

Defense Secretary Austin's failure to tell White House of his hospitalization exposes collapse of civilian control over the military

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On Tuesday, the Department of Defense (DoD) press secretary, Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, officially informed the press that the “elective surgery” performed December 22 on Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin was a prostatectomy (prostate removal), carried out at Walter Reed Army Medical Center following a diagnosis of prostate cancer.

Ryder's briefing followed a press release by Walter Reed publicly revealing for the first time the nature of the illness that brought Austin to the hospital on December 22, the fact of the “minimally invasive” procedure carried out, with the aid of general anesthesia, and the subsequent “urinary tract infection” and blockage of the small intestines that resulted in Austin's return to the hospital in severe pain on January 1 and admission to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) the following day.

Austin remained in the ICU until Monday and is still hospitalized at Walter Reed, with no official word as to when he will be released. The Defense Department claims he is recovering and is performing his duties fully from the hospital.

However, Ryder refused to answer questions from reporters about the unexplained failure of Austin and his DoD chief of staff, Kelly Magsamen, to inform the White House or Congress that the defense secretary was hospitalized for three full days following Austin's return to Walter Reed on January 1 and admission the following day to the ICU.

According to previous statements by Ryder and the DoD, Magsamen, a senior aide and two press secretaries, including Ryder, were made aware of Austin's hospitalization on January 2, but failed to inform the White House's National Security Council,

Biden's national security adviser Jake Sullivan or Congress. Magsamen has said she failed to notify officials because she was sick with the flu.

Also on January 2, DoD Deputy Secretary Kathleen Hicks, who was vacationing in Puerto Rico, was told that some authorities had been temporarily transferred from Austin to herself. However, she, like Biden and the White House, was kept in the dark about Austin's hospitalization until January 4.

It further appears that the White House and Congress had not been informed of Austin's diagnosis of cancer and his prostatectomy on December 22. National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters Tuesday that neither Biden nor anyone else at the White House knew about Austin's cancer diagnosis until Tuesday morning, hours before Walter Reed officials made the information public.

Ryder held a lengthy press conference last week, while Austin was in the ICU, and failed to mention the DoD head's hospitalization.

Evidently, the military brass was informed of Austin's incapacitation but did not feel it necessary to inform Biden or Congress. Among those who knew about the situation was the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air Force Gen. Charles Brown.

At Tuesday's press conference, Ryder brushed aside questions about the breakdown in communication between the DoD, the military and the White House and Congress. He said DoD Chief of Staff Magsamen had initiated a 30-day internal review of the issue as well as new protocols supposedly ensuring that the president and Congress would automatically be informed of any transfer of authorities from the defense secretary to his subordinates.

This will only intensify the controversy and crisis over Austin's behavior. In the past several days, Donald Trump has demanded that Biden fire Austin and a number of Republican lawmakers have called for his resignation. The chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Republican Mike Rogers, and the ranking Democrat, Adam Smith, issued a joint statement saying they were "concerned with how the disclosure of the secretary's condition was handled."

Roger Wicker, the ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, called on the DoD to provide lawmakers with "a full accounting of the facts immediately."

The Pentagon Press Association, which represents reporters who cover the Defense Department, sent a letter of protest on Friday, calling the delay in alerting the public "an outrage." The letter pointed to the massive and expanding role being played by the US and its military in the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, and noted the right of the public to "be informed about the health status and decision-making ability of its top defense leader."

Indeed, on January 4, while Austin was in the Walter Reed ICU, the US carried out a drone strike in Baghdad, killing the leader of an Iranian-backed militia. This followed the sinking of Houthi ships by US forces in the Red Sea. Biden has deployed multiple aircraft carrier groups to the region buttress the dozens of US military bases and emplacements, while Washington backs Israel's genocide in Gaza and its expansion of the war by means of drone assassinations in Lebanon and other countries in the region. There are also reports of US plans to attack Iranian-backed Houthi forces within Yemen.

Little is being said, however, about the central issue in the Pentagon's failure to report Austin's hospitalization to "Commander in Chief" Biden and Congress: the contempt of the military brass for their supposed civilian bosses. This bizarre incident reflects a new stage in the decades-long strengthening of the power of the military within the state.

This is the inevitable accompaniment to the non-stop series of wars of the last decade of the 20th and first quarter of the 21st century, now metastasized into an expanding global war spearheaded by US imperialism, whose initial fronts are in Eastern Europe against Russia, the Middle East against the Palestinians and

eventually Iran, and ultimately China. At the same time, the colossal growth of social inequality and the breakdown of democratic forms of rule within the US make the use of the military against the working class at home a critical issue for the ruling class. Preparations for urban warfare in America's cities are far advanced.

The constitutional principle of the subordination of the military to the civilian authority is increasingly a dead letter. The decades-long practice of choosing non-military figures for defense secretary was breached by both the Trump and Biden administrations. Trump's first secretary of defense, "Mad Dog" James Mattis, was a retired Marine Corps four-star general who commanded US forces in the Gulf War, the war in Afghanistan and the Iraq War. Having retired from his post as commander of the US Central Command in 2013, he required a congressional waiver to become secretary of defense in 2017 because of a legal requirement that military officers be retired for at least seven years before taking the helm of the Pentagon. He was granted the waiver by a lopsided bipartisan vote in the Senate.

The same applied to Lloyd Austin, a retired four-star Army general who commanded US combat troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and replaced Mattis as commander of the US Central Command in 2013. Austin retired from his post in 2016. Exemplifying the colossal growth of the "military-industrial complex" against which President Eisenhower warned in 1961, Austin joined the corporate boards of Raytheon, Nucor and Tenet Healthcare after he retired from the military and before he was picked by Biden to head the Department of Defense. He too was given a waiver to head the Pentagon by lopsided bipartisan votes in the House and Senate in January of 2021.



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