

The Trump press conference: A ferocious conflict within the ruling elite

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The news conference given by Donald Trump Thursday afternoon was extraordinary and unprecedented. The event took on a surreal character as, for more than 75 minutes, the US president traded insults with journalists and otherwise engaged in a bitter battle with his nemeses in the media. It is not comparable to anything seen before in modern American history, even at the height of the Watergate crisis.

In witnessing such a spectacle, it is always necessary to uncover the rational content, the underlying political dynamic. In this case, the press conference gave expression to a vicious conflict within the American ruling class over foreign policy as the United States hurtles toward war.

The news conference was initially called to announce Trump's new pick for labor secretary, but this took up only one minute of the event. Trump began with a litany of achievements and actions he has taken since his inauguration, which was largely directed at the ruling elite in an appeal for support. The stock market has "hit record numbers," corporate regulations are being eliminated, immigrants are being targeted for deportation, and Trump has ordered a "massive rebuilding" of the US military, among other right-wing measures.

However, from the media, channeling the US intelligence apparatus, questions focused almost exclusively on the ties of the Trump administration to Russia and the circumstances behind the forced resignation earlier this week of Trump's national security advisor, Michael Flynn, over his pre-inauguration telephone conversation with the Russian ambassador.

Trump responded with a diatribe in which the media served as a stand-in for his real opponents in the US

ruling elite, comprising the bulk of the permanent military-intelligence apparatus that really runs the government, regardless of which party controls the White House or majorities in Congress. He repeatedly denounced what he called "illegal leaks" to the media from sources within the intelligence agencies.

It was remarkable that when Trump directly denounced the media as a mouthpiece for the intelligence agencies, there was no attempt to rebut him. Everyone knows it is true. Likewise, when he flatly denied any contact between his campaign and Russian intelligence agencies, not a single reporter could cite evidence to the contrary.

In the course of the press conference, Trump blurted out a number of astonishing comments that point to the extreme dangers facing the entire world.

Responding to questions about what he would do about a Russian ship conducting surveillance operations in international waters off the coast of Connecticut—the same type of operations US warships conduct on a much larger scale off the coasts of Russia and China—Trump said, "The greatest thing I could do is shoot that ship that's 30 miles off shore right out of the water. Everyone in this country's going to say 'oh, it's so great.'" He continued, "If I was just brutal on Russia right now, just brutal, people would say, you would say, 'Oh, isn't that wonderful.'"

Trump pointed out the implications of such a clash, given that Russia and the United States have the two largest nuclear arsenals in the world. "We're a very powerful nuclear country and so are they," he said. "I have been briefed. And I can tell you one thing about a briefing that we're allowed to say because anybody that ever read the most basic book can say it: a nuclear holocaust would be like no other." In other words, there are ongoing discussions, at the highest levels of the

American government, about a potential nuclear war with Russia, for which preparations are well advanced.

When challenged by one reporter on why there was no response by the US government to a series of what he called “provocations” by Russia—largely consisting of incidents provoked by US and NATO war maneuvers along Russia’s borders—Trump replied, “I’m not going to tell you anything about what response I do. I don’t talk about military response.”

He expanded on this theme, declaring that he would not talk about military operations in Iraq, North Korea, Iran or anywhere else. “You know why? Because they shouldn’t know. And eventually, you guys are going to get tired of asking that question.”

Such conflicts within the ruling elite over foreign policy are usually fought out behind the scenes, as with discontent within the military-intelligence apparatus over Obama’s retreat from a direct military intervention in Syria in 2013, when he failed to enforce his so-called “red line” against the government of Bashar al-Assad.

This time, however, the conflict has exploded into the open. Aside from the specific form that the debate within the US state apparatus has taken, it is an expression of an underlying crisis of the entire capitalist order. Twenty-five years of unending war are metastasizing, with extreme rapidity, into a major conflict involving large nation-states. National security journals are full of articles in which there is open discussion about war with Russia, in which the question is not if, but when and how. Trump, on the other hand, has focused his attention on China. In either case, the consequences are incalculable.

What was perhaps most striking is how remote the entire press conference was from the sentiments and concerns of the vast majority of the American population. There was virtually no questioning at the press conference about Trump’s war against immigrant workers or the nationwide day of protest by immigrants and their supporters that was taking place at the same time.

Those participating in the mass protests that have erupted since Trump’s inauguration are not motivated by a desire to launch a war with Russia, but by hatred of Trump’s authoritarian, anti-democratic policies and the oligarchic government that he has set up.

Trump’s critics in the Democratic Party and media,

however, are responding to powerful sections of the US ruling elite who welcome Trump’s ultra-reactionary domestic policies—tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations, deregulation of corporations, attacks on democratic rights, persecution of immigrants—but regard his posture of seeking better relations with Russia as intolerable.

The Democrats have responded with passive handwringing while Trump has assembled his cabinet of billionaires, ex-generals and right-wing fanatics, and issued a series of reactionary and unconstitutional executive orders. But when given the opportunity to attack Trump as soft on Russia, they engage in savage witch-hunting that recalls nothing so much as McCarthyism.

There is no faction with the American ruling class that is opposed to imperialist war. In the struggle to prevent war, it is up to the working class to intervene independently, opposing both factions in the US ruling elite, both Trump and the line-up of the CIA, the media and the Democratic Party.



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