

Biden taps William Burns to head Central Intelligence Agency

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11 January 2021

President-elect Joe Biden announced Monday that he had selected longtime US State Department official William Burns to head the Central Intelligence Agency. Burns was a 33-year veteran of the US diplomatic corps, rising to Deputy Secretary of State from 2011 to 2014 in the Obama administration. He retired in 2014 to head the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a major foreign policy think tank in Washington.

As a top-level State Department official through the administrations of Reagan, Bush I, Clinton, Bush II and Obama, Burns is implicated in virtually every crime of US imperialism over the past three decades, including the war in Iraq, the US-NATO attack on Libya, the military coup that drowned the Egyptian Revolution in blood, and the US intervention in Syria.

Burns specialized in the Middle East and Russia, moving up the ladder from US Ambassador to Jordan (1998-2001) to Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs (2001-2005), where he was responsible for State Department operations in conquered Iraq, ruled as a virtual US colony, as well as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In 2005, George W. Bush named him Ambassador to Russia, one of the top US diplomatic postings. He returned to Washington in 2008 to be undersecretary of state for political affairs, and was maintained in that position when Hillary Clinton became secretary of state under Obama. In 2011, Obama promoted him to deputy secretary of state, the number two position, where he was the day-to-day leader of the State Department, first under Clinton, then John Kerry.

After such a career, as the saying goes, Burns knows where all the bodies are buried. Now he is assigned to head an agency that is probably responsible for more killing, torture and mass suffering than any other on the planet: the CIA.

He will be replacing current CIA Director Gina Haspel, herself a former spy, notorious for running a “black site” torture prison in Thailand. Largely because of this and her subsequent role in destroying evidence of the criminality she and fellow agents engaged in, Trump elevated Haspel to head the agency in 2018, after he promoted his first CIA director, Mike Pompeo, to secretary of state.

Burns’s trajectory is in the opposite direction, but the close connection of the CIA and State Department signaled first by Pompeo and now by Burns demonstrates the overlapping role of both these institutions as agencies of American imperialist violence and political subversion.

On Monday, Biden released a statement and short video announcing the selection of Burns. In his statement Biden assured, “the American people” that they, “will sleep soundly with him as our next CIA director.” In his video Biden praised Burns for his, “honesty, integrity, and skill,” noting that is “exactly how he’ll head the CIA.”

The selection of Burns has drawn similar praise from former veterans of the military-intelligence apparatus responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. Former CIA director and Iraq Commander General David Petraeus told Politico in a statement that Burns was, “a truly inspired choice.”

A subsequent successor to Petraeus at the CIA, John Brennan, infamous for his role in drone missile assassinations and illegal spying, called it an “enlightened selection.” Brennan approvingly noted that Burns had, “deep substantive expertise [and] extensive experience working with the Intelligence Community. The CIA will be most fortunate to have him at the helm.”

While Burns has never formally worked for the CIA,

his decades of work at the State Department required that he coordinate closely with the military-intelligence apparatus in carrying out the predatory aims of US imperialism.

One of his less-publicized activities was helping suppress the revolutionary movement of the working class in Egypt which erupted in 2011, and was drowned in blood after the 2013 military coup. As Deputy Secretary of State, Burns traveled to Egypt before and after the July 3, 2013 military coup by dictator general-General Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi, who has remained in power ever since with Washington's blessing and favor.

Also in 2013, Burns headed a special high-level State Department detail that was sent to Russia to try to convince President Vladimir Putin to turn over National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden. He later chastised China for permitting Snowden to escape Hong Kong after his devastating revelations about systematic spying by the NSA against the world's population, including Americans. The Chinese reluctance to detain—i.e., kidnap—Snowden on behalf of the US government “was not consistent with the spirit... the type of relationship—the new model—that we both seek to build.”

A preview of what to expect from a Burns-led CIA was given during an interview with National Public Radio's Mary Louise Kelly on “US Global Leadership” held June 19, 2019 at the Truman Center for National Policy in Washington, DC. In the extended conversation, Burns defended the US and NATO-led coup in Libya which ended with the grisly murder of Muammar Gaddafi, followed by an ongoing civil war, the torture and killing of refugees and the return of slave-markets.

“It was right to act in Libya in the way that we did,” Burns said. While the US government might have “got some assumptions wrong,” he expressed no regrets, saying that he still thought Obama's “decision to act was unavoidable.”

One of the few regrets Burns expressed in the interview was the “failure to enforce the red line,” in regards to the attempted overthrow of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In other words, Burns thought that Obama should have ordered a US military strike on Syria: a preview of the type of policy recommendations that he will provide to a President Biden.

There is no doubt that as Deputy Secretary of State, Burns was well aware of the CIA effort known as Operation Timber Sycamore which flooded millions of dollars worth in military weapons to so-called “moderate rebels” composed of remnants of al-Qaeda as well as al-Nusra in Syria to be used against the Assad government, beginning in 2012.

On August 21, 2013, these forces staged a poison gas attack on Ghouta, which was used as a pretext for the US to begin bombing Syria. However, broad popular opposition to another imperialist war, as well as internal conflicts within the US government and its European allies, led Obama to back off from further military action and eventually negotiate a face-saving peace agreement with Putin.

A Cost of Wars report from last year estimated that the ongoing conflict in Syria has led to the displacement of over 7 million people. This estimate, however, is on the low end, with some arguing it could be as high as 12 million people. Overall, some 380,000 Syrian civilians have reportedly died in the nine-year conflict.

Unsurprisingly, during his interview, Burns expressed his support for the Democratic and CIA-led “election interference” conspiracy theory against Russia, telling Kelly that Putin “saw dysfunction in our system and took advantage ... and put the thumb on the scale [against] Hillary Clinton.”

Biden's appointment of Burns, far from allowing “every American to sleep at night” is a warning to the working class that imperialist war, illegal spying, and the persecution of whistleblowers such as Snowden and Assange, who remains imprisoned at Belmarsh in London, will continue under a Democratic administration.



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