

Democrats overwhelmingly back nominees

Senate confirms Trump generals to head Pentagon, Homeland Security

By Barry Grey
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Only hours after Donald Trump delivered his fascistic inaugural address, Senate Democrats overwhelmingly voted with their Republican counterparts to confirm recently retired Marine generals James “Mad Dog” Mattis and John Kelly to head the departments of Defense and Homeland Security, respectively.

These votes came as the newly-installed president signed an executive order potentially crippling the Obama administration's health care overhaul, setting the stage for a repeal of the Affordable Care Act that could eliminate health insurance for close to 20 million people over the next year.

While Obamacare is itself a reactionary counter-reform imposing increased costs and decreased coverage on millions of workers for the benefit of the health care industry, Trump and the Republicans are preparing to use its repeal to dismantle Medicaid, the government program for the poor, impose even deeper cuts in health care for working people, and escalate the attack on Medicare, the government program for seniors.

The vote for Mattis, who headed the US Central Command until 2013, was 98 to 1, the only dissenter being New York Democrat Kirsten Gillibrand. She had made clear she approved of Mattis, but voted “no” because she opposed a waiver overriding a law requiring a military officer to have been in retirement for at least seven years before becoming Pentagon chief.

The vote for Kelly, who led the Southern Command until last January, was 88 to 11. (The Democratic caucus includes 48 of the 100 senators.) The supposed leaders of the “liberal” Democrats, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, both voted for Mattis. Sanders also voted for Kelly.

The lopsided support of the Democrats for Trump's military nominees highlights the basic agreement of both big business parties on a policy of expanded militarism and war abroad and increased repression at home. The sharp differences that have emerged over foreign policy center on

which enemy should be the initial focus of US military, economic and diplomatic aggression, Russia or China. The Democrats and the intelligence agencies have attacked Trump for suggesting a pullback in the confrontation with Moscow in order to concentrate, at least initially, on China.

But as the near-unanimous confirmation of Mattis shows, this is a sharp tactical struggle between representatives of American imperialism who are equally committed to the use of military force to secure the interests of the US financial elite. The bipartisan character of the vote is all the more significant coming in the aftermath of an inaugural speech proclaiming Washington's readiness to go to war against any nation that impedes the “America First” agenda of the US corporate oligarchy.

A major reason for the near-unanimous Democratic support for Mattis is the testimony he gave at his confirmation hearing last week in which he distanced himself from Trump's conciliatory stance on Russia and singled out Moscow as a primary target for US military aggression.

Mattis is a war criminal, having led the US assault on Fallujah in 2004 that turned the city into rubble and killed uncounted thousands of civilians. Shortly thereafter he ordered the bombing of a wedding party near the Syrian border that killed 42 civilian men, women and children. He subsequently boasted that it had taken him 30 seconds to make the decision to bomb the target.

General Kelly, as chief of the Southern Command, which covers Central and South America and the Caribbean, advocated a more aggressive policy against undocumented immigrants and expanded arms sales to US client regimes in the region. He has defended the use of torture, opposed the closure of the Guantanamo prison camp and supported Trump's call for the building of a wall on the Mexican border.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), created in the aftermath of 9/11 as a domestic counterpart to the “war

on terror,” is a massive bureaucracy of state violence and repression. Kelly now commands 240,000 employees comprising an army of border guards, police detectives, deportation administrators who seize and deport hundreds of thousands of undocumented workers each year.

He is the first former military officer to head the DHS, and his installation is the first step in the implementation of Trump's plans to further militarize US society and increase state violence against all expressions of social opposition.

This is already being illustrated in the brutal police crackdown against anti-Trump protesters in Washington. Close to 300 were arrested Friday as thousands of police in riot gear attacked demonstrators with tear gas and concussion grenades.

Mattis and Kelly are among four former military officers appointed to top posts in the Trump administration. The others are retired Gen. Michael Flynn as national security adviser and retired Gen. Keith Kellogg as chief of staff of the National Security Council.

Trump's first executive order, signed Friday, orders federal agencies to take measures aimed at “minimizing the economic burden” of Obamacare “pending repeal.” It instructs the Secretary of Health and Human Services and other officials to “exercise all authority and discretion available to them to waive, defer, grant exemptions from or delay” any requirement of the Affordable Care Act that imposes a fiscal burden.

The new president also signed a document declaring 9/11 a “National Day of Patriotism.”

Within minutes of Trump's taking the oath of office, all references to climate change, civil rights and LGBT rights were effaced from the White House website (WhiteHouse.gov). The White House website for the Council on Environmental Quality, founded in 1969, also disappeared on Friday afternoon.

In place of the issue page on climate change there appeared a new page titled “America First Energy Plan.” It states Trump's commitment to “eliminating harmful and unnecessary policies such as the Climate Action Plan and the Waters of the US rule.” It also pledges to “revive America's coal industry” and open federal lands to oil and gas drilling.

This reflects the character of the new administration, which is directly staffed by multi-millionaire and billionaire representatives of the energy and banking industries. These include Trump's nominee for secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, the former CEO of Exxon Mobil.

The billionaire real estate mogul now occupying the White House has also chosen as head of the Environmental Protection Agency Scott Pruitt, the former Oklahoma attorney general who sued the EPA 14 times on behalf of the

energy industry, and Rick Perry, the former Texas governor who has long fronted for the oil barons in his state.

Trump's government of the oligarchs is determined to roll back every regulation and rule restricting the unfettered ability of the giant corporations to pollute the air and water, poison and cripple workers on the job, and ultimately destroy the environment in the pursuit of profit. His rejection of climate control comes two days after two separate federal agencies issued reports warning that global temperatures set new highs in 2016, marking the third consecutive year of record global warmth.

The page on civil rights was replaced with a page entitled “Standing Up For Our Law Enforcement Community.” Articulating the agenda of mass repression that Trump brings to the White House, the new page states: “Our job is not to make life more comfortable for the rioter, the looter, or the violent disrupter.” It omits any reference to police brutality and instead calls for “more law enforcement” and “more effective policing.”

Outgoing president Barack Obama summed up the complicity of the Democrats in the savage policies, international and domestic, of the new administration. Addressing staff members at Andrews Air Force Base before departing with his family to vacation in Palm Springs, California, he once again, as he has done systematically since the election, downplayed the dangers to democratic rights and social conditions represented by Trump.

He called the assumption of power by Trump “just a little pit stop.” Exuding complacency, indifference and, on a more fundamental level, solidarity with Trump's policy of all-out war against the working class, he called Trump's government of oligarchs and generals “not a period,” but rather “a comma in the continuing story of building America.”

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