

White House turmoil deepens after Kelly firing

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On Saturday, President Donald Trump removed his White House chief of staff, retired General John Kelly, only to have his top choice to replace Kelly decline the position barely 24 hours later. Nick Ayers, chief of staff to Vice President Mike Pence, will himself leave the administration to head up a political action committee that will raise funds to support Trump's 2020 reelection campaign.

The firing of Kelly was carried out with all the finesse and subtlety of an episode of Trump's "Celebrity Apprentice." Trump has been bad-mouthing his chief of staff for more than a month, hinting repeatedly that he was about to leave the White House and would not be missed.

He also targeted Kelly's protégé and successor as secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, Kirstjen Nielsen, for vitriol, particularly on Twitter, over the political debacle of Trump's own policy on stepped-up persecution of immigrants at the US-Mexico border. Nielsen is expected to follow Kelly when he departs sometime before the end of the year.

Kelly was a particular target of Trump's daughter Ivanka and son-in-law Jared Kushner, largely because after he became chief of staff in mid-2017 he sought to limit their access to the Oval Office. He was opposed to the sweeping foreign policy resumé handled by Kushner—including Mexico, Israel, Saudi Arabia and China—dubbing him "the boy secretary of state," and his sarcastic dismissal of the couple as "playing government" from their positions as White House advisers was widely reported.

On Friday, Trump named another favorite of his daughter and son-in-law, State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert, as US ambassador to the United Nations. Nauert is a longtime Fox News talking head whose most recent foreign policy tour de force

was to declare that D-Day symbolized the close foreign policy relationship between the United States and Germany.

There were indications that the appointment of Nauert was intended as a slap at the United Nations—her post will reportedly no longer carry cabinet rank—as well as an affirmation of the influence of the ultra-right within the Trump administration, underscored by the selection of a former Fox News personality to represent the United States government to the world.

Trump also announced the nomination of William Barr to replace Jeff Sessions as attorney-general. Barr held the same position more than 25 years ago, in 1991-93, at the end of the first Bush administration. He has been a highly paid corporate lawyer ever since. Given his pedigree, Barr was widely portrayed as an establishment pick, sure to be confirmed by the Senate with little difficulty, although he has been publicly critical of the Mueller investigation into allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 election and possible Trump campaign collusion.

In the matter of the attorney-general, the influence of Kushner and Ivanka Trump was demonstrated in the negative: they reportedly vetoed former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, who was also on Trump's short list, because Christie, while a US attorney in New Jersey, prosecuted Charles Kushner, Jared's father, for tax evasion and illegal campaign contributions. The elder Kushner served a brief prison term.

These appointments come only a few weeks after one of the murkier episodes in the Trump White House—the firing of deputy national security adviser Mira Ricardel, an ultra-right hard-liner who had a personal conflict with Melania Trump and her chief of staff during her visit to Africa last month. Melania Trump's spokeswoman issued a statement declaring that

Ricardel “no long deserves the honor of serving in this White House,” and the national security aide was walked off the premises shortly thereafter.

The prominent role of Trump’s wife, daughter and son-in-law in key personnel decisions adds to the atmosphere of court decadence that has enveloped the White House since Trump first took office. This is an administration in which the principal role of the vice president is to engage in unctuous public flattery of the “commander in chief,” and where an entire cabinet meeting was given over to singing the praises of the president, with virtually every cabinet secretary giving Trump a personal testimonial of devotion and loyalty.

The real feelings of his appointees have been revealed in a series of tell-all books, many of them quoting unnamed top officials disparaging Trump in the harshest terms, as well as in the constant turnover in his cabinet and White House staff.

The decision by Ayers, a 36-year-old Republican Party operative from Georgia, not to take the post of chief of staff is a further indication of White House turmoil and palace intrigue. Ayers was reportedly the choice of Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump, but other White House officials had leaked hostile statements to the media and warned of a “melée of backstabbing” and mass resignations if Trump selected Ayers as his top aide.

Ayers has no expertise in either foreign or domestic policy and no administrative experience outside of running election campaigns. He has been a Republican political operative since leaving college, rising to campaign manager for Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue in 2006, then moving to the Republican Governors Association, where he joined forces with Mike Pence, then governor of Indiana.

His most remarkable talent was the ability to turn political consulting and campaign management into a huge money-raiser for himself. The 36-year-old has accumulated a personal fortune estimated at \$55 million by such tactics as buying up television airtime in swing states before the 2016 elections and then selling it at premium rates to “super PACs” set up by billionaires seeking to influence the result. One such company, Advance Media Capital, raised \$177 million from investors in March 2016, according press reports.

The dismissed chief of staff Kelly was one of the four high-ranking military officers to take positions with the

Trump administration, joining Michael Flynn, Trump’s first national security advisor, who lasted less than a month; H. R. McMaster, who succeeded Flynn but was forced out after little more than a year and replaced by neoconservative warmonger John Bolton; and James Mattis, who remains as secretary of defense.

Mattis’s own tenure may also be coming to an end shortly. Trump raised eyebrows a few months ago by declaring that his Pentagon chief was a Democrat, although Mattis has never shown a preference for one or the other of the two corporate-controlled parties, and was fired by President Obama because he kept voicing the demand for a tougher policy towards Iran.

On Saturday, while in Philadelphia to attend the Army-Navy football game, Trump announced he was appointing Army Chief of Staff Mark Milley to become chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff next September, when General Joseph Dunford retires. It was well known that Mattis favored a different officer, Air Force Chief of Staff David Goldfein, in part because no Air Force officer has held the top post since Richard Myers in 2005. Publicly snubbing his choice could provide one more push sending Mattis out the door.

There were other likely reasons for selecting Milley, since he is identified with a policy of preparing for all-out war as the central task of the Pentagon. He warned in a speech last year that in the next war “the levels of violence... would be immense and it would be the likes of what the world hasn’t seen since the Second World War.”

Milley also engineered the court martial of Bowe Bergdahl, the army sergeant captured by the Taliban and held for five years after he walked off his base following a dispute with his commander. Mattis’s preferred choice, Goldfein, is also Jewish, and has been the target of anti-Semitic attacks from Christian fundamentalists who dominate the officer corps, particularly in the Air Force.



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