

Trump, John Kelly and the media firestorm over “disrespecting” the troops

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Retired General John Kelly, the White House chief of staff, made an extraordinary intervention into the political firestorm over President Donald Trump’s crude and lying comments about the official treatment of military casualties in his and previous administrations.

Kelly took the podium Thursday afternoon in the White House press briefing room, using his status as a former combat commander and the father of a soldier killed in Afghanistan—his son Robert Kelly died when he stepped on a land mine in 2010—to defend the president from mounting questions and criticisms.

The retired general denounced Democratic Congresswoman Frederica Wilson in intensely personal terms, although Kelly actually was confirming the truth of Wilson’s account of a telephone conversation between Trump and Myeshia Johnson, the pregnant widow of Sgt. La David T. Johnson, killed in action in the west African country of Niger on October 4.

Myeshia Johnson was in a car traveling to the Miami airport to receive the body of her husband for burial when the phone call from the White House came in on Tuesday. The conversation was on a speaker phone at both ends: Kelly and other White House aides gathered around Trump, Myeshia Johnson in a car with her mother-in-law and several family friends, among them Wilson.

According to Wilson, Trump made the brutish declaration to Ms. Johnson, that “your guy ... knew what he signed up for” when he enlisted in the military (Trump never referred to Sgt. Johnson by his name). Even though Trump has flatly declared that he never made such a remark, and claimed to have proof that Wilson’s claim was false, Kelly did not repeat the denial. Instead, he dismissed the remark as a clumsy repetition of something he had told Trump relating to

his own son’s death.

Then he launched into a diatribe against Representative Wilson, saying he was appalled that she had listened into a “private” conversation—although Kelly himself and other White House aides were listening in at their end!—and berating her conduct at an unrelated event, a memorial for FBI agents killed in the line of duty some years previously.

Kelly concluded by declaring that he would only take questions from journalists who had a military death in the family or knew someone who did. No reporter challenged this blatant gag order, which suggested that only those who had suffered such a loss could be allowed to discuss the issue.

The overall effect was to express the vitriolic hatred of the military brass—which with Kelly as chief of staff, retired General James Mattis as secretary of defense and General H.R. McMaster as national security adviser, plays a dominant role in the Trump administration—for either congressional or media oversight.

Kelly was seeking—successfully, in the case of the press briefing—to intimidate those who might seek to raise questions about the circumstances of the death of Sgt. Johnson and three other special forces soldiers killed in the same battle. What are US troops doing in Niger? What was the purpose of the alleged “routine patrol” in which US and Nigerien troops invaded a stronghold of Islamist militants? Why did the White House say nothing for 12 days?

One of the dead American soldiers, Sgt. Jeremiah Johnson, is described as a “chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear specialist.” For what purpose was someone with his skillset deployed to Niger?

Trump’s remark to Myeshia Johnson was not merely his typical bullying. It expressed the real indifference

and callousness of the American financial oligarchy towards the soldiers it employs to do its violent dirty work around the world.

The “volunteer army,” established by American imperialism after the revolt of conscripts became a major factor in ending the Vietnam War, has been called an “economic draft,” since most volunteers are drawn from impoverished sections of the working class, like La David Johnson, a former worker at Wal-Mart, a notoriously low-paying job.

Kelly sought to glorify the slain troops as “the best of the best” and “the one percent.” This is part of the ongoing effort by the US ruling elite to use public sympathy for soldiers who have lost their lives to disguise the criminal purposes for which they have been deployed. The US military is the most destructive force in the world, responsible for more acts of murder and pillage than any armed forces since those of Hitler.

Since the end of World War II, the American military has invaded and attacked Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Serbia, Libya, Syria, Nicaragua, Haiti, Grenada, Lebanon, Somalia, Yemen, and the Dominican Republic, none of which attacked the United States. It occupies some 700 bases around the world. The US military budget is greater than the next dozen countries combined.

The military brass itself has become a social caste placed almost above criticism in political and media circles, a law unto itself, increasingly calling the shots in national security policy. It is more than 75 years since the last time the US Congress exercised its constitutional responsibility to declare war. US presidents have waged wars based on mere congressional resolutions, in Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, and most recently, Afghanistan and Iraq. By 2011, when Obama ordered the bombing of Libya, he did not even bother with the formality of seeking congressional approval.

The Trump administration brings this process to a new height, with Trump threatening the nuclear annihilation of North Korea on his sole order, without a shred of consultation with Congress, and US troops engaged in military operations across an increasingly wide swathe of the planet, without legislative oversight and for the most part with the American population entirely in the dark.

The press reports about the four US soldiers killed in

Niger were the first time that the American public was made aware of the presence of hundreds of US special forces spread across west Africa, engaged (supposedly) in the hunt for Al Qaeda or ISIS, although the territory involved just happens to be rich in uranium, rare earth metals and other minerals, as well as potential fossil fuel deposits.

None of these critical issues are raised by the supposed opposition to Trump in the Democratic Party. On the contrary, as Wilson’s intervention makes clear, the goal of the Democrats is to attack Trump from the right, condemning him as insufficiently mindful of the troops, even unpatriotic.

Just as in the anti-Russia campaign, the Democratic Party does not mobilize popular opposition to Trump’s policies of destroying social benefits, attacking democratic rights, and militarism. Instead, it seeks to demonstrate to the ruling financial elite that Democrats are the more faithful and reliable servant of the global interests of American imperialism.



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