

US Senate confirms top-level political “fixer” as ambassador to Australia

Mike Head
8 January 2019

The US Senate last week confirmed the Trump administration’s selection of Arthur B. Culvahouse, a highly-connected member of the political-intelligence establishment, with a long track record of involvement in the acute political crises of successive governments, as ambassador to Australia.

The Senate’s unanimous confirmation of Culvahouse on January 2 is another warning of Washington’s determination to ensure there is not the slightest deviation by the Australian ruling class from its commitment to a front line role in the US-led economic and military conflict with China, Australia’s largest export market.

Culvahouse has for four decades advised US administrations on the most sensitive intelligence and war-related questions, from Richard Nixon’s Watergate crisis to the Iran-Contra affair under Ronald Reagan and the upgrading of nuclear weaponry under Vice President Dick Cheney.

He will take charge of the US embassy under conditions of intensifying political instability in Australia. Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s faction-riddled Liberal-National Coalition government is the seventh since 2007 and faces likely defeat at an election due before May. Washington clearly favoured last August’s removal of Morrison’s predecessor Malcolm Turnbull, who was loyal to the US alliance but had sought to mend relations with Beijing.

Unlike Admiral Harry Harris, whom the White House initially nominated for the sensitive Australian post last February, before shifting him to the key front line location of South Korea, Culvahouse is not a military commander. But no less than Harris, he is an outspoken proponent of an aggressive stance toward Beijing.

Moreover, Culvahouse is much more of a political insider and backroom operator than Harris, and acutely aware of the mounting discontent globally over social inequality and the drive to war. In Australia, as elsewhere,

this disaffection has been compounded by the catastrophic US-led wars in the Middle East and the exposures provided by Julian Assange and Edward Snowden of US and allied war atrocities, political plots and mass surveillance.

Culvahouse’s appointment was one of dozens pushed through on the last day of the outgoing Senate, in a deal struck with Democratic Party leaders. Nevertheless, the selection of such a top-level political “fixer” has a particular importance in the context of the rising geo-strategic tensions generated by Donald Trump’s unvarnished “America First” drive to reassert the post-World War II dominance of the US.

During his confirmation hearings last month, Culvahouse pledged blunt support for the witchhunting campaign by the media and political elite over alleged Chinese “meddling” in Australia. He accused Beijing of seeking to “undermine” the US-Australia alliance.

“Just let me say I view the strategic and security relationship between the US and Australia to be strategically critical and I will, if confirmed, make an assessment of efforts by third countries, third parties, to undermine that relationship,” Culvahouse told the hearing.

“If there are such efforts, including China, I will not refrain from forthrightly reporting up the chain to the (State) Department and to speak publicly if and as required.”

Culvahouse is such a senior and trusted figure in the Trump administration and the entire US political establishment that he vetted Vice President Mike Pence for the Trump campaign in 2016, and led the selection process of Sarah Palin as the running mate for 2008 Republican presidential nominee John McCain.

Between 1973 and 1974, as a congressional aide to US Senator Howard Baker, Culvahouse participated in the efforts to protect Richard Nixon from the Watergate

affair, which was precipitated by the cover-up of US lies and crimes in the Vietnam War. From 1987 to 1989, as White House counsel, he advised Reagan during the probe into the Iran-Contra scandal, which involved secretly selling arms to Iran to fund the Contras fighting to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

From 1990 to 1992, Culvahouse was a member of a committee appointed by then Defense Secretary Cheney to upgrade the US Nuclear Command and Control System. In 2006, George W. Bush appointed Culvahouse to the president's Intelligence Oversight Board, which presided over a vast expansion of surveillance.

Throughout these decades, Culvahouse has enjoyed trusted relations with leading political and corporate figures. As part of his nomination, the 70-year-old reported earning \$US1.7 million in the past two years alone for legal work advising Trump administration officials and large corporations, including Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, Securities and Exchange Commission chairman Jay Clayton and billionaire financier Stephen A. Feinberg.

Culvahouse, whose clientele also featured Exxon, Ford, Goldman Sachs & Co and AT&T, provocatively told the Senate hearings that his legal work made him aware of China's "aggressive" tactics. "China is Australia's largest trading partner and that gives it out-sized influence and out-sized opportunities to a nation that is already, let us say, aggressive," Culvahouse said.

Pointedly, the nominee praised the Australian government's decision to ban Huawei, one of the world's largest telcos, from supplying 5G technology to the country. "The Australians have recognised some of the aggressive efforts to influence them," he said. "They have done some house cleaning of past domestic legislation, creating a counterpart of our Foreign Agents Registration Act."

This reference was to the extensive "foreign interference" laws jointly pushed through parliament last year by the Coalition government and the Labor Party opposition. Culvahouse's comments are another indication of the pressure applied by Washington for the passage of the laws, which seek to criminalise political activity allegedly favouring China or undermining preparations for war with Beijing.

In answers to questions from senators, Culvahouse backed the expansion of the so-called Quadrilateral alliance between the US, Japan, India and Australia, directed against China. "Certainly the challenges, the threats and the geopolitical competition—if you will—from

China in the region is such that I think the quad initiative is one that definitely should be pursued," he said.

Culvahouse's confirmation was hailed throughout the media and political establishment in Australia, where the US has been without an ambassador since President Barack Obama's appointment, John Berry, left in September 2016. Both Foreign Minister Marise Payne and acting Labor Party leader Tanya Plibersek immediately praised the appointment and reconfirmed their fidelity to the US alliance.

A January 4 editorial in Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* said Culvahouse's "direct channels to the Trump White House and his reputation as a reliable 'keeper of secrets' for Republican administrations" were particularly important.

The significance of Culvahouse's appointment should not be underestimated. As a high-level backroom operative, he bears some resemblance to Marshall Green, a veteran of the CIA-instigated military coups in South Korea and Indonesia who arrived in Australia in 1973. Green played a central role in the 1975 "Canberra Coup," in which the Labor government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was dismissed after it began to lose control over the industrial and social movement in the working class.

Another political insider, Jeff Bleich, a long-time friend of Obama, was ambassador from 2009 to 2013 as the White House implemented the US "pivot" or "rebalance" to the Indo-Pacific to combat China. In mid-2010, Labor and union power-brokers who were "protected sources" of the US embassy ousted Kevin Rudd as prime minister in favour of Julia Gillard. Rudd had suggested that the Obama administration should make some accommodation to China's rise. Gillard quickly committed to the "pivot."

For all the propaganda about Chinese "interference," US representatives have a long record of anti-democratic intervention in Australia. Culvahouse's appointment is an ominous warning that US imperialism will stop at nothing to ensure Australian governments remain fully committed to the American partnership and US war drive against China, and to suppressing any opposition to war and social inequality.



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