Trump nominee for attorney general defends right-wing, anti-democratic agenda

Patrick Martin
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The first hearing on confirmation of a Trump cabinet selection, Senator Jeff Sessions, the nominee for attorney general, demonstrated two central facts of American politics in 2017: the Trump administration will be the most right-wing and repressive in American history, and the congressional Democrats will do nothing to oppose it.

At Tuesday's hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Sessions defended a long litany of ultra-right positions hostile to democratic rights. These include his support for the Supreme Court decision gutting the Voting Rights Act and his embrace of state actions to limit voter access to the polls in the name of fighting nonexistent "vote fraud."

Sessions declared his backing for keeping open the US detention camp at Guantanamo Bay and for the panoply of anti-democratic measures undertaken by the Bush and Obama administrations in the name of the "war on terror:" the Patriot Act, mass surveillance of the Internet and telecommunications, drone-missile assassinations and the like.

Asked about the detention of American citizens indefinitely without a trial, if the government asserts that the individual is linked to a foreign terrorist organization, Sessions said there had to be a *habeas corpus* proceeding to review evidence, but left open the possibility that this review could be through a military tribunal or other expedited procedure, rather than through a court proceeding where the defendant's constitutional rights were observed.

Sessions is an implacable opponent of abortion rights. While he claimed that he would enforce current laws, he reiterated his longstanding position that the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling was wrongly decided and should be overturned. He suggested a similar attitude towards the more recent Supreme Court decision legalizing gay marriage.

Much of his opening statement sounded a "law and order" theme, dovetailing with Trump's entirely false depiction of the United States as overrun by a wave of violent crime. "It is a fundamental civil right to be safe in your home and your community," he said. "It will be my priority to confront these crises vigorously, effectively and immediately."

He criticized the publicity given to police murders of young people, and particularly African-Americans, saying, "In the last several years, law enforcement as a whole has been unfairly maligned and blamed for the actions of a few bad actors and for allegations about police that were not true."

Sessions is opposed to even the token measures taken by the Obama administration on police brutality, suggesting that the "consent decrees" negotiated with particularly flagrant local police departments, as in Cleveland, Baltimore and Ferguson, Missouri, should be reviewed. He concluded that "to smear whole departments places those officers at greater risk."

Sessions distanced himself from the pronouncements of President-elect Donald Trump in only two areas, giving carefully rehearsed answers that were undoubtedly cleared with the Trump transition team in advance. He said he would oppose banning immigrants and visitors from the United States because they were Muslim, and conceded that current US law (which he voted against) prohibits waterboarding as a form of torture.

After prolonged wrangling with Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, Sessions said he had no reason to disbelieve the conclusion of the report issued last week by US intelligence agencies that the Russian government had intervened in the US elections by hacking the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign.

Despite his ultra-right views, there is little prospect that Sessions will be rejected either by the Judiciary Committee or the full Senate. All 52 Republicans are expected to vote for confirmation, along with at least a smattering of Democrats. The biggest display of opposition is expected to come Wednesday, with testimony before the committee by leaders of the Congressional Black Caucus. But this is entirely for show, to be followed by the rubber-stamping of the nomination.

One of the first issues discussed at the hearing was the

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prospect of the new attorney general appointing a special prosecutor to investigate Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton for her use of a private email server while secretary of state in the Obama administration. Trump repeatedly threatened such an action during the campaign, prompting his supporters to chant “lock her up, lock her up” at rallies, including many where Sessions appeared side by side with Trump.

Sessions said that he would recuse himself from any decision in relation to Clinton’s email or the Clinton Foundation because his comments during a “contentious” campaign “could place my objectivity in question.” While declaring, “We can never have a political dispute turn into a criminal dispute,” he continued with language that left open the possibility for such a politically-motivated prosecution: “This country does not punish its political enemies but this country ensures that no one is above the law.”

Sessions grew up in rural Alabama, just outside of Selma, and was 19 years old at the time of the 1965 civil rights march there. There is no indication that he broke personally or politically with the racist politics of that time. On the contrary, he joined the College Republicans at the time when segregationist Democrats were switching to the Republican Party en masse because of their opposition to civil rights reforms.

Thirty years ago Sessions was rejected by the same Judiciary Committee when Ronald Reagan nominated him to become a federal district judge because of allegations of racism based on his role in prosecuting civil rights workers for helping elderly black voters to cast their ballots. The allegations against Sessions were supported by testimony from African-American co-workers.

Sessions went on to make a political career as a conservative Southerner allegedly victimized by Northern liberals, winning election first as Alabama state attorney general and subsequently, in 1996, winning an open US Senate seat. He has been on the extreme right of Senate Republicans ever since, and was the only senator to endorse Donald Trump prior to the string of primary victories that won the billionaire real estate mogul the Republican nomination.

In his opening statement to the committee, Sessions denounced the charges of racism that torpedoed his judicial nomination in 1986 and proclaimed himself a supporter of civil rights, including the right to vote, for all US citizens, including African-Americans. He maintained this posture despite repeated protests from members of the hearing audience, with more than a dozen dragged out by Capitol Hill police after they denounced him as a racist and an anti-gay bigot.

As a long-time member of the Judiciary Committee, Sessions was treated with unctuous courtesy, not only by the Republican members of the committee, but also by nearly all the Democrats, many of whom prefaced their token criticisms with professions of personal affection and high regard.

The real attitude of Senate Democrats to Trump’s policy of mass repression and attacks on democratic rights was shown at a second confirmation hearing, held Tuesday afternoon, for retired General John F. Kelly, nominated to head the Department of Homeland Security.

General Kelly was treated to a bipartisan love fest, with an introduction to the committee by Republican Senator John McCain and Democratic Senator Thomas Carper, and an opening testimonial by former Bush and Obama defense secretary Robert Gates.

Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri, the committee’s top Democrat, gushed over General Kelly’s credentials and made no objection to putting a career military officer in charge of the largest police force in the United States, an agency that includes the Border Patrol, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and a dozen other units responsible for repressive actions of one kind or another.

McCaskill asked Kelly about the intelligence agency report on Russian hacking in the US election and Kelly immediately declared that he endorsed its conclusions “with full confidence.”

At the same time, in response to Republican questioning, he outlined a perspective of border defense going far beyond the wall proposed by Trump. In his view, Kelly said, “defense of the southwest border starts about 1,500 miles further south.” Based on his experience as head of the Pentagon’s Southern Command, which covers most of Latin America, Kelly cited the importance of gaining the cooperation of the right-wing governments in Central America and the Andean countries of South America to halt the movement of immigrants and drugs.

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