

# The adulation of H.R. McMaster and the collapse of American democracy

23 February 2017

The US media and political establishment has responded with virtually universal praise to Donald Trump's choice of Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster to replace the fired ex-general Michael Flynn as his national security adviser.

Observing the response from both Democrats and Republicans, as well as the corporate media, one might conclude that a memo had gone out from CIA headquarters on the language to be used in describing McMaster. He is a “scholar,” an “experienced commander,” an “iconoclast,” even an “intellectual.” The received wisdom is that this mixture of Thucydides and Clausewitz will provide “reasoned and sound judgment” to guide the foreign policy of the Trump administration.

Democratic Senator Sheldon Whitehouse gushed that McMaster is a “card-carrying grownup,” while Democratic New York Representative Steve Israel proclaimed him a “brilliant, reasoned leader.” Former Obama administration official and Clinton advisor Jared Cohen called him a “brilliant strategist and thinker.”

On the part of the media, the *New York Times*, which functions as a de facto organ of the Democratic Party, set the tone with its editorial on Wednesday. Its response was particularly noteworthy given the newspaper's leading role in the anti-Russian campaign waged by the intelligence agencies.

The editorial's headline appealed directly to Trump and his top White House aides: “Now, Let General McMaster Do His Job.” It declared the latest Trump general to be “an enlightened choice.” It went on to advise, “If Mr. Trump empowers him and defers to his judgment, General McMaster could be an important moderating force in an administration packed with radicals and amateurs.”

The editorial praised McMaster as a “student of

history,” “one of the military's most gifted scholars and strategists,” and “one of the best American commanders” in the Iraq War. According to the *Times*, McMaster's book on Vietnam War decision-making in Washington, *Dereliction of Duty*, “lays out the consequences of abetting misguided presidents with ill-conceived policies.”

The *Times* piles on the flattery in an op-ed column by Jonathan Stevenson, a former Obama national security aide, who describes McMaster as “a compelling choice: a scholar-warrior in the mold of Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, with the bonus of looking every inch the part,” and “a proven cavalry officer and a formidable defense intellectual,” who demonstrated in Iraq “exemplary application of counterinsurgency doctrine.”

The immediate issue driving the praise for McMaster is the hope that his foreign policy views, which adhere to the conventional anti-Russian consensus of the bulk of the military-intelligence apparatus, will prevail within the councils of the Trump administration, particularly when General Mattis at the Pentagon and General John Kelly at the Department of Homeland Security weigh in as well.

More generally, the exercise in collective deification is an expression of the disintegration of American democracy and the extraordinary power of the military over all official institutions in the United States.

The growing influence of current and former generals, who occupy four top positions in the Trump national security hierarchy—secretary of defense, secretary of homeland security, national security adviser and National Security Council chief of staff—is no cause for concern to the media pundits and newspaper columnists, who appear to have forgotten the core democratic principle of civilian control of the military.

Especially noteworthy in the praise of McMaster—who will remain on active duty as national security adviser—is the reference to the lessons he drew in his analysis of the Vietnam War. McMaster’s book denounced the Joint Chiefs of Staff for failing to demand that President Lyndon Johnson commit the resources required to “win” the war up-front: as many as 700,000 troops, no restrictions on ground operations in South Vietnam, and unrestricted targeting of North Vietnam for bomb attacks, including MiG fighter bases and ports where Soviet and Chinese military personnel would likely have been killed.

His thesis is a variant of the criticism leveled against the methods of “limited war” in Iraq and Afghanistan in favor of an all-out approach, summed up by the slogan, “Go big, or go home.”

That such methods would have constituted a massive war crime in Vietnam, even greater than the one actually perpetrated by the tactics of gradual escalation—millions of Vietnamese dead, more than 50,000 American soldiers killed, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia laid waste—does not interest McMaster’s fan club in the slightest.

Even more reactionary is McMaster’s argument that the main defect of the Vietnam War was the failure of the generals to assert themselves more forcefully against the civilian leadership. Their “dereliction of duty” consisted of allowing themselves to be overruled by a president who, in McMaster’s view, was more interested in winning the war on poverty than the war in Southeast Asia.

More recently, McMaster has been engaged in a 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.

The response to the selection of McMaster underscores the fact that the conflict that has raged within the political establishment since Trump’s inauguration has nothing to do with the concerns motivating millions of people opposed to Trump’s authoritarianism and right-wing policies. As far as Trump’s establishment critics are concerned, the more power the military and intelligence agencies have over the instruments of state, the better.

In terms of policies, if the desires of those promoting the “moderate” McMaster are fulfilled, there will be a

vast escalation of US militarism in relation to Russia, a nuclear-armed power. As for Trump’s other “moderate” generals, Department of Homeland Security head John Kelly is overseeing the assault on immigrant workers and has signed a memo calling for the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of national guardsmen to enforce it. Secretary of Defense Mattis, a war criminal responsible for the destruction of Fallujah, is overseeing a massive expansion of the military in preparation for world war.

All of this demonstrates, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has stressed, that Trump is not an interloper into an otherwise healthy democratic society. His administration is the outcome of twenty-five years of unending war and decades of social counterrevolution. The American financial aristocracy stands atop a deeply diseased social order and relies ever more directly on the instruments of war and state repression to maintain its domination.

There is no popular support for further military adventures in the Middle East, let alone the cataclysmic prospect of war with China or Russia, both nuclear-armed powers. The drive to maintain the dominant world position of American imperialism by means of ever more bloody military aggression abroad is inseparably linked to a frontal assault on the social conditions and democratic rights of the working class at home.

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