

Trump shifts retired Marine general from Homeland Security to replace fired White House chief of staff

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President Donald Trump capped off another week of turmoil in the White House by announcing Friday afternoon that Reince Priebus, the former chairman of the Republican National Committee (RNC), was out as White House chief of staff, replaced by current Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly, a retired Marine general.

The announcement followed several days of vicious and profanity-laced attacks on Priebus by Anthony Scaramucci, the multi-millionaire hedge fund operator and Trump crony who was named White House communications director one week before, on July 21. Scaramucci, who has threatened to fire the entire communications staff to halt the flow of leaks from the White House, publicly accused Priebus of leaking damaging information to the press.

The appointment of Scaramucci had been vigorously opposed by Priebus and his main ally in the White House, Sean Spicer, who responded to the move by announcing his resignation as White House press secretary. Prior to joining the Trump team, Spicer was spokesman for the RNC.

Trump has in recent days also singled out Attorney General Jeff Sessions for public criticism and ridicule, denouncing him for having recused himself in the Justice Department investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 US election and possible collusion by the Trump campaign. In addition, Trump attacked Sessions for failing to stop leaks by the intelligence agencies and other government sources and refraining from investigating the supposed crimes of his defeated presidential rival, Hillary Clinton.

The public attacks on Sessions as well as other top Justice Department officials and special counsel Robert

Mueller, the former FBI director who is heading up the Justice Department Russia probe, are widely seen as a prelude to a White House attempt to either curtail or shut down Mueller's investigation. The threats against Sessions and Mueller have prompted leading Democrats to warn of a constitutional crisis. Prominent Republicans have come to the defense of the attorney general and the special counsel and have warned Trump against moving against either of the two.

The firing of Priebus and elevation of Kelly to head the White House inner circle also followed the late-night defeat of the administration's efforts to repeal Obamacare. Three Republican senators defected and voted against a bill to revoke major provisions of the Affordable Care Act.

In response to the mounting crisis of his administration, facing a widening Justice Department probe, legislative setbacks, record low poll numbers and a weakening of support among congressional Republicans, Trump is seeking to rally support from within the military and among police and border cops, and find a popular base within backward sections of the population on the basis of appeals to anti-immigrant racism and prejudice against gays.

On Wednesday, Trump announced, via Twitter, a total ban on transgender people in the military, and on the same day his Justice Department intervened in a civil job discrimination case to assert that the 1964 Civil Rights Act does not protect homosexuals from being fired by private employers because of their sexual orientation.

With the elevation over the past week of fellow Wall Street oligarch Scaramucci and General Kelly to top White House positions, Trump is at the same time

seeking to give his administration a more directly Bonapartist character and assert greater independence from both major political parties. It is expected that other White House staffers linked to the RNC will in short order follow Priebus out the door. In its staffing as well as its outlook, the White House is increasingly an amalgam of semi-criminal financial movers and shakers, military brass and Trump toadies.

The only previous military man to serve as White House chief of staff was Alexander Haig, appointed by Richard Nixon in 1973 after the resignation of H. R Haldeman in the Watergate scandal.

The increasingly authoritarian and fascistic character of the administration was underscored earlier on Friday in an appearance by Trump before an audience of uniformed police at a community college in Long Island, New York. With dozens of police lined up behind him, Trump pledged to eradicate the largely Hispanic and immigrant MS-13 gang, using the Central American-based gang to smear immigrants in general and promote his policy of mass roundups and deportations of undocumented workers.

Trump called the gang members “animals” and urged police to treat them “rough.” He demanded that Congress back his call for hundreds of new federal prosecutors and thousands of additional immigration enforcement agents and border police. He reiterated his plans to build a wall along the US border with Mexico and urged passage of laws to increase penalties on so-called “illegal” immigrants, speed up deportations and penalize “sanctuary cities” that refuse to allow their police to function as immigration cops.

Trump praised Kelly for his role in heading up the anti-immigrant witch-hunt and pledged that his administration would support the police as no other, prompting chants from the assembled officers of “USA! USA!”

Trump issued the tweet announcing the replacement of Priebus with Kelly on the flight back to Washington DC.

The near-term agenda driving the attacks on Sessions and the shakeup within the White House is Trump’s desire to shore up his inner circle in advance of a confrontation with Mueller, and, possibly, Congress and the courts. Trump has been particularly agitated over recent reports that the special counsel is aggressively investigating his business deals and those

of his family.

USA Today led its front page on Friday with a report on the widening scope of this aspect of the Russia probe. “Federal investigators,” the newspaper wrote, “are likely to delve into records revealing some of the president’s most closely guarded secrets, including how much money he makes, whom he does business with and how reliant he is on wealthy, politically connected foreigners.”

The article went on to note that the inquiry encompasses Trump’s income tax filings and bank records. Mueller’s investigators, it reported, “can get, and may already have, the Trump organization’s phone records, email and contracts, exposing sensitive records and long secret details to eventual release as part of the public record of the investigation.” This would expose “Trump, his family and his associates to legal troubles beyond the scope of the Russian allegations”

The immediate response of the network news media to Priebus’ firing and replacement by Kelly was either muted or supportive. On the NBC “Nightly News” program, political commentator Chuck Todd said that “today could be the start of good days” for the White House. He praised Kelly as the “best pick” among Trump’s aides to fill the chief of staff position.

The Democrats dispatched West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin, one of the most right-wing congressional Democrats, to give an initial response to the announcement. Interviewed on CNN by Wolf Blitzer, Manchin enthusiastically endorsed Kelly’s appointment. “Both Democrats and Republicans have worked with [Kelly] and respect him,” Manchin said.

Asked what he thought about Trump surrounding himself with generals, Manchin said, “These generals are the cream of the crop, as good as it gets. Top notch people. The president has a right to make changes. I respect that.”



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