus was on domestic economic issues, and many critics regarded him as a lightweight on foreign policy. This time around, Sanders has won over skeptics in the foreign-policy establishment with substantive speeches in 2017 and 2018, laying out a comprehensive vision for America’s role in the world. Beyond wanting to end or prevent wars in the Middle East, Sanders has also linked the global rise of authoritarian populism to wealth inequality, and has called for an international progressive movement to combat authoritarian leaders and kleptocrats from Russia to Brazil. And while Duss doesn’t want to take credit for what he says are his boss’s deeply held views, he has had a hand in all of this.

To the extent that Sanders is raising new ideas and challenging the interventionist consensus that has long dominated Washington, it makes sense that he’s relying on the advice of a relative outsider. The nation’s capital is infamously a town of straight-A students who hustled their way through the most elite schools and prestigious internships in pursuit of power. Duss took a more meandering path, playing in bands and working odd jobs for years before finishing college in his early 30s. He then spent the next decade influencing the public debate, mainly as a blogger, before finally emerging as a Senate staffer.

Duss is now gaining prominence at a pivotal moment for progressive foreign policy. Since the end of the Cold War, leading Democrats have broadly subscribed to the liberal-internationalist doctrine, with its emphasis on free-trade pacts, military coalitions to overthrow dictators and prevent atrocities, and, since 9/11, ruthless prosecution of the War on Terror; any differences with their Republican colleagues have often been more of degree than kind. Foreign-policy critics on the left, meanwhile, have generally been relegated to academia and the alternative media, and have focused mainly on challenging the excesses of empire, not on articulating a more positive and ambitious global vision.

More than most policy-makers, Duss is a product of that left-leaning tradition. His ascension was in many ways made possible by the political earthquake of 2016—not just Trump’s election, but the defeat of Hillary Clinton, the enduring influence of Sanders, and the emergence of a new generation of progressives who have grown up amid endless wars. The open question is whether Duss and others like him are capable of taking on the foreign-policy world’s entrenched status quo.


Duss was born in 1972 in the Hudson Valley town of Nyack, an hour north of Manhattan. His mother, a nurse, came from a family of truck drivers in rural western Pennsylvania; his father, a journalist and aid worker, was born in a displaced-persons camp in Germany after his family, some of whom had been kulaks in Ukraine, survived famine under Stalin and some of the worst carnage of World War II. When Duss’s father was 2, his family emigrated to the United States and settled in Brooklyn. Despite their very different origins, Duss’s father and mother shared an evangelical faith, they met while attending a missionary-training college in Nyack, where they eventually settled.

“We’re a family of refugees,” Duss tells me over brunch near his home in northern Virginia. “That’s always been part of my understanding of where we came from.” Because of his family history, Duss says, he never had any illusions about Soviet communism, but he does identify as a man of the left, a strong social democrat who has any illusions about Soviet communism, but he does identify as a man of the left, a strong social democrat perfectly at home with Sanders’s political program.

Duss himself grew up in a tight-knit community of evangelical Christians. While he wrestled with his faith throughout his teens and early adulthood—he describes himself as pro-choice, pro-LGBTQ rights, and very liberal—the communitarian and humanitarian aspects of Christianity remain central to his life.

In 1983, his family relocated for a year to a refugee-processing center in the Philippines to work with a Christian NGO there. From age 10 to 11, Duss attended a Christian boarding school while helping refugees from Southeast Asia prepare for life in North America. He was in Manila at the time of the assassination of opposition politician Benigno Aquino, a critic of the US-aligned dictator Ferdinand Marcos. “It was an interesting vantage point for how the US was perceived elsewhere,” he says. “Obviously, I couldn’t fully understand or engage with the political conversation there—but still, it made an impression.”

Exposure to the wider world left Duss feeling more isolated from his peers back home. Once a promising student, in junior high he became disengaged from school, grappling with his religious upbringing and preferring music to homework. At 15, he took up guitar, his influences ranging
from Van Halen to indie groups like the Replacements, the Pixies, and Dinosaur Jr. It was through playing in bands that he found his peer group, which included an Iraqi-American singer who helped personalize the first Gulf War for him. “I just was uncomfortable with America sending troops around the world,” Duss says.

After two and a half years at a small Christian college in Massachusetts, Duss found himself unmotivated and returned home to Nyack, where he worked in a variety of menial jobs while pursuing his true passions: playing guitar and writing fiction. In 1994, he moved to Seattle, where he met his wife, and where he first became involved in politics via anti-globalization activism and Ralph Nader’s 2000 presidential campaign.

Duss became fascinated with the Muslim world on a trip to Istanbul for a friend’s wedding in 2000. He found the experience of being awakened by the morning call to prayer transformative, and began reading obsessively about Islamic history and politics. The 9/11 attacks the following year left him frustrated and concerned about the way the US media portrayed Muslims and the Middle East, and for the first time in his life he felt a sense of political mission. At a time when many US policy-makers were encouraging open-ended war across the Muslim world, Duss dedicated himself to understanding the societies that would bear the brunt of such a policy.

In 2002, Duss transferred from community college to the University of Washington, where he finally earned his bachelor’s degree at 31 and his master’s at 34 while studying Arabic and raising a newborn. He wrote his thesis on Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shiite cleric who had become the political and spiritual leader of the insurgency against the US-led coalition occupying Iraq.

After finishing his academic work, Duss and his family moved back east and settled in Alexandria, Virginia. Duss quickly took to the Beltway blogosphere and started several websites, including one dedicated to monitoring the Islamophobic writings of Marty Peretz, then publisher of The New Republic. He began receiving wider recognition writing about the Middle East for The American Prospect. That eventually earned him a staff job at the Center for American Progress, where in early 2008 he became editor of the national-security team for the liberal think tank’s affiliated blog, ThinkProgress. “If TAP was like getting signed to Sub Pop,” says Duss, referring to the indie label that launched bands like Nirvana and Sleater-Kinney, “going to CAP was like a major label.”

“His success is an argument for all kinds of diversity in the foreign-policy community,” says Heather Hurlburt, a former State Department official during Bill Clinton’s presidency. “Perhaps ironically, it’s also a vindication of [CAP founder] John Podesta, of all people, whose early vision for the Center for American Progress was that it would hire and pay talented young people who didn’t come from super-privileged traditional backgrounds.”

At the same time that Duss was starting at CAP, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were engaged in a heated presidential primary. During a January 2008 debate, Obama contrasted his opposition to the Iraq War with Clinton’s initial support for it. “I don’t want to just end the war,” Obama said. “I want to end the mind-set that got us into war in the first place.” For Duss, this line “was like hearing [Jimi Hendrix’s] ‘Voodoo Child (Slight Return)’ for the first time. It’s like, ‘That is rock and roll.’”

“Matt has always been willing to challenge underlying assumptions about the conduct of American foreign policy,” says Ben Rhodes, one of Obama’s closest national-security advisers. “He rightly seized on President Obama’s statement…and he held us to that standard for eight years.”

The Obama administration often struggled to hold itself to that same standard. The idealism that appealed to Duss and many others produced some significant achievements, notably the Iran nuclear deal, the reestablishment of relations with Cuba, and the Paris climate accord. But Obama didn’t end US military operations in Iraq or Afghanistan, and he launched new, undeclared wars in several other countries in the Muslim world. He authorized record sums of military aid to Israel and Saudi Arabia despite the atrocities they committed in the Gaza Strip and Yemen. He championed the Arab Spring, then stood by the Gulf monarchies and the Egyptian military junta as they snuffed it out.

Obama’s foreign-policy record disappointed many activists and writers on the left. But inside the Beltway and among key Democratic institutions, it had plenty of defenders, including some who would clash directly with Duss once he’d entered the think-tank world.

Duss worked at CAP until 2014 and blogged prolifically for ThinkProgress, where he was an outspoken voice against military interventionism, a critic of Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories, and an advocate of diplomacy with Iran. He co-authored a report on Islamophobia in the world of conservative donor networks and think tanks, making his share of enemies in the process. He also helped identify and recruit like-minded writers to the site, including Ali Gharib (now an editor at The Intercept) and Eli Clifton (now a fellow at Type Media Center).

Initially, Duss had a significant degree of freedom to express his opinions at ThinkProgress, which he attributes to Podesta’s hands-off approach. Asked whether that approach continued for the entirety of his time at CAP, Duss says simply, “No, it didn’t.”

In 2011, the year that CAP’s current presi-
dent, Neera Tanden, took over from Podesta, Duss’s team drew the ire of pro-Israel organizations and media outlets in Washington. Following an article in Politics by Ben Smith (now editor in chief of BuzzFeed News) spotlighting ThinkProgress’s critical coverage of Israel, Duss and several other CAP writers felt targeted. “The goal of that piece was definitely to start a campaign against us,” says Duss, who adds that he has no personal resentment toward Smith and respects much of his work. “It was clear he was working off of an opposition document that had been shopped to him that was later leaked.” Duss specifically calls out the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), The Washington Free Beacon, and some members of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies for coordinating a campaign against him and his colleagues.

“Reporters get information from all sorts of places, and from people with all sorts of motives,” Ben Smith says in response. “That was an accurate story about the differences on Israel inside a Democratic institution—a story that is obviously still playing out in the party.” In any case, Gharib and Clifton would voluntarily leave CAP after what Duss says was significant internal pressure that interfered with their work. Duss remained at the organization for three more years, essentially daring the higher-ups to fire him.

Faiz Shakir, who ran ThinkProgress at the time and hired all of the writers targeted by AIPAC, still speaks warmly of Duss. “Matt was advocating for the Iranian deal long before it was mainstreamed; he was also warning of the consequences of [Israel’s] settlement expansion long before the Obama administration tried to take a hard line on the issue,” says Shakir, now the ACLU’s national political director. “For his work, he obviously engendered opposition from powerful groups who didn’t want to see ideological movement on those issues.”

Tanden’s only comment for this profile was delivered via her communications director: “While at CAP, Matt Duss made important contributions to our national-security team, and he has done critical work since.”

While it’s clearly a sensitive subject for all parties involved, the tensions from the CAP incident presaged deeper divides within progressive policy circles. Tanden was an outspoken critic of Duss’s future boss Sanders during the 2016 Democratic primaries and remains so today. CAP’s acceptance of funds from the United Arab Emirates, which started during her tenure, was recently a source of significant internal turmoil, as was Tanden’s 2015 event with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whereas Duss has vociferously criticized both the UAE and Israeli governments for years. His experience at CAP speaks to the limits of trying to challenge donors and policy-makers within powerful Democratic Party-aligned organizations—limits that Sanders will likely run into again if he seeks to reform foreign policy in a progressive direction.

In 2014, Duss left CAP to become president of the Foundation for Middle East Peace, a small nonprofit that provides grants to Israeli, Palestinian, and American civil-society groups. While at FMEP, Duss participated in working groups in coordination with Ben Rhodes to support the Obama administration’s nuclear deal with Iran, which faced significant opposition from hawks and pro-Israel groups in Congress.

Several times during Duss’s tenure at both CAP and FMEP, some neoconservative and pro-Israel critics accused him of anti-Semitism, a charge that he finds hurtful and absurd. A 2013 article in The Washington Free Beacon insinuated that Duss, his brother, and his father are all hostile to Jews, largely relying on their persistent criticism of the Israeli occupation as evidence. In 2015, a Republican congressman issued a press release accusing Duss and his family of “anti-Semitic [sic] ties,” again citing as evidence their criticism of the Israeli government. “Any fair reading of my work—and, frankly, my life—refutes that plainly,” Duss says.

Duss’s deep interest in the Israel-Palestine conflict is rooted in both his Christian upbringing and his humanitarian instincts. The first of his many visits to Israel and the occupied territories was in 2003, in the middle of the second intifada, while his brother was doing relief work there. “A bus had blown up in Jerusalem a week before, so the reality of terrorism is there; you have to recognize it,” Duss says. “But at the same time, watching the daily indignity and humiliation and violence that is visited on Palestinian civilians in multiple ways… there’s no justification for that.”

The public conversation about Israel has shifted in the past few years. Younger Jews on college campuses and elsewhere have become disenchanted with Israel and more critical of the occupation, and this has created more space in the media and in politics for views like Duss’s. The new Congress includes several Democrats who have endorsed the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement, a position that many other Democrats not only oppose but are trying to make illegal. Neither Duss nor Sanders has endorsed boycotting Israel, but both have defended the right to engage in such boycotts, and in 2015 Duss testified before Congress that “it is a mistake to focus on the BDS movement while ignoring the main reason for its continued growth, which is the failure to end the occupation.” While some BDS activists may consider that a moderate position, no one has ever voiced it in the context of a presidential campaign.

During the 2016 Democratic primary contest between Clinton and Sanders, Duss bemoaned the absence of a real foreign-policy debate. At the time, many progressives were frustrated with Clinton’s reflexive hawkishness, on the one hand, and Sanders’s perceived lack of a serious interest in international affairs, on the other.

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Intelligence and Security Agency—as well as a Somali legal expert and activist said the Somali government does not have the capacity to help investigate these strikes.

Sagal Bihi, a member of Parliament and the former chair of Somalia's Human Rights, Gender, and Humanitarian Committee, told me that she had raised the issue of civilian casualties with the Ministry of Defense in 2017 and was told that the military “investigates as needed” into any such allegations. But the national military is barely functioning, and the clans that once controlled pockets of the country have complicated relationships with the government and may be reluctant to share information with it. Additionally, according to my interviews, Al Shabab bans the use of smartphones in the territories it holds, which makes taking photographs and sending information difficult. All of these factors make civilian casualties hard to investigate, but nearly every Somali I spoke with was certain that people with no connection to Al Shabab were being killed in the air strikes. “Civilian casualties will always exist,” Bihi said, “because we are talking about an enemy that really takes ‘human shield’ to the next level.”

Felix Horne, the senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch, told me in an e-mail that his organization “is concerned about ongoing allegations of civilian casualties caused by US drone strikes in the Middle Shabelle and Lower Shabelle regions, where much of the fight against Al Shabab is taking place.” He added, “The federal government of Somalia has not taken any known measures to investigate these claims.”

Somalia’s Office of the Prime Minister and Office of the President did not respond to queries about civilian casualties.

Further, two high-level former Somali security advisers say civilian casualties are all the more likely because the United States doesn’t have the ability to collect solid information on the ground. “There’s not enough intelligence to justify kinetic strikes,” said one. “They [the US military] don’t have enough linguists. Even the CIA doesn’t go out [of the Green Zone],” an area of tight security in Mogadishu.

“There are very few people in the Pentagon that can even explain to you what is going on in East Africa.”

—Gen. Donald Bolduc

Had Clinton defeated Trump that fall, Duss expected to remain at FMEP and attempt to push the new administration toward a more progressive approach to the Middle East. Instead, mere weeks after Trump’s shocking victory, Duss met with Sanders in person and soon found himself working for the Vermont senator, taking a pay cut in order to directly shape policy on Capitol Hill. “He’s very much like he is in public, except funnier,” Duss says of Sanders, “and that’s how I immediately knew we could work together.”

While they come from very different backgrounds, Sanders and Duss share something important in common: At least by Washington standards, they both spent their 20s adrift. After graduating from the University of Chicago, where he was more interested in activism than in grades, Sanders moved to Vermont and worked as a carpenter while making radical film strips and writing for alternative publications. He didn’t win an election until he was 39, didn’t go to Washington for another decade after that, and has only emerged as a leading national figure in the past few years. Like Duss, Sanders has stubbornly held onto a set of core ideals and waited, at whatever cost to his career, for the national debate to shift his way. As Duss puts it, both men’s identities were fully formed outside the Beltway.

“People with Matt’s views don’t always work within the US government, so I was glad he took on his current role as an adviser for Bernie,” Ben Rhodes says. “It’s good for the Senate to have a progressive activist in that role, and it’s good for someone like Matt to learn how to navigate the complexity of being a Senate staffer.” Rhodes, who rocketed to international influence at 29 on the basis of his “mind meld” with Obama, is the most obvious example of the kind of role that Duss might be expected to play in a Sanders administration. Rhodes was also a critic of the US foreign-policy establishment, which he dubbed “the Blob,” and its interventionist consensus—and during his time in the White House, he made many of the same enemies that Duss has.

In the lead-up to the 2020 Democratic primaries, a number of the expected major contenders have tackled left on the domestic-policy issues that Sanders staked out in 2016. But no one has indicated as clearly as Sanders that there needs to be a break with the foreign-policy consensus that Clinton embodied and would have reinforced. No one besides Sanders has hired an adviser with such a clear track record of defying the Blob. But while foreign policy could be an issue that attracts activists to Sanders, it will also likely inspire attacks, especially with regard to Israel. In fact, Ann Lewis, a pro-Israel Democratic operative who pressured CAP over Duss and his cohort in 2012, now co-chairs a well-funded new organization, the Democratic Majority for Israel, dedicated to countering the growing criticism of Israel among progressives.

Then again, the world has changed a lot in the past decade, and some Democrats are optimistic about ending the status quo. “Matt represents a real break from interventionist thinking,” says Ro Khanna, “and it’s why foreign policy is going to be an advantage for Bernie Sanders if he runs. Last time, they said he was naive on foreign policy. This time, he’s responsible for the biggest foreign-policy success of the past few years, with the Yemen vote. And I would give a lot of credit to Matt Duss.”

Duss himself is insistently modest, refusing to claim any special credit for Sanders’s perceived new outspokenness. He compares his boss to the legendary jazz trumpeter Miles Davis. “One of Miles’s real geniuses was as a band leader, assembling the best players of the moment and getting them to play better than they ever had before—and in many cases than they ever would again,” Duss says. “This is the best band I’ve ever played in.”