

Pentagon purges advisory boards packed by Trump

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The Biden administration's recently confirmed defense secretary, General Lloyd Austin (ret.), has ordered the resignations of hundreds of Pentagon-appointed members of the Defense Department's 42 civilian advisory boards, including a slew of last-minute appointees named by the Trump administration. The forced resignations are to take effect no later than February 16.

The Pentagon described the move as part of a "zero-based review" of all the existing civilian advisory boards and commissions, whose activities will be suspended and evaluated. These include high profile panels such as the Defense Policy Board, the Defense Business Board and the Defense Science Board, as well as boards formed on issues ranging from Arlington National Cemetery to military families and sexual assault in the military. Among the boards is one recently formed to advise the Pentagon on changing the names of military installations that currently commemorate Confederate generals.

"Advisory boards have and will continue to provide an important role in shaping public policy within [the Department of Defense]," Austin wrote in a statement to the Pentagon leadership. "That said, our stewardship responsibilities require that we continually assess to ensure each advisory committee provides appropriate value today."

The Senate confirmed Austin as defense secretary on January 22. His was the second nomination in four years to require a waiver by both houses of Congress because of a statute barring recently retired military officers from the position. General James Mattis, Austin's predecessor as chief of the US Central Command (CENTCOM) and Donald Trump's first defense secretary, also needed the waiver. Austin has also been required to leave his lucrative berth on the

board of directors of top Pentagon arms contractor Raytheon.

There was no question that the overriding consideration behind the purge of the advisory panels was the packing of these boards with Trump loyalists precisely during the period the former president was plotting a coup to overturn the 2020 presidential election and installing his loyalists in the most senior positions within the Pentagon.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby, speaking to reporters Tuesday, said that "the secretary was deeply concerned with the pace and the extent of recent changes to memberships of Department advisory committees done with a bit of frenetic activity in the final two months of the previous administration."

Less than two months before the inauguration of Biden, Christopher Miller, an ex-special forces colonel who Trump named as acting defense secretary after firing Mike Esper as Pentagon chief, purged the Defense Policy Board, ousting 11 members. They included veteran practitioners of US imperialist policy such as former secretaries of state Henry Kissinger and Madeleine Albright; retired Adm. Gary Roughead, who served as chief of naval operations; ex-House Majority Leader Eric Cantor and former ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, Jane Harman.

A similar wholesale firing was carried out at the Defense Business Board, whose members had traditionally been drawn from the ranks of CEOs and other top corporate executives who understood the immense profits generated by massive US military spending.

Among those appointed as replacements to the Defense Policy Board were Anthony Tata and Scott O'Grady, both of whom had been placed in high-ranking civilian positions in the Defense Department in

the purge that followed the firing of Esper, as Trump attempted to exert political control over the Pentagon in preparation for his attempted coup.

Tata had been installed as the third-ranking official at the Pentagon, undersecretary of defense for policy. An extreme-right and Islamophobic Fox News commentator, he had denounced former president Barack Obama as a Muslim, “terrorist leader” and “Manchurian candidate.”

O’Grady, a former Air Force fighter pilot, was similarly installed briefly as acting assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs. A far-right conspiracy theorist, O’Grady had advanced claims that Trump won the 2020 election by a landslide, but that it had been stolen from him in a conspiracy involving, among others, George Soros, Hillary Clinton and the late Venezuelan president, Hugo Chavez. He denounced Biden and the Democrats, as well as Trump critics in the military, as “socialists” and “traitors” who were attempting to stage a “coup,” and joined Trump’s former national security adviser Michael Flynn in calling for Trump to impose martial law.

Those named as replacements for the Defense Business Board included Corey Lewandowski, Trump’s former campaign manager, and David Bossie, his former deputy campaign manager, who was, at the time of his nomination, coordinating the abortive lawsuits to overturn the election.

While posts on the advisory boards are voluntary and unpaid, their members receive reimbursement for travel and per diem pay for board meetings. They are, in many cases, likely afforded opportunities to forge lucrative business ties with Pentagon contractors and are also provided access to classified material.

The purge of the advisory board does not affect members appointed by either the US president or the Congress. Thus, Trump’s final-hour appointments of his ex-press secretary Sean Spicer and his campaign adviser Kellyanne Conway to the boards of visitors of, respectively, the Naval Academy and the Air Force Academy remain unchanged.

Similarly, while the four members of the commission on the military bases named for Confederate generals appointed by the Pentagon under Christopher Miller will be ousted, four named by Congress will remain in place.



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