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White House shakeup: A further step toward authoritarian rule

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Friday's announcement by President Trump removing White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus and replacing him with retired Gen. John F. Kelly marks a further stage in the emergence of the military brass as the decisive political power in the Trump administration.

With General Kelly as White House chief of staff, Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, an active duty officer, as national security adviser, and retired Gen. James Mattis as secretary of defense, military men hold three of the top four appointed positions in the executive branch.

Press coverage of the White House transition has focused almost entirely on the Twitter antics by Trump and the vulgar ranting by his new communications director, former hedge fund boss Anthony Scaramucci. A sober assessment of the actual political implications of the White House reshuffle reveals, however, that the events of the past week mark a major turning point for the Trump administration and the crisis-ridden US political system as a whole.

Trump fired Priebus, the former chairman of the Republican National Committee, whom he chose as chief of staff to act as a conduit to the Republican congressional leadership and the party establishment. He has replaced him with a retired Marine general with no political record and an avowed and well-publicized contempt for civilian oversight of the military—one, moreover, who, as secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, has overseen the administration's program of mass arrests and deportations of undocumented immigrants.

The president coupled the removal of Priebus with a public blast against Senate Republicans, including Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, over their failure last week to enact any version of a repeal of the Obama administration's Affordable Care Act.

Trump responded with a series of tweets saying Senate Republicans "look like fools" and demanding that McConnell trample on minority rights in the Senate and proceed immediately to push through White House proposals for slashing taxes on the wealthy and gutting social programs such as Medicaid.

Trump presents himself more and more as a ruler above the two capitalist political parties, while seeking to surround himself with uniformed audiences. He addressed 40,000 Boy Scouts assembled at a jamboree in West Virginia, then gave a speech Friday to police on Long Island in which he endorsed "rough" treatment for immigrants and others under arrest, touching off chants of "USA, USA" from the assembled cops.

While inciting police violence, Trump made direct appeals to ultra-right bigotry with a tweet calling for the expulsion of transgendered people from the military and new legal steps by the Justice Department directed against the democratic rights of homosexuals.

Added to this is the rancid atmosphere of palace intrigue in the White House. It is widely reported that Trump family members played a key role in the firing of Priebus, with son-in-law Jared Kushner, daughter Ivanka Trump and First Lady Melania Trump all weighing in.

In all of this there is the stench of dictatorship. Trump is pursuing a definite political strategy. He is seeking to carve out for himself, as the representative of the financial oligarchy, a position of power independent of the apparatuses of the establishment political parties and the traditional institutions of bourgeois rule such as Congress, the courts and the so-called mainstream media.

Like all would-be Bonapartist autocrats, he seeks to establish a personalist regime based on the military and police. His use of Twitter is an essential component of this effort. He bypasses the establishment media and makes his appeal directly to the military and police while seeking to whip up national chauvinism and all forms of social and political backwardness. He seeks in this way to establish a base he can mobilize independently of the political parties.

But Trump is not some aberration or accident, an interloper into the otherwise pristine precincts of American democracy. He is the product of decades of uninterrupted war, reaction and decay of political culture within the ruling class and all official institutions, including academia—a process that has been presided over by both big-business parties. This has coincided with the rise of a criminal financial oligarchy and a staggering growth of social inequality to levels incompatible with democratic norms.

The Democratic Party for its part welcomes the appointment of Kelly. Its opposition to Trump continues to be centered on demands for an escalation of the confrontation with Russia. It welcomes any sign that this is being done, such as the White House's announcement that Trump will sign the bill passed last week with virtual bipartisan unanimity imposing new sanctions on Russia, as well as Iran and North Korea.

It fears no less than the Republicans the growth of social opposition and anticapitalist sentiment in the working class and supports the domination of the military over the political system as insurance against the threat of social revolution.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi praised General Kelly during an appearance on Fox News Sunday, while expressing the hope that he would improve the functioning of the Trump White House. “I will be speaking with him today and look forward to working with him,” she said.

On another Sunday interview program, CNN’s “State of the Union,” Democratic Representative Barbara Lee was grilled for remarking that by putting General Kelly in charge, “President Trump is militarizing the White House and putting our executive branch in the hands of an extremist.” Lee backpedaled from the suggestion that she was antimilitary, declaring, “Let me first say, I have come from a military family... And so I respect and honor the military and recognize the sacrifices that all of our military men and women make as well as General Kelly and his history and his sacrifices.”

Senator Bernie Sanders appeared on the same program and did not even make reference to the White House shakeup.

The concentration of wealth in the hands of a tiny financial oligarchy, personified by social criminals like Trump and Scaramucci, is completely incompatible with democratic rights. The defense of democratic rights falls to the working class, as a central element in its struggle for the abolition of the profit system and the socialist reorganization of society.