

Biden selects recently retired general, ex-Mideast war commander to head Pentagon

Bill Van Auken
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President-elect Joe Biden Tuesday announced his nomination as secretary of defense of General Lloyd Austin, a former Iraq war commander who retired as the chief of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), which oversees all US military operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

This choice is being hailed by Democrats and the corporate media as historic, in that Austin would be the first African American to lead the Pentagon.

Despite the attempt to make Austin's race a symbol of socially progressive change, the nomination represents a definite continuity with the Trump administration, which also chose a recently retired general for the top civilian post at the Department of Defense. In Trump's case it was Marine General James "Mad Dog" Mattis (ret.), who preceded Austin as CENTCOM commander.

Austin's nomination, like that of Mattis, breaches the National Security Act of 1947, which stipulated that an ex-officer would have to wait 10 years (changed by Congress in 2008 to seven years) after leaving the military before taking the position of secretary of defense. Overriding this provision, which was meant to defend civilian control of the military, requires the approval of a waiver by both houses of the US Congress.

In the case of Mattis, 17 Democratic senators voted against granting a waiver. Senator Jack Reed, then the ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, voted in favor, while insisting, "I will not support a waiver for future nominees." Reed and his fellow Senate Democrats have thus far failed to raise the same objections to Austin that they did in 2017 with the Mattis nomination.

The *Atlantic* magazine published an article by Biden on Tuesday in which he defends his appointment of Austin as "part of our diverse national-security leadership team that reflects the lived experiences of all Americans."

He wrote: "He was the first African American general

officer to lead an Army corps in combat and the first African American to command an entire theater of war; if confirmed, he will be the first African American to helm the Defense Department—another milestone in a barrier-breaking career dedicated to keeping the American people secure."

That the commander of the Army corps that destroyed Iraqi towns and villages, leaving untold casualties in its wake, was African American was hardly a comfort to the Iraqi victims of Washington's criminal invasion, nor to those elsewhere in the "entire theater of war" commanded by Austin.

Other sections of the Democratic Party establishment had argued for the nomination of Michèle Flournoy as the first woman secretary of defense. Some had proposed former Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson, also an African American.

For all the talk of "diversity," what is remarkable is the similarity between the careers of all three of these proposed nominees and those of their counterparts of any race and gender within the top ranks of the sprawling US military and intelligence apparatus.

In the first place, all of them share responsibility for massive crimes carried out by US imperialism.

Austin served as a combat commander in Iraq, going on to direct all US military operations in that country, where Washington's illegal war of aggression launched on the basis of lies about weapons of mass destruction claimed the lives of over a million people, turned millions more into refugees and devastated an entire society.

Interviewed by the *Washington Post* on the eve of the US invasion, when he was the assistant commander of the Army's 3rd Infantry Division, Austin said of the Iraqis: "We can see them. And what we can see, we can hit, and what we can hit, we can kill, and the kill will be catastrophic."

Austin went on to command 150,000 US and allied

troops in Iraq during the bloody period of repression and civil war provoked by Washington's sectarian divide-and-rule policies.

Subsequently, as head of Central Command, he oversaw Washington's illegal regime-change intervention in Syria and the bloody campaign waged in both Iraq and Syria in the name of defeating ISIS that saw the razing of Mosul and Ramadi in Iraq, Raqqa in Syria and other cities, where tens of thousands of civilians were killed.

Flournoy and Johnson played similar roles. As undersecretary of defense for policy under Obama, Flournoy was an out-and-out warmonger, an architect of the US military "surge" in Afghanistan and a chief proponent of the US war for regime change in Libya that devastated the North African nation.

Johnson worked as the Pentagon's general counsel, defending drone assassinations and "military commissions," the kangaroo courts for detainees at Guantanamo, before becoming secretary of homeland security, where he oversaw the most massive deportation of immigrants in US history.

All three became multi-millionaires by parlaying their government connections into lucrative deals with military and security contractors. Austin joined the board of Raytheon along with other Pentagon-linked firms, while Johnson joined the boards of Lockheed Martin and US Steel. Flournoy joined the board of Booz Allen Hamilton, while joining Biden's nominee for secretary of state, Antony Blinken, in founding WestExec Advisors, a consulting firm specializing in Silicon Valley's ties to the Pentagon and US police forces. Both Austin and Flournoy became partners in Pine Island Capital, a private equity firm specializing in the aerospace and defense sectors.

The claim that picking such individuals will make Biden's cabinet reflect "the lived experiences of all Americans," under conditions in which tens of millions of Americans are facing destitution, eviction and hunger, is nothing short of obscene.

Austin's confirmation will require the support of Democrats who voted against a waiver for Mattis based on civilian control of the military, along with Republicans, who could now hypocritically invoke the same principle.

This principle was codified into law during the same period nearly 60 years ago when outgoing Republican President Dwight Eisenhower, a former five-star general and supreme commander of allied forces in Western Europe during World War II, warned the American people to "guard against the acquisition of unwarranted

influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex," adding that "The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists, and will persist."

As the US Congress prepares to approve a \$740.5 billion military spending bill, the scale of the military-industrial complex and the scope of the "disastrous rise of misplaced power" is beyond anything Eisenhower could have imagined.

That Biden is choosing as his defense secretary the general who was successor as chief of CENTCOM to the nominee chosen by Donald Trump is hardly a coincidence, nor merely an expression of the Democratic president-elect's right-wing politics.

The back-to-back elevations of the chiefs of the command responsible for bloody wars of aggression for the better part of the last three decades is an expression of the thoroughgoing militarization of US government policy and American society as a whole.

Austin's nomination is by no means an outlier. Ex-generals and other military personnel are playing an oversized role throughout the incoming Biden administration, according to *Politico*, which reported that ex-generals, admirals and other military personnel are leading so-called "agency review teams" that are put in place to prepare the transition from the Trump to a Biden administration.

With Trump still attempting to carry out a coup to overturn the results of the November 3 presidential election, Biden may have an additional incentive to curry favor with the military brass, in hopes that it will serve as the final arbiter should Trump refuse to leave the White House.

In any case, the nomination of Austin and the prominent role being played by other recently retired senior officers in the transition constitute a warning to the working class that an incoming Democratic administration will be a regime of escalating militarism abroad and social reaction and repression at home.



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