

The US lurches toward military dictatorship

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The militarist diatribe by White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, a retired Marine general, at a White House press briefing last week laid bare an open secret of American politics: behind the façade of democratic rule, the United States increasingly resembles a military dictatorship.

Firing back at criticisms of President Donald Trump's handling of the October 4 deaths of four US soldiers in Niger, Kelly called members of the US military "the best one percent this country produces." He then announced that he would take questions only from journalists who were family, friends or acquaintances of soldiers killed in action.

In an expression of undisguised contempt for the civilian government, Kelly denounced Democratic Congresswoman Frederica Wilson, who had publicly exposed Trump's callousness in his condolence call to the widow of one of the soldiers killed in the October 4 incident. Kelly falsely accused Wilson of bragging about securing funding for a government building in Miami named after slain FBI agents, saying of her: "Empty barrels [make] the most noise."

The next day, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders implied at a press briefing that any questioning of the pronouncements of the military was out of bounds. "If you want to get into a debate with a four-star Marine general," she said, "I think that that's something highly inappropriate."

Concerned over the White House's undisguised contempt for the constitutional principle of civilian control over the military, some military figures sought to verbally distance themselves from Kelly's statements. ABC's "This Week" program on Sunday led with an interview with retired four-star army general and former CIA director David Petraeus, who declared, "We in uniform...are fiercely protective of the rights of our fellow Americans to express themselves, even if that includes criticizing us."

Kelly's remarks evoked such defensive statements not because they challenge nearly 250 years of civilian rule in

the United States, but because sections of the US political establishment see it as necessary, at least for the time being, to cloak the massive power exercised by the military over political life with the formal trappings of civilian rule.

This task, however, is increasingly difficult. Shortly after Petraeus's appearance, Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer appeared on NBC's "Meet the Press," where he had an extraordinary exchange with moderator Chuck Todd. Asked whether as Senate Democratic leader he had been briefed on the situation in Niger, Schumer nonchalantly replied, "Not yet."

When Todd asked whether Schumer knew the US had a thousand troops stationed in Niger, Schumer replied, "Uh, No, I did not."

Todd pressed him further: "How do you describe it any other way than never-ending war?" Schumer gave a meandering reply that ended with the words, "We have to keep at it."

In other words, the country's civilian leadership neither knows where the US military operates, nor dares to inquire. Wars are not declared. Those who lead them are not accountable to Congress or the people. The military is deployed at the discretion of the president and his generals, as in the over one dozen African countries where US troops are engaged in combat operations. The ranking member of the nominal opposition party has no problem with this state of affairs.

Should anybody be surprised, then, when Kelly, one of three generals occupying the most sensitive positions in Trump's cabinet, denounces a member of Congress for daring to question the commander-in-chief?

One need only consider the rest of Sunday's broadcast of ABC's "This Week" interview program. With only the slightest modifications, the entire program could have been produced in a country run by a military junta. In the midst of host Martha Raddatz's interview with Petraeus, the program cut to a prerecorded segment showing Raddatz on the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan as it carried out a war exercise off the Coast of

North Korea, with Raddatz declaring enthusiastically, “The Sea of Japan is bristling with warships.”

The segment featured statements by the captain, the commander, a signal officer and a pilot aboard the ship. Raddatz concluded, “With the region remaining on the brink, they have to be ready to fight tonight.” The program then went on to preview an upcoming eight-part miniseries by the National Geographic Channel glorifying the Iraq war.

By this point, three quarters of the program had elapsed and not a single nonmilitary figure had made an appearance on one of the premier political talk shows of the world’s leading “democracy.”

Kelly’s comments triggered statements of concern among some segments of the US press. “A military dictatorship: that appears what the White House thinks the United States is,” declared CNN anchor Erin Burnett. Masha Gessen wrote in the *New Yorker*, “Consider this nightmare scenario: a military coup. You don’t have to strain your imagination—all you have to do is watch Thursday’s White House press briefing, in which the chief of staff, John Kelly, defended President Trump’s phone call to a military widow, Myeshia Johnson. The press briefing could serve as a preview of what a military coup in this country would look like.”

But this raises the question: Would the United States really need to have a coup to transition to military rule? Would it really look much different from today’s “democracy”? There would be the same parade of generals serving as talking heads on the news, the same “embedded” reporters interviewing commanders on the front lines, the same members of Congress (most dictatorships do not dissolve parliament) declaring they had “not yet” been briefed on what the military has decided to do.

One could object that a military dictatorship would censor the press. But this has already in large measure been accomplished. The search engine giant Google has announced that it is promoting “authoritative” news content, while it buries links to left-wing sites in search results, almost entirely removing results on Google News for the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The ever-growing power of the military in the United States is not some accident or fluke stemming from the personality of Donald Trump. Despite being at war for his entire two terms in office, Trump’s Democratic Party predecessor Barack Obama never once went to Congress for authorization to use military force, and he defended his orders for drone assassinations of US citizens as part

of the prerogatives of the commander-in-chief.

In the current political furor over the deaths of the soldiers in Niger, the Democrats have not questioned the legality of the deployment of thousands of US troops to Africa, carried out without any public discussion and behind the backs of the population, but instead sought to attack Trump from the right for being insufficiently deferential to the military.

After all, it is the Democrats and newspapers generally aligned with them, particularly the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, which praised General Kelly, together with fellow generals H. R. McMaster (national security adviser) and James Mattis (secretary of defense) as the “grown-ups” in the White House, with *Times* columnist Thomas Friedman calling on the generals to “reverse the moral rot that has infected the Trump administration” in the person of the president.

The increasingly dictatorial forms of rule emerging in the United States are the outcome of protracted and deep-rooted processes. Amid levels of social inequality that eclipse even those of the Gilded Age, bourgeois democracy in the US is collapsing, replaced by direct rule by the oligarchy and its partners in the military.

This process has been accelerated through a quarter century of aggressive wars, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which have reached such a pitch that “never-ending war,” in the words of NBC’s Chuck Todd, is the new American reality, presently reaching a higher stage with the looming threat of nuclear war over North Korea.

The move toward dictatorship in the United States, accompanied by the drive to world war, is proceeding at breakneck speed. There is not much time. Workers and young people must mobilize now to oppose it on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program aimed at overthrowing the root cause of war, social inequality and dictatorship—the capitalist system.



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