

Trump lines up militarists for cabinet posts

By Tom Eley
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US President-elect Donald Trump continued over the weekend to assemble the makings of the most right-wing and militarist administration in U.S. history, while taking steps to ensure that he retains personal control over his multi-billion-dollar business empire.

On Sunday, Trump met with retired Marine General James N. Mattis, responsible for U.S. war crimes in the Iraqi city of Fallujah. Mattis is being touted as Trump's likely defense secretary.

The discussion with Mattis at Trump Tower in Manhattan followed the previous day's meeting with the 2012 Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney, also an advocate of increased U.S. military aggression, who is being considered for secretary of state.

The discussions with Mattis and Romney follow Friday's selection of a troika of far-right figures for key posts: Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama for attorney general, retired General Michael Flynn for national security adviser, and Representative Mike Pompeo for CIA director. Those appointments came after the selection of the fascist Stephen Bannon, former head of Breitbart News, as top White House strategist.

In forming his unprecedentedly right-wing cabinet, Trump faces no opposition from the Democratic Party. Leading Democrats have repeatedly stressed their intention to seek "common ground" with Trump around economic nationalist and protectionist policies.

Trump's promotion of "America First" nationalism and the general lineup behind this reactionary outlook by Democratic leaders, from incoming Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer to the so-called "lefts" Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, signal an overall reorientation of the American ruling class in the direction of trade war and military confrontation with U.S. imperialism's major international rivals.

Mattis and Romney have both positioned themselves as proponents of war with Iran, which they label the most dangerous threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East. Both have criticized the Obama administration, which has been at war for its entire eight years in office against a total of six different countries, for supposed reticence in using military force.

Mattis has gone so far as to dismiss ISIS, ostensibly the target of expanded U.S. military action in Iraq and Syria, as a diversion from the Iranian threat.

"I consider ISIS nothing more than an excuse for Iran to continue its mischief. Iran is not an enemy of ISIS," he told a Center for Strategic and International Studies meeting in Washington last spring. "They have a lot to gain from the turmoil

in the region that ISIS creates." In the same address he proposed that the U.S. make preparations for war with Iran.

Iran extends over an area equivalent in size to Alaska. It has a population equal to that of California, Texas and New York combined. War with Iran would extend the U.S. combat theater across the entire southeastern quadrant of Eurasia—from Syria in the west to Pakistan in the east. It would dwarf and subsume the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, both of which border Iran, and would likely necessitate the implementation of the draft to expand the ranks of the U.S. military.

Mattis is already a veteran of several American wars of aggression. As a brigadier general, he led a Marine battalion in the invasion of Kuwait during the Gulf War of 1991, one of history's most lopsided imperialist slaughters. In brief fighting, as many as 100,000 Iraqi soldiers were killed, mostly in their bunkers or in retreat, as compared to 147 "coalition" casualties. Mattis then commanded forces in the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, in 2001-2002, and the "shock and awe" invasion of Iraq, in 2003.

In subsequent Iraqi "peacekeeping" operations from 2003 onwards, Mattis oversaw some of American imperialism's most heinous crimes. In 2004, he shared command of a U.S. attack against the city of Fallujah, which was held up for exemplary punishment after the killing of four private Blackwater defense contractors by angry civilians. The city, once regarded as among the most beautiful in the Middle East, was left in ruins after a massive artillery bombardment, which included the use of white phosphorus and depleted uranium weapons, and indiscriminate door-to-door raids. Untold thousands were killed.

On May 19, 2004, Marines under Mattis' command massacred a wedding party in the village of Mukaradeeb on the Iraq-Syria border. At least 42 civilians were killed, including women and children who were mowed down by US machine guns. In spite of video evidence clearly showing the wedding festivities, Mattis insisted, "I don't have to apologize for the conduct of my men."

On the contrary, Mattis revels in killing. In early 2005, months after the massacres of defenseless civilians in Fallujah and Mukaradeeb, he was caught on video telling a San Diego audience that he enjoyed the slaughter. "It's a hell of a hoot," Mattis said. "It's fun to shoot some people. I'll be right up there with you. I like brawling... it's a hell of a lot of fun to shoot them."

Such bloodlust won Mattis promotion first under George W. Bush and then under Obama, who, in 2010, appointed him commander of United States Central Command, replacing Gen. David Petraeus. Mattis retired from the command in 2013, reportedly over differences with the Obama administration on

Iran.

The fact that it is only three years since his retirement from the military would normally, under existing law, preclude Mattis from assuming the civilian post of defense secretary. However, it is expected that the federal statute in question will be waived by Congress without opposition from the Democrats.

Like Mattis, Romney advocates moving toward a war footing against Iran. In 2012, he insisted that, if elected president, he could declare war on Iran without congressional approval. In a 2015 column in the *Wall Street Journal*, Romney condemned the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran, which lifted some punitive sanctions in exchange for Teheran's dismantling of enriched uranium capabilities. Trump similarly attacked the nuclear deal with Iran during his campaign.

Romney, however, has been far more hawkish toward Russia than Trump. While the Clinton campaign attacked Trump during the election campaign, in McCarthyite fashion, over alleged ties to Russia, depicting Trump as a stooge of the Kremlin, Romney has consistently attacked the Obama administration for being insufficiently aggressive against Russia, which he identified in 2012 as "without question our number one geopolitical foe."

The reconciliation of Romney with Trump, much like Obama's embrace of his successor, reveals once again the unprincipled and often stage-managed character of American bourgeois politics. Regardless the bitterness of election campaign conflicts, both big business parties and the various factions within them are all, as Obama said following Trump's election, on the "same team," i.e., that of American imperialism. In the end, their differences are tactical while their unity against the working class is fundamental.

During the campaign, Romney bitterly opposed Trump's nomination, publicly calling him a "con man" and "faker." Trump, in turn, called Romney a "loser." But in their meeting at Trump's New Jersey golf course on Sunday they embraced warmly. Vice President-elect Mike Pence, who heads Trump's transition, later said that Romney was "under active consideration" for secretary of state.

The *Washington Post* reported on Saturday that, in yet another break with historical precedent, the current head of the National Security Agency (NSA), Admiral Michael S. Rogers, without informing his superiors, met with Trump in New York on Thursday regarding the position of director of national intelligence, a post currently held by James R. Clapper, who announced his retirement last week. In the same article, the *Post* revealed that last month Clapper and Defense Secretary Ashton Carter each sent letters to Obama requesting that he fire Rogers, an action that has not yet been taken. The revelation brought forth public statements of support for Rogers from prominent Republicans.

The NSA is the federal agency which, as Edward Snowden revealed in 2013, systematically and illegally spies on the communications of the American people.

Also on Saturday, Trump met with two potential education secretaries: Michelle Rhee, a Democrat who as chancellor of the Washington DC public schools from 2007 until 2010 sought the total destruction of teacher tenure, and Betty DeVos, whose organization, American Federation of Children, seeks to divert

money from public schools to charter schools, private schools and religious institutions. The meetings make clear that Trump intends to carry forward the attack on public education initiated by his predecessors Bush ("No Child Left Behind") and Obama ("Race to the Top").

Trump has shown no intention of separating the government he will head from his sprawling real estate and hospitality concerns. His son-in-law, Jared Kushner, has emerged as his closest advisor.

Kushner himself heads up a multi-billion-dollar family real estate empire built by his father, Charles Kushner. The *New York Times* has reported that Trump may seek to circumvent a federal anti-nepotism law, in place since 1967, and give his son-in-law an advisory position in his administration. Kushner, who had no previous government or political experience, was present on Thursday when Trump met with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in New York.

Last week, Trump's lawyer said the president-elect would place his businesses in the hands of his children, Donald Jr., Eric, and Ivanka, the wife of Jared Kushner. However, he subsequently named all three, as well as Kushner, members of his White House transition team.

These transparent conflicts of interest have been ignored by prominent Democrats, including New York Senator Schumer, who will assume the post of Senate minority leader vacated by the retiring Harry Reid of Nevada.

Schumer, who has emerged as the leading figure in the Democratic Party, made the rounds of the Sunday morning interview programs. Appearing on the ABC News program "This Week," he said congressional Democrats would collaborate with Trump to promote "a very strong and bold economic platform and message" including "dramatic change in the trade laws"—in other words, trade war.

"Now, many of these issues, actually, Donald Trump supported in the campaign," Schumer told host Martha Raddatz. "We're going to challenge him to work with us on those issues and not work—go against them and break his promise to the blue collar people, because the Republican leadership or the Republican establishment doesn't like them."

The attempt of both Trump and the Democrats to identify their turn to economic nationalism with the interests of American workers is a fraud. What is involved is a shift in the orientation of the American ruling class, effected through the installation of the most right-wing, militaristic and authoritarian government in U.S. history, to unbridled nationalism. This must of necessity go hand in hand with a massive increase in military spending, the cost of which will be borne by the working class in the form of increased austerity and violent repression.

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