

Trump packs Pentagon with right-wing loyalists

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Among the most ominous actions taken by the Trump White House as it seeks to nullify the results of the 2020 presidential election is a wholesale shakeup of the top civilian leadership of the Pentagon.

President Donald Trump is keenly aware that his attempt to pull off an extra-constitutional coup and remain in the White House cannot be accomplished without resort to extreme repression against an inevitable popular eruption against such a coup. To this end, he is placing a gang of extreme right-wing ideologues and loyalists in key positions.

The purge began on Monday with the summary sacking—by tweet—of Defense Secretary Mark Esper, which reportedly took the entire uniformed command of the US military by surprise. Even more shocking to the military brass was Esper’s replacement.

The new “acting” Pentagon chief will be Christopher Miller, a 30-year Special Forces operative and retired colonel with no experience in the upper echelons of the military command. Trump has deliberately cultivated support within the 70,000-strong Special Forces, including through war crimes pardons, with the aim of transforming this quasi-independent force into his praetorian guard.

Miller is viewed within the military brass as wholly unprepared to assume the post of defense secretary. His main qualification is his unreserved support for Trump, demonstrated while serving on the National Security Council at the White House, and his willingness to use military repression against domestic protesters.

Before assuming his previous position as director of the National Counter-Terrorism Center (NCTC), he testified at his Senate confirmation hearing that he would not oppose the NCTC sharing intelligence on US citizens with the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security for the purpose of suppressing protests.

Esper’s ouster was followed on Tuesday by the

resignation of the third-ranking official at the Pentagon, James Anderson, the undersecretary of defense for policy, and his replacement by retired general and Fox News commentator Anthony Tata. Trump nominated Tata for the post last August, but was forced to rescind the appointment after the Senate canceled confirmation hearings in the face of Tata’s record of referring to former president Barack Obama as a “terrorist leader,” a “Manchurian candidate” and a Muslim. Tata was then installed at the Pentagon in a made-up position as an assistant to Anderson. Now, an Islamophobic fascist occupies the No. 3 post in the US war machine.

In his resignation letter, Anderson wrote, “Now, as ever, our long-term success depends on adhering to the US Constitution all public servants swear to support and defend.” In reporting on the resignation, Breaking Defense noted, “Such sentences are not boilerplate in a senior official’s resignation letter and this was clearly designed to send a message.” Indeed, Esper included almost identical language in his last message to the military, praising it for “remaining apolitical, and for honoring your oath to the Constitution.”

Trump’s determination to rid himself of Esper stems from the events of early June, in which the White House deployed federal security forces and sought to put US troops on the streets to suppress the mass protests triggered by the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

Esper publicly opposed Trump’s threats to invoke the Insurrection Act in order to deploy US troops throughout the country to put down the protests. He declared that such action could be only a “last resort and only in the most urgent and dire situations.” He added, “We are not in one of those situations now.”

This opposition from an official whose subservience to the White House had earned him the nickname “Yesper” reflected grave concerns that such a domestic deployment

was not necessary and could tear the military apart. Trump was reportedly infuriated by Esper's statement and was determined from then on to replace him with someone who would not oppose his attempts to use the military in pursuit of a presidential dictatorship.

An indication of the vindictive purge atmosphere at the Pentagon was provided by the Republican columnist Bill Kristol. Citing conversations with senior military officials, Kristol reported: "When Jim Anderson was fired yesterday as Acting Undersecretary for Policy, he was given a 'clap-out' as he left the building. The WH called to request the names of any political appointees who joined in so they could be fired."

Two other appointments of Trump loyalists to top positions indicate the scope of the extreme right-wing political takeover of the Pentagon. Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence Joseph Kernan, a retired three-star Navy admiral, was replaced by Ezra Cohen-Watnick, a 34-year-old right-wing operative who gained positions in the military and intelligence apparatus based on his political connections with Trump's former adviser Stephen Bannon and ex-National Security Adviser Gen. Michael Flynn, as well as with Jared Kushner. He proved himself to Trump by leaking secret CIA documents that were supposed to prove government spying on the Trump campaign to California Republican Representative Devin Nunes, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee and member of Trump's transition team.

The fourth appointment was that of Kash Patel, who is replacing Jen Stewart as chief of staff of the defense secretary. Patel, a former staff member of Nunes, had previously been named to a position created especially for him on the National Security Council. Trump referred to him as a "Ukraine policy specialist," and he was widely suspected of being part of the effort to pressure the Ukrainian government for damaging information about Joe Biden.

On Wednesday, the new acting defense secretary, Christopher Miller, announced his first major appointment, naming retired Army Col. Douglas Macgregor as his senior adviser. A frequent Fox News commentator, Macgregor has denounced the European Union and Germany for welcoming "unwanted Muslim invaders," who, he claimed, had the "the goal of eventually turning Europe into an Islamic state." He has also derided attempts in Germany to deal with the crimes of the Nazis as part of a "sick mentality" and called for the imposition of martial law on the US-Mexico border. As a deliberate provocation, Trump tried to nominate the

colonel as ambassador to Berlin.

Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, who has very close relations with the national security apparatus, cited speculation in the Pentagon command that Trump might be installing his handpicked loyalists to carry out accelerated troop withdrawals during his last days in office. He added, however, "A darker possibility is that Trump wants a Pentagon chief who can order the military to take steps that might help keep him in power because of an election result that he claims is fraudulent."

William Cohen, former secretary of defense and Republican senator, told CNN that the administration's shakeup at the Pentagon was "more akin to a dictatorship than a democracy." Similarly, CNN cited an unnamed senior defense official as saying: "This is scary, it's very unsettling. These are dictator moves."

The placing of key levers of power within the massive US military apparatus in the hands of a cabal of fascistic Trump loyalists poses immense dangers to the working class in the United States and all over the world. With 68 days left until Inauguration Day, Trump's tightened political grip over the Pentagon can be used to launch acts of military aggression and manufacture the pretext for a declaration of martial law and the suspension of constitutional and democratic rights.

Biden and the Democratic Party have treated the wholesale purge at the Pentagon as a "national security" problem, suggesting that the greatest worry is that Trump's reshuffling of senior officials will weaken US imperialism vis-à-vis Russia and China. Above all, they are determined to conceal that Trump's actions pose a serious threat to what remains of democratic rights and forms of rule in the United States.

Far more than the threat of a coup and dictatorship, the Democratic Party, representing the interests of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus, fears an eruption of popular protest and mass resistance from below against Trump and his co-conspirators.



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