Trump escalates defiance of the 2020 election outcome

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In a series of actions Monday, President Trump and his closest aides and political accomplices demonstrated that they do not accept the vote of the American people to remove him from office, and that they will do anything in their power to prevent the victorious Democratic Party candidate, former Vice President Joe Biden, from taking office on January 20.

On Monday afternoon, Trump fired Secretary of Defense Mark Esper in a tweet because Esper had opposed using troops to suppress demonstrations in American cities—a "failing" Trump hopes to remedy with his next Pentagon chief.

The Trump-appointed chief of the General Services Administration (GSA), which handles logistics and infrastructure for the federal government, said she would not move forward with the legally required assistance to the Biden transition team until the outcome of the election was known.

Attorney General William Barr sent a circular to all US attorneys authorizing them to initiate investigations into vote fraud if it "could potentially impact the outcome of a federal election," effectively lining up the Justice Department behind Trump's bogus claims that the election has been stolen from him.

Barr held a closed-door meeting with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell on the same afternoon that McConnell delivered his first public remarks on the 2020 election. Speaking from the floor of the Senate, he upheld Trump's "right" to file lawsuits over alleged irregularities in half a dozen states won by Biden.

Meanwhile, on Twitter, Trump kept up a stream of denunciations of supposed fraud in the election, with baseless claims that elections overseen by Republican state officials, as in Georgia, Arizona and Nevada, and vote tallying conducted mainly by Republican local officials, as in Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania, were rigged in favor of Biden and the Democrats.

The firing of Esper is the most ominous step, coming only days after an interview given by the Pentagon chief to the *Military Times*, in which he recalled his well-publicized dispute with Trump last June, when the president threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act and deploy active duty federal troops against the millions demonstrating against police violence after the murder of George Floyd.

In response to pressure from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other top officers, concerned that such an openly repressive intervention was inadequately prepared and likely to discredit the military in the eyes of the American population, Trump backed down temporarily. But he is clearly aware that he can overturn the results of the November 3 election, clearly won by Biden, only through the use of military force.

Esper did not discuss this subject directly, but he told the *Military Times* that he had prepared a letter of resignation and then decided against sending it, concerned about what might come next. "Who's going to come in behind me?" he asked. "It's going to be a real 'yes man.' And then God help us."

The undeniable implication of Esper's firing is that Trump wants a Pentagon chief who will say yes to the deployment of troops into American cities to deal with the mass unrest that would undoubtedly follow an attempt by the president to defy the election results.

Trump named Christopher Miller, director of the National Counter-Terrorism Center (NCTC), as Esper's replacement to head the Pentagon on an "acting" basis. Miller retired in 2014 after a 31-year career as a Special Forces officer. He joined the White House staff in 2018 at the National Security Council (NSC), working on counterterrorism under John Bolton, then the national security advisor.

Soon after Bolton left the White House in September 2019, Miller came to Trump's attention as the NSC liaison to the Pentagon during the Special Forces operation in which ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was assassinated. Miller subsequently moved to a counterterrorism position at the Pentagon, before being selected by Trump to head the NCTC.

At least one senator, Democrat Ron Wyden of Oregon, voiced objections to Miller's appointment because he indicated at a confirmation hearing that he would not oppose the NCTC supplying information on American citizens to the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security, to assist in the suppression of ongoing protests against police violence in Portland, Oregon.

Trump repeatedly denounced the Portland protesters as terrorists and sent federal paramilitary forces into the city. Miller was confirmed by the Senate on August 6 in a voice vote, indicating that no Democrat felt strongly enough even to demand a roll-call vote.

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The decision by GSA Administrator Emily Murphy not to begin formal cooperation with the Biden transition team has both political and practical significance. A spokeswoman for Murphy told Reuters that she was waiting until "a winner is clear," although the traditional practice at the GSA has been to begin liaison efforts as soon as a winner is called by the major television networks and other news organizations.

Trump and his congressional backers have demagogically attacked Saturday's announcement of a Biden victory by the Associated Press, CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox News, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* as though it was a usurpation of the popular will by "giant corporations," although Trump made no such objection when the same organizations called him the winner the morning after the polls closed in the 2016 election.

It would be unprecedented for the transition to a new administration to be delayed until after formal certification of the results of the election by the authorities in 50 states and the District of Columbia, a process that will take two or three weeks, given the slow arrival of mail ballots, particularly from overseas and military voters, and the time required for recanvassing and recounting in those states where the contest is close enough to warrant such action.

The Electoral College does not meet until December 14 to cast the electoral votes for the rival presidential tickets. And this process could well be disrupted if, as some state legislators and right-wing pundits have suggested, Republican-controlled state legislatures in Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Georgia and Arizona intervene and attempt to impose pro-Trump electors rather than the pro-Biden slates elected by the voters.

Wisconsin Assembly Speaker Robin Vos has called for a wide-ranging investigation of the election—Trump lost the state by 20,000 votes—citing "concerns surfacing about mail-in ballot dumps and voter fraud." In Pennsylvania, there has already been discussion among Republican legislators about how to go about appointing pro-Trump electors.

The letter from Attorney-General Barr to federal prosecutors authorizes them to investigate "if there are clear and apparently credible allegations of irregularities." In the context of Trump's open defiance of the election results, the directive amounts to making the resources of the Justice Department freely available to the Trump campaign. It also supersedes a longstanding policy that federal prosecutors not involve themselves in election-related cases until after states certify the results.

In his statement on the election, Senate Majority Leader McConnell made no mention of the Democratic president-elect, a former senator and supposed "friend," according to the pro-Biden media. McConnell's brief speech made no reference to allegations of vote fraud or ballot stuffing.

But other Senate Republicans were far less constrained. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, appearing on Fox News, demanded that losing Republican Senate candidate John James in Michigan also refuse to concede. "If Republicans don't challenge and change the US election system, there will never be another Republican president elected again," he declared.

A Trump legal adviser revealed the strategy behind the state lawsuits, telling Fox News last week, "We're waiting for the United States Supreme Court—of which the president has nominated three justices—to step in and do something. And hopefully Amy Coney Barrett will come through."

Only a handful of top Republicans in Congress or around the country have acknowledged Trump's defeat and the victory of Democratic candidate Biden. This includes three governors—in the heavily Democratic states of Maryland, Vermont and Massachusetts—four of the 53 Senate Republicans, and only a dozen of the nearly 200 members of the House of Representatives, including four who are leaving office.

In all these reactionary machinations, there are elements of both desperation and delusion. The bulk of the Republican Party has embarked on a political course to deny the results of an election in which 75 million people voted for the Biden-Harris ticket. While the Democratic Party might well capitulate to such a political coup, there is no chance that the American population as a whole will passively accept the usurpation of the presidency. Trump can maintain power only through methods of mass repression and violence.

The atmosphere in the White House itself appears to be that of a besieged fortress. According to an unnamed official who spoke with CNN, "John McEntee, director of the White House Presidential Personnel Office, is spreading the word throughout the administration that if he hears of anyone looking for another job they will be fired." The administration has also been shaken by a third wave of COVID-19 infections that has hit Chief of Staff Mark Meadows, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Ben Carson, and top Trump campaign adviser David Bossie.

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