

For second time in four years, Senate confirms ex-general as US defense secretary

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Retired General Lloyd Austin was sworn in Friday as the new US secretary of defense following an overwhelming 93-to-2 Senate confirmation vote.

The rise of Austin, the first African-American to occupy the top post at the Pentagon, has been hailed by the Democrats and the corporate media as a historic milestone and manifestation of social progress. Newspapers and news web sites carried headlines about the “First Black Defense Secretary.”

Typical was the statement of Democratic Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer who stated on the Senate floor Friday that “Mr. Austin will be the first African-American to ever helm the Defense Department in its history—a powerful symbol of the diversity and history of America’s Armed Forces.”

Others suggested that installing a black defense secretary would serve in itself to counter the threat of right-wing extremism in the US military, reflected in the fact that fully one fifth of those arrested in connection with the January 6 attempted coup at the US Capitol are ex-military personnel.

For all the promotion of Austin’s racial identity as proof of progress, what is most significant in terms of the relations between the military and the civilian government in the US is not that he is the first African-American in the post, but rather that he is the second retired four-star general in four years whose nomination required that both houses of Congress pass a waiver of a law barring recently retired officers from occupying the top civilian position at the Pentagon.

In 2017, retired General James “Mad Dog” Mattis became Donald Trump’s first secretary of defense. It is hardly a coincidence that Mattis was Austin’s predecessor as the chief of the US Central Command, which oversees all US operations in the killing fields of Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan and the war buildup in the

Persian Gulf.

Like Mattis, Austin was also a combat commander in Iraq, leading Army troops in the bloody invasion of the country and ultimately commanding 150,000 US troops occupying the country. Biden, who as a US senator voted for the criminal war of aggression, as vice president cemented his ties with Austin during his command there.

Leading the charge for the waiver vote in the US Senate was Senator Jack Reed, the incoming Democratic chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. In 2017, then the ranking Democrat on the committee, Reed also voted in favor of a waiver for Trump’s nominee, Mattis, while insisting, “I will not support a waiver for future nominees.”

Approval of the waiver passed by comfortable margins in both the House and the Senate: 326 to 78 and 69 to 27, respectively.

The waiver by both houses of congress is required under the National Security Act of 1947, which stipulated that no ex-officer would occupy the top civilian position at the Pentagon until 10 years after leaving the military. This was changed by the US Congress to seven years in 2008. Austin retired from the military in 2016.

The act was meant to defend the fundamental democratic principle of civilian control over the military. It was passed during the same period some six decades ago when outgoing Republican President—and former five-star general—Dwight Eisenhower warned the American people to “guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence ... by the military-industrial complex,” adding that “The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.”

The growth of this “unwarranted influence” and “misplaced power” today is far beyond anything that

Eisenhower could have imagined some 60 years ago. Austin, the ex-general and multimillionaire board member of the arms contractor Raytheon, is taking charge of the largest branch of the US government with a budget of close to \$750 billion.

That two administrations in a row have nominated a former chief of US imperialism's most militarily active "combatant command" as defense secretary is an undeniable symptom of the unrelenting militarization of the entire US government. This has only been deepened by the events surrounding Trump's failed bid to overturn the election, culminating in the January 6 coup attempt. The Biden camp relied heavily upon the military command to oppose the overthrow of US constitutional government. Meanwhile, Washington remains an armed camp, with plans for keeping armed national guardsmen deployed in the US capital until mid-March.

Schumer and other members of the House and Senate leadership pushed for the speedy confirmation of Austin on the grounds that there could be no vacuum of leadership in the sprawling US military and intelligence apparatus.

"Foreign adversaries will seek to exploit this period of transition, and we cannot allow America's military, intelligence and national security policy to be disrupted by staffing delays," Schumer warned.

House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith (Democrat-Washington) declared, "The disruption President Trump brought to the Pentagon cannot be underestimated. They need a fully confirmed secretary of defense, immediately, to begin to thoroughly clean up that mess and get the Pentagon back to being as effective as it needs to be."

There were similar expressions of urgency over the confirmation of Avril Haines as the "first woman Director of National Intelligence," which took place the day before the vote on Austin, with a vote of 84 to 10 in the Senate.

Right-wing Senator Marco Rubio, the top Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee, urged the swift confirmation of Haines, who as deputy CIA director under Obama, was one of the architects of the drone assassination program that claimed countless victims in the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa. "Our adversaries will not stand by and wait for the new administration to staff critical positions," Rubio said.

The urgency expressed by both Democrats and Republicans over filling the top posts in the US military and intelligence apparatus stands in stark contrast to their plodding indifference to the mass unemployment, hunger and evictions plaguing ever growing sections of the US population. There is no such rush to passing even the meager \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief package proposed by Biden, an amount that will no doubt be whittled down as his administration accommodates the Republican right. This contrast is a clear warning as to the character of the incoming administration, which will pursue escalating militarism abroad along with social reaction at home.



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