

Trump names Iraq war general and militarist as national security adviser

By Patrick Martin
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US President Donald Trump named Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster as his new national security adviser Monday, one week after firing retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, the previous head of the National Security Council. The replacement of one general by another underscores the dominant role of the military in the Trump administration.

McMaster's appointment does not require Senate confirmation, so he assumed his new duties as soon as he accepted the position. He will reportedly not retire from the Army but rather take a leave of absence for the duration of his stint at the White House.

Retired or active-duty military brass hold four top positions: Secretary of Defense James "Mad Dog" Mattis and Secretary of Homeland Security John F. Kelly are both retired Marine Corps major generals. McMaster will head the NSC, and retired Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, who had been acting head during the week since Flynn's dismissal, will resume his position as NSC chief of staff, now as McMaster's deputy.

While McMaster's appointment does not increase the number of generals in the top ranks of the administration—since he replaces General Flynn—his elevation to head the NSC could well signal a shift in the foreign policy orientation of the Trump administration, and represent a concession to the anti-Russian campaign being waged by the intelligence agencies, the Democratic Party and sections of the Republican Party.

The appointment was backed by many of those who have been denouncing Trump for his alleged "softness" on Russia. The ultra-right magazine *National Review* hailed the appointment, comparing it to the nomination of Neil Gorsuch for the Supreme Court, and writing that "Trump's key generals—James Mattis, John Kelly, and now H.R. McMaster—represent the best of modern

military leadership. Their presence in the government is deeply reassuring. It's now incumbent on President Trump to heed their counsel and give them the level of authority that they have earned."

Senator John McCain, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, fresh from a speech to the Munich Security Conference in which he portrayed the new administration as a potential threat to world stability, praised the nomination as well. "I give President Trump great credit for this decision, as well as his national security cabinet choices," McCain said in a statement. "I could not imagine a better, more capable national security team than the one we have right now."

Michael Hayden, the former director of the CIA and NSA who supported Hillary Clinton for president, described McMaster as "a big-picture thinker. And he stands up for what he believes. What a perfect choice for this administration." Representative Adam Smith, the senior Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, called McMaster "obviously very well qualified," adding, "to say that he's an improvement over Mike Flynn is an understatement."

Herbert Raymond McMaster, 54, is leaving a position as commander of the Army Capabilities Integration Center (ARCINC), where he was responsible for strategic planning for the "army of the future." He was a tank commander in the first Persian Gulf War, in 1991, and commanded a combat regiment during the occupation of Iraq, where he came to the attention of General David Petraeus as the first commander to successfully recruit local Sunni tribal leaders to assist military operations against insurgent groups.

McMaster's tactics in the northern Iraqi city of Tal Afar was the model for the surge of US forces in 2006-2007, and McMaster became closely associated

with Petraeus in his subsequent rise through the upper echelons of the Army.

The appointment has special significance in terms of policy towards Russia because McMaster has been engaged in a major military project to study the conflict in Ukraine and the lessons to be drawn by US military planners preparing for war in Eastern Europe against the Russian army and air force. He said in 2016 that the Ukraine conflict has “revealed that the Russians have superior artillery firepower, better combat vehicles, and have learned sophisticated use of UAVs [drones] for tactical effect.”

According to a report last year in *Politico*, “McMaster is quietly overseeing a high-level government panel intended to figure out how the Army should adapt to this Russian wake-up call.” He told a Senate committee, “Russia possesses a variety of rocket, missile and cannon artillery systems that outrange and are more lethal than US Army artillery systems and munitions.” He called for developing advanced weapons to replace the two main Army armored vehicles, the Abrams tank and the Bradley Fighting Vehicle.

This background suggests that McMaster will be aligned with Secretary of Defense Mattis in viewing Russia as the main strategic adversary of US imperialism in both the Middle East and Europe. That accounts for the widespread praise for his selection by those who have been spearheading the anti-Russian campaign on behalf of the US military-intelligence apparatus.

McMaster first came to public attention in 1997 as the author of a volume analyzing the Pentagon command performance during the early stages of the war in Vietnam, from 1963 through 1965. The book’s title, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, suggests a more critical attitude to the Vietnam War than the author actually espouses. He indicts the lies that the civilian and military leaders of the day told each other, not the lies they both told to the American people.

A wide range of political commentators praised the book, ranging from Rush Limbaugh on the ultra-right to historian Stanley Karnow to journalist Peter Arnett, a critic of the war. It provides a detailed analysis of the day-to-day relations between the Pentagon brass and

the Johnson White House, based on documents then newly declassified.

More significant from the standpoint of his current position is the attitude McMaster adopted towards social and political constraints on the military. His book strongly attacked the Joint Chiefs of Staff of that period, 1963-1965, for failing to demand the all-out mobilization of up to 700,000 troops they believed necessary to win the war. They did not press these demands because Johnson was committed to a strategy of limited war in order to provide resources for domestic social reforms such as Medicare, Medicaid and the “war on poverty.”

Such an approach suggests that General McMaster, like Trump himself, would favor the plundering of social programs in order to pay for the rapid and extensive military buildup that both have advocated, preparing for an explosion of American militarism on a scale that would dwarf both Vietnam and the current wars in the Middle East and Central Asia.

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