

The resignation of General Mattis and America's crisis of class rule

By Bill Van Auken
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Thursday's resignation of US Defense Secretary James Mattis has provoked a reaction of panic and near hysteria from leading members of both major political parties, the media and former top military and intelligence officials.

Mattis, a former four-star Marine Corps general, made his resignation announcement in a letter that represented an open rebuke of President Donald Trump's policies, essentially accusing him of failing to support the US alliances established by Washington in the post-World War II era or sufficiently counter "malign actors and strategic competitors," i.e., China and Russia.

Before making the letter public, Mattis reportedly had 50 copies printed and distributed to top brass within the Pentagon.

The immediate trigger for the resignation was Trump's order, made public Wednesday, to withdraw all 2,000-plus US troops from Syria and his reported decision to draw down at least half—approximately 7,000 soldiers—of the US forces still waging a more than 17-year-long war in Afghanistan.

Trump had campaigned in 2016 on his "America First" program, calling for an end to the protracted US wars in the Middle East and Central Asia. This rhetoric played a substantial role in winning the billionaire real estate speculator popular support against his presidential rival, Democrat Hillary Clinton, the favored candidate of Wall Street and the CIA, whose career was bound up with past US wars and advanced preparations for an escalation of the Syria intervention as well as a direct confrontation with Russia.

Trump's decision to act on these campaign pledges now are bound up with the deepening crisis of his presidency, which is besieged by multiple scandals and investigations that are themselves driven by the bitter conflicts within the American ruling class, particularly over foreign policy.

If Trump has played this card, it is because he knows that bringing troops home from the Middle East and Central Asia will enjoy broad support, well beyond the far-right base he has attempted to cultivate with anti-immigrant chauvinism and his incessant demands for a wall along the US-Mexico border.

Within the US working population there is deep hostility to the never-ending wars waged by US imperialism for more than a quarter-century. Justified in the name of defending against "weapons of mass destruction," waging a "global war on

terror" and upholding "human rights" these wars have killed well over one million people, demolished entire societies and cost trillions of dollars.

What does Washington have to show for it? After 17 years of fighting in Afghanistan, the Taliban controls more territory than at any time since 2001, and the US has been forced to pursue talks with Taliban representatives in the UAE, including on the withdrawal of US and other foreign troops from the country.

Iraq remains crisis-ridden and deeply divided along sectarian lines as a result of the US war launched in 2003 to topple Saddam Hussein. Libya, where the US-NATO war for regime-change ended in the murder of Muammar Gaddafi, is in shambles, racked by continuous fighting between rival militias. And in Syria, the attempt of the US and its allies to overthrow Bashar al-Assad by arming and funding Al Qaeda-linked militias has failed, while claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands and creating millions of refugees.

Gen. Mattis, who earned the nickname "Mad Dog" for leading the bloody US campaign to retake the Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2004 and boasted to his troops during his command of US forces in Afghanistan that "it's a hell of a lot of fun to shoot" Afghans, is now being hailed as an American hero, a rock of stability and sanity whose departure has set the ship of state adrift.

The *Washington Post* published an editorial Friday titled "With Mattis leaving, be afraid." It noted that the defense secretary's departure "followed a pair of precipitous and reckless decisions by President Trump: the removal of all US forces from Syria and a 50 percent force reduction in Afghanistan," and added that "Mr. Trump appears unhinged and heedless of the damage he might do to vital interests."

Similarly, the *New York Times*' editorial carried the scare headline: "Jim Mattis was right: Who will protect America now?" It condemned Trump for having "overruled" Mattis and other national security advisors by "ordering the rapid withdrawal of all 2,000 American ground troops from Syria."

Democratic Party leaders virtually wept over Mattis' resignation and voiced virulent opposition to any end to the US wars in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Senator Mark Warner, the ranking Democrat on the Senate

Intelligence Committee, tweeted, “as we've seen with the President's haphazard approach to Syria, our national defense is too important to be subjected to the President's erratic whims.”

What is he saying? National defense is too important to be determined by an elected president. The president should instead obediently follow the orders of the “deep state” of unelected military and intelligence officials.

Members of past Democratic administrations were even more vociferous in their support for Mattis and opposition to Trump's troop withdrawals. Former CIA director, defense secretary and White House chief of staff Leon Panetta was quoted in the *Washington Post* as saying, “We're in a constant state of chaos right now in this country. While it may satisfy Trump's need for attention, it's raising hell with the country.”

Victoria Nuland, an assistant secretary of state during the Obama administration, infamous for her intervention in Ukraine to promote a fascist-led anti-Russian coup, declared: “With his decision to withdraw all US forces from Syria, President Donald Trump hands a huge New Year's gift to President Bashar Assad, the Islamic State, the Kremlin and Tehran.”

For whom do these Democrats and ex-state officials speak? Certainly not for the American people, who are overwhelmingly opposed to the ongoing US wars.

None of them make any reference to the criminal character of these military interventions. In Syria, where they claim US troops are a “stabilizing force,” the illegal intervention—launched without congressional approval, UN sanction or the permission of the Syrian government—has destroyed entire cities and exacerbated sectarian tensions.

Its purpose is not to defeat ISIS, but rather to carve out a US protectorate consisting of one third of Syria's territory and, most importantly, the country's oil and natural gas fields. Unable to overthrow the Assad government, the US has continued bleeding Syria white while confronting Russian and Iranian-backed forces that have supported the Damascus government.

The Democrats and the media are openly appealing to the military and the intelligence agencies to act against Trump. NBC news Friday stated that US military commanders were “outraged” by Trump's decisions, while the *Washington Post* quoted an unnamed “former senior administration official” who stated, “There's going to be an intervention. Jim Mattis just sent a shot across the bow.” This is the language of military coups.

Anyone who believes that Trump's decisions regarding Syria and Afghanistan signal a new era of peace in the Middle East or anywhere else on the planet are in for rude shocks.

Trump's “America First” policies are themselves an expression of the protracted crisis of US and world capitalism and, in particular, the loss of US global economic hegemony and failure of a quarter-century of military aggression to reverse the decline of American capitalism on world markets.

Trump approaches US foreign policy on an entirely transactional basis. He sees the military interventions in Syria and Afghanistan as ineffective from a cost-benefit standpoint. But he is fully prepared to employ the US war machine in prosecuting his trade war policies against China, with the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait the most likely arenas for the eruption of a major new war.

That Trump and his fascistic anti-immigrant advisor Stephen Miller—who appeared on CNN denouncing US wars involving “generation after generation, spilling American blood”—are able to posture as antiwar to win support for their reactionary, anti-working class agenda is thanks to the absence of a mass antiwar movement.

That such a movement does not exist is due in no small measure to the role played by the various pseudo-left organizations, from the Democratic Socialists of America to the International Socialist Organization, Socialist Alternative and others, which have supported US militarism, particularly in Syria. These groups have promoted CIA-backed Islamist militias as spearheading a “democratic revolution,” while invoking “human rights” and opposing “Russian imperialism.”

The resignation of Mattis leaves these elements high and dry. Reflecting the social interests of a privileged layer of the upper-middle class, whose rising incomes have been tied to the stock market and the fortunes of US imperialism, they will inevitably step up their defense of US wars, invoking the fate of the Kurds and other pretexts.

In a sign of what is to come, Mia Farrow, the godmother of the #MeToo movement, tweeted out: “As Trump pulls troops out of Syria, we must acknowledge the enormity of the world's failure to halt a humanitarian catastrophe. US exit benefits Russia, ISIS—still active—Iran & Assad.” She added, “General Mattis was our last source of comfort that there was one ethical person in the Trump administration.”

The pseudo-left has no political independence whatsoever from the ruling class. Seeking to influence the Democratic Party, it inevitably lines up behind imperialist war.

The working class must chart its own course in the face of the deep divisions and crisis gripping the capitalist ruling class, developing an independent strategy to stop the drive toward world war. The most urgent task is the creation of an international antiwar movement of the working class based on socialist principles, and the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections as the revolutionary parties to lead it.

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