

Trump picks ultra-right congressman Mark Meadows as new chief of staff

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In an action carried out repeatedly during the Trump administration, a top official was fired Friday by tweet and replaced, with little or no advance warning. This time the official was Mick Mulvaney, the acting White House chief of staff, and the replacement is Representative Mark Meadows of North Carolina, a leader of the ultra-right House Freedom Caucus.

Mulvaney's dismissal was abrupt, but hardly unexpected. He was named acting chief of staff in December 2018, after retired General John Kelly left the position, and never succeeded in persuading Trump to remove the "acting" from his title, while he continued to hold the official position of budget director, with the work carried out by his deputy Russ Vought, who was "acting" budget chief.

Press accounts suggest that Mulvaney's fate was sealed by his disastrous October press conference, when he unexpectedly stepped into the White House briefing room to confirm that Trump had indeed demanded political favors from the president of Ukraine in return for the delivery of US military assistance. "We do it all the time," he declared. "Get over it."

Within hours, Mulvaney was compelled to issue a groveling retraction, but the video of his statement was used continually by the Democrats in the course of their drive to impeach Trump for withholding military aid to Ukraine. Mulvaney refused to testify before the House impeachment inquiry, but Trump reportedly was reluctant to fire him until after the Senate trial, which ended in acquittal February 5.

Meadows comes the same milieu as Mulvaney—the ultra-right "Tea Party" wing of the House Republicans, but their social backgrounds are slightly different. Mulvaney went into politics early, and held seats in the South Carolina state legislature for a decade before

winning his seat in Congress in the 2010 election, defeating a longtime Democratic incumbent in South Carolina's Fifth Congressional District.

Meadows was a real estate developer when he won his House seat in 2012, in North Carolina's 11th Congressional District, which covers most of the western panhandle of the state. The seat was created by a Republican gerrymander in 2011 that redrew the lines of the district, then held by conservative Democrat Heath Shuler, to remove most of the city of Asheville, making it the most Republican district in the state. Shuler announced his retirement, and Meadows won the Republican primary and then swept the general election easily, winning 57 percent of the vote.

The new congressman was even more right-wing than Mulvaney, having voiced support for the "birther" wing of the Republican Party—those extremists who claimed that Barack Obama had been born in Kenya, rather than Hawaii, and therefore was not eligible to be president of the United States. Trump himself was the most prominent "birther" in 2011–2012, when that fantasy was at its height.

Meadows helped form the ultra-right House Freedom Caucus in 2013 to push the Republican Party even further to the right. In January 2015, a dozen members of the caucus refused to vote for Republican leader John Boehner as speaker, leaving him with a narrow majority. Meadows later took advantage of a parliamentary motion to declare the speakership vacant, filed in July 2015, and ultimately forced Boehner to step down. He was succeeded by Paul Ryan, who was put on notice about the power of the ultra-right faction.

Although Meadows did not support Trump for the Republican nomination, he was a fervent supporter of his campaign in the general election, and in January 2017 was elected chairman of the House Freedom

Caucus, giving him virtual veto power over significant legislation in the House. He became an all-out supporter of Trump on Fox News, the principal means for currying favor at the White House.

When General Kelly was forced out at the end of 2018, Meadows was briefly mentioned as a possible chief of staff, but Trump ultimately decided to shift Mulvaney from the budget office, although always keeping him as “acting.” It was in this context that Trump made his notorious comments about how he preferred “acting” officials, including department heads, because they were more dependent on him (and they also did not require Senate confirmation).

In late 2019, Meadows announced that he would not seek reelection to his North Carolina seat, but would continue to serve Trump in some other way. It was widely expected that he would replace Mulvaney whenever Trump decided to make the switch. One month after the acquittal vote in the Senate, Trump finally did so, using Twitter, as he had for dismissing other disgraced or discarded officials like Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions.

Meadows will be the fourth White House chief of staff in 38 months, following Reince Priebus, Kelly, and Mulvaney, the fastest turnover in that key position in any administration. It is remarkable that Trump chose to make the move in the midst of the crisis over the spread of coronavirus, a clear expression of the unseriousness and indifference with which the US president approaches the task of making any serious effort to save the lives of tens of millions of Americans now at risk.

The extreme volatility within the inner circles of the Trump administration is a sign both of the crisis of this government and of its continuing tendency toward authoritarianism. More and more, the atmosphere in and around the White House resembles that of a court camarilla in the final stages before a popular revolution—Louis XVI in France, or Tsar Nicholas II of Russia.

Press accounts of the Mulvaney-Meadows switch have focused on the role of Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner, described as the second most powerful figure in the White House, whose influence Meadows apparently cultivated as part of his campaign to become chief of staff.

Prior to his elevation into the position of chief of staff, Meadows came to public attention in one significant episode in 2019 during a hearing of the House Government Oversight Committee, when former Trump lawyer and fixer Michael Cohen was describing Trump as a racist.

Meadows, as the ranking Republican, had positioned a black female Trump appointee in camera view. When Representative Rashida Tlaib of Michigan pointed to this stage-managing and accused Meadows of using the woman as a racial prop, the committee chair, the late Elijah Cummings, intervened, declaring Meadows a personal friend who could not be accused of racism.

Now this ultra-rightist, validated with the stamp of approval of a leading House Democrat, has been put into a position of direct responsibility for implementing the worst crimes of the Trump administration.



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