

Pentagon rebukes White House over USS McCain incident

Patrick Martin
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The US Department of Defense has publicly rebuffed the White House over last week's effort to keep the Navy ship USS John McCain hidden from view during President Trump's recent visit to Japan. A White House official reportedly asked that the ship be kept "out of sight" to avoid offending the US president.

The USS John S. McCain is a destroyer launched in 1994, initially named after the grandfather and father of the late US senator, Navy admirals in World War II and the Vietnam War, respectively. The ship was rechristened to honor Senator McCain as well after his death last August. McCain was a Navy pilot and prisoner of war in Vietnam.

When the controversy came to light—after a leak to the press from Navy sources—Trump said he had not been aware of the request, but he defended it, commenting that "somebody did it because they thought I didn't like him, OK? And they were well-meaning, I will say."

Contradicting the initial press reports, the Navy said that no action had been taken in response to the White House request. The USS John McCain remained on station in Tokyo Bay and a barge that obscured the view of the ship was moved prior to Trump's arrival in the Japanese capital.

Navy officials conceded that a tarpaulin draped over the side had temporarily concealed the ship's name, but claimed that this was part of a maintenance operation that had also ended before Trump's arrival.

Trump returned to the United States after a four-day state visit to Japan, but acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan remained in the region, visiting South Korea. He was questioned about the incident repeatedly by reporters, telling them in Seoul Sunday that he would not seek an investigation by the Pentagon inspector general "because there was nothing carried

out" by the Navy. His office did not know of the request and would not have honored it, he said.

Shanahan added that he would seek further information on how the request was handled within the Pentagon. Some press reports said the White House directly contacted the US Seventh Fleet, which is responsible for naval operations throughout the Pacific and Indian oceans, rather than routing any request through the Pentagon, the normal practice.

The McCain incident gives a glimpse of the sharp tensions within the US military-intelligence apparatus, exacerbated by Trump's increasingly open efforts to incorporate the military into his efforts to whip up his fascistic political base. Sections of the military brass object to this, fearful that Trump's political embrace could fuel domestic opposition to the overseas operations of American imperialism and that his racist rhetoric could provoke divisions within the ranks.

On Thursday, for example, Trump gave the commencement address at the Air Force Academy, making a thinly disguised reelection speech in which he denounced his political enemies rather than adopting the non-partisan, patriotic language more typical of such occasions.

Shanahan's official spokesman, Lt. Col. Joseph Buccino, said that Shanahan had told his chief of staff Friday to contact the White House military office (headed by a uniformed officer in regular contact with the Pentagon) to "reaffirm his mandate that the Department of Defense will not be politicized." Buccino said the chief of staff had delivered the message.

Shanahan appears to have been caught between demands from White House political operatives and resistance from the Navy brass. The former longtime Boeing executive has been acting defense secretary

since Trump fired retired Gen. James Mattis last December 31.

While Trump has indicated he had settled on Shanahan, who was Mattis's deputy, as the permanent replacement, he has not actually submitted the nomination to the Senate. The US president has suggested that he prefers to maintain officials in "acting" status for a prolonged period of time because it gives him greater leverage over their day-to-day performance. It also undermines the principle that top executive branch officials are accountable to Congress through the process of Senate confirmation.

Acting White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney, appearing on several Sunday television interview programs, tried to make light of the incident, denying there was any serious conflict between the Pentagon and the White House. He emphasized that no Trump aide would be fired for making the request to move the USS John McCain.

"To think that you're going to get fired over this is silly," he said. "The fact that some 23- or 24-year-old person on the advance team went to that site and said 'Oh my goodness, there's the John McCain, we all know how the president feels about the former senator, maybe that's not the best backdrop. Can somebody look into moving it?' That's not an unreasonable thing to ask."



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