

Trump taps ex-Green Beret, CIA operative as ambassador to Mexico

Andrea Lobo

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Donald Trump's nomination last week of former Green Beret and CIA agent Ronald Johnson as ambassador to Mexico have underscored the incoming fascist president's threats of military and economic aggression against Washington's southern neighbor and main trading partner.

On the social media platform X, Trump boasted of Johnson's military and intelligence career and wrote: "Together, we will put an end to migrant crime, stop the illegal flow of Fentanyl and other dangerous drugs into our Country and, MAKE AMERICA SAFE AGAIN!"

The nomination of Johnson serves as a serious warning. It makes clear that threats of military operations and a reckless tariff war against Mexico are not merely bluster and are aimed at much more than curbing migration and fentanyl. US imperialism is resorting to its most brutal methods of the 20th century to recolonize Latin America and crush working class opposition.

The occupant of the embassy in Mexico City is among most influential positions in US foreign policy across the hemisphere, and the nomination takes place at a time in which "Latin America is about to become a priority of U.S. foreign policy," as noted by *Foreign Affairs*.

The magazine highlights the nomination of Florida Senator Marco Rubio as secretary of state. Rubio is the son of Cuban immigrants who has long advocated for devastating economic sanctions, coups and military invasions against Latin American governments that don't toe the line of US imperialism.

Rubio called Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the predecessor and mentor of current Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum, "not a good ally" for "handing a large swath of his national territory to drug dealers" and for being an apologist for the governments in Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela. Last year, Rubio endorsed plans for a military intervention in Mexico, ostensibly against the drug cartels, as long as it was coordinated with the Mexican armed forces and police.

Trump also nominated as national security adviser Mike Waltz, another former Green Beret who introduced legislation last year to authorize the use of military force against Mexican cartels, a policy also backed by incoming vice president JD Vance, a Marine Corps veteran.

Sheinbaum clearly interpreted Johnson's nomination as a threat, declaring the next morning in relation to the nominee: "Mexicans should have the certainty that we will always defend Mexico as a free, sovereign and independent country ... We are going to collaborate, to coordinate, but we are never going to subordinate ourselves."

After achieving the rank of Special Forces Captain in the 1970s, Johnson began his active military career as detachment commander in

1984, deployed in Panama. He was selected as the first Special Forces officer to be trained as a CIA agent through an Army War College fellowship, which led him to become a key liaison between the intelligence apparatus and the Southern Command, which oversees the Pentagon's operations in Central and South America.

According to his biography offered by the US Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, "He led combat operations in El Salvador as one of the authorized 55 military advisors during the civil war in the 1980s."

Between 1980 and 1992, a series of fascist-military dictatorships were responsible for killing tens of thousands, mostly civilians, as part of a genocidal war against the left-wing guerrilla Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The US sponsored the effort to expand the Salvadoran military five-fold and direct its operations during this time through "advisors" like Johnson.

The incoming ambassador is implicated in some of the worst war crimes committed in Latin America during the 20th century.

As an indication of the role of US forces in El Salvador during the 1980s and the guilty cover-up by the Pentagon, it was revealed only in 2021 that there was a US military advisor, Sergeant Major Allen Bruce Hazelwood, present during the December 1981 El Mozote massacre, when the US-trained Atlacatl Battalion massacred 978 unarmed peasants, including 533 children (248 under six). Babies were hurled for target practice in what was the largest massacre in Latin America in the 20th century.

The limit of 55 "advisors" was implemented (very flexibly) by Ronald Reagan in August 1983, shortly before Johnson began full-time active duty.

At the time, opposition to US participation in the atrocities in El Salvador was growing, as details of the carnage became known. A Gallup poll in March 1981 showed 80 percent of Americans opposed sending advisors like Johnson, although they would play a key role in the following years.

A report by journalist Ambrose Evans-Pritchard for the right-wing British weekly *The Spectator*, cited by Noam Chomsky during a speech in early 1986, notes an "improvement" in El Salvador:

"Numbers are down and the bodies are dropped discreetly at night in the middle of Lake Ilopango and only rarely wash up onto the shore to remind bathers that the repression is still going on... The death squads did exactly what they were supposed to do: they decapitated the trade unions and mass organizations that seemed in danger of setting off an urban insurrection at the beginning of the decade," and now,

following the directions of its U.S. military advisers, the army—in effect, a U.S. proxy army—is following the classic tactic implemented by the U.S. in its successful destruction of the South Vietnamese resistance: “to drive civilians out of the zones and leave the guerillas cut off from their support structure...” The peasants flee air attacks with 500 pound bombs and fragmentation bombs that “blast shrapnel in all directions,” and then, “the troops go through their villages, burning crops, killing livestock, tearing down houses, ripping up water pipes, and even planting hideous booby traps in the ruins they leave behind. The army, Evans Pritchard continues, “learnt its tricks at American counterinsurgency schools in Panama and the United States. ‘We learnt from you,’ a death squad member once told an American reporter, ‘we learnt from you the methods, like blowtorches in the armpits, shots in the balls.’ And political prisoners often insist they were tortured by foreigners, some Argentinian, others maybe American.”

With the CIA, Johnson later joined the imperialist dismemberment of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, in operations to capture alleged war criminals targeted by the US government. He would lead numerous departments over two decades at the agency.

Trump first appointed Johnson as ambassador to El Salvador in 2019, with the main task that of pulling fascistic President Nayib Bukele away from China, in exchange for backing the Salvadoran’s shift toward establishing a personalist dictatorship.

On February 9, 2020, Bukele invaded the Salvadoran Congress with armed troops, demanding the approval of a US security loan at gunpoint. Once inside, he sat on the chair of the legislative President, led a prayer and walked out to meet supporters. As the crowd called for the heads of opposition members, Bukele said, “if we wanted to press the button, we would only need to press it.”

As the most experienced individual for such an anti-democratic conspiracy present at the time—not to speak of the task of getting military aid into the hands of Salvadoran troops—Johnson was a participant both behind the scenes and publicly. Bukele first convoked the extraordinary session of Congress on the loan during a press conference with Johnson on February 6.

The State Department at the time denied that it had any previous knowledge of the attack, but acknowledged to *El Faro*: “Ambassador Johnson accepted a personal invitation from President Bukele to meet with him and the First Lady on the night of February 9,” after the invasion. *El Faro* also reported, citing a direct witness, that Johnson met privately with Bukele’s private secretary, legal secretary and chief of staff in a private home that night for a briefing on what had taken place.

Not until the next day did Johnson make a public statement, writing meekly, “I do not approve of the presence of the Armed Forces in the Assembly of El Salvador,” before praising Bukele’s appeals for “patience and prudence.” During a meeting on February 11 between Bukele’s cabinet and foreign diplomats, Johnson reportedly intervened to stop the recriminations about the invasion, declaring: “I do not want to talk about yesterday; I want to talk about tomorrow.”

In the months that followed, Bukele and Johnson made a point of posting photos of themselves dining and vacationing together. They also worked closely in sacrificing tens of thousands of Salvadorans to COVID-19 for the sake of re-opening the economy.

Bukele’s ties with Trump have only strengthened since he launched a state of exception in March 2022, deploying the military nationally, declaring martial law and arresting nearly 2 percent of the population as part of his “war on criminal gangs.” There are countless reports of people going missing or being tortured and killed in custody.

The ground for Trump’s threats against Mexico and for Johnson’s nomination was prepared by the Biden administration, which financed pro-opposition groups and carried out numerous other provocations against Mexico.

Even the right-wing *Universal* acknowledged: “At a moment in which the relationship between [US Ambassador] Ken Salazar and the government of Mexico had arrived at its worst moment with his open criticisms of the ‘abrazos no balazos’ [hugs not bullets] policy” of the government of Mexico, Trump signaled a major shift in nominating an ex-US military officer,” whom the paper described as a “Rambo.”

At the same time, López Obrador and Sheinbaum have conceded to US imperialism on every major question, with Trump declaring on the campaign trail that his “friend” AMLO had given him “everything he wanted.”

Sheinbaum hopes that collaborating by deploying Mexican troops to detain hundreds of thousands of migrants, while imposing tariffs on Chinese goods and blocking Chinese investments, will appease Trump. But these measures will only embolden US imperialism to assert even more direct control over its strategic interests in Mexico and the region.

US imperialism sees in Mexico’s military forces and shared 2,000-mile border a necessary military, industrial and mineral bastion against its geopolitical rivals, mainly China and Russia, as well as against any mass revolutionary challenge from the working class in Latin America. As the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote during his exile in Mexico in 1938, Latin America “for the United States is what Austria and the Sudeten were for Hitler.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* has explained that Trump’s claims that America is facing an “invasion” of migrants, whom he describes as composed largely of violent convicts and “terrorists,” is not mere rhetoric, “but a claim of legal and constitutional justification for any and all repressive actions undertaken by the new administration.”

The target of these repressive policies is the working class and youth, immigrant or native born, in the United States, Mexico, Canada and the Americas, who can only fight the threat of fascism and imperialist oppression by uniting politically against the capitalist ruling elites everywhere, and for socialist revolution.



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