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By Patrick Martin
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Trump names ultra-right congressman as intelligence chief

In a tweet Sunday, President Trump announced that he will nominate ultra-right Republican Representative John Ratcliffe to replace Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Dan Coats, who has submitted his resignation effective August 15.

Coats filled the position as the nominal head of the vast US intelligence apparatus for more than two years. The DNI controls no intelligence resources of its own, but is supposed to act as the spokesman for the 17 agencies that report through him to the president. In practice, however, the CIA provides the “President’s Daily Brief” and other key intelligence documents to the White House.

A former US senator from Indiana with a conventional right-wing Republican foreign policy perspective, Coats reportedly had clashed frequently with Trump over key national security issues, taking a harder line on Russia and North Korea and a more conciliatory one on Iran, but always pulled back rather than provoke his dismissal.

Despite the frequent disagreements, Trump hesitated to fire him because, as a former Republican senator, he had close ties to the current Senate Republican majority. But he increasingly ignored Coats’ advice while issuing public tongue-lashings on Twitter.

Early this year, after Coats testified before Congress that Iran was complying with its obligations under the nuclear agreement with the US and five other countries and was not engaged in developing nuclear weapons, Trump declared, “The Intelligence people seem

to be extremely passive and naive when it comes to the dangers of Iran. They are wrong!” He added, “Perhaps Intelligence should go back to school!”

Coats also told Congress that North Korea was “unlikely to completely give up its nuclear weapons and production capabilities,” although Trump was proclaiming a supposed agreement with Kim Jong-un to do exactly that.

Coats openly sided with the anti-Russia campaign being waged by sections of the military-intelligence apparatus with the backing of the Democratic Party and much of the media. One of his final actions was to appoint a top aide to head an interagency effort to protect the 2020 US elections from alleged “meddling” by Russia, China, Iran or another foreign power.

In naming Ratcliffe, a three-term congressman with no specific expertise in intelligence matters, Trump has clearly sought to install a personal loyalist as DNI. Coats had no intelligence background either, but he was a known quantity to the intelligence agencies from his 12 years in the US Senate as well as a term as US ambassador to Germany.

Ratcliffe was the mayor of the small town of Heath, Texas, before being named a US attorney during the George W. Bush administration. At one point, he reportedly boasted of having personally arrested 300 “illegal aliens” in a single day, a dubious claim that no doubt won him favor with the anti-immigrant cabal in the White House.

Ratcliffe was elected in 2014 from the Fourth Congressional District in rural northeast Texas, along the borders with Oklahoma and Arkansas. The largest city in the district is Texarkana, although it includes some northeast suburbs of the Dallas-Ft. Worth metropolitan area.

The district was represented by conservative Democrats for decades, including Sam Rayburn, the longtime Democratic speaker of the House, and Ralph Hall, who switched to the Republican Party but was ultimately beaten by Ratcliffe in a Republican primary.

The congressman’s website proudly records that in 2016 the Heritage Foundation rated him the most conservative congressman from Texas and the second most conservative of all 435 members of the House of Representatives.

Ratcliffe was clearly being groomed for a position in the Trump administration. After the 2018 election, he was placed on the House Intelligence Committee, giving him greater access to classified information and the chance to develop a record in that area.

It was in that capacity that he made headlines last week as the most strident defender of President Trump during the Intelligence Committee hearing for former Special Counsel Robert Mueller. He denounced Mueller for the second half of his lengthy report, which discussed possible obstruction of justice charges while declaring that Trump could not be indicted for such offenses while in office, according to a ruling by the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel.

Ratcliffe demagogically assailed Mueller, declaring, "You wrote 180 pages about decisions that weren't reached, about potential crimes that weren't charged or decided... by doing that, you managed to violate every principle and the most sacred of traditions about prosecutors."

The congressman said nothing about the Office of Legal Counsel ruling, which Mueller interpreted as prohibiting him from making a final prosecutorial decision.

In a subsequent appearance on Fox News, Ratcliffe was not hesitant at all about allegations of wrongdoing, claiming that "there were crimes committed during the Obama administration" in the initial stages of the FBI investigation into the Trump campaign and its purported ties with Russia.

Senate Republicans, who are expected to confirm Ratcliffe in a party-line vote, nonetheless were at pains to distance themselves from him initially, in case the nomination collapses either through Trump's erratic conduct or the nominee's own problematic background.

Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Intelligence Committee Chair Richard Burr each issued statements praising Coats for his service but making no mention of his potential replacement, Ratcliffe.

Leading Democrats praised Coats as a representative of the bipartisan anti-Russia campaign, while denouncing Ratcliffe as a Trump toady. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi issued a statement declaring, "The departure of DNI Coats is bad news for the security of America. As a Republican Senator from Indiana, a George W. Bush-appointed Ambassador to Germany and Director of National Intelligence, he was respected by those on both sides of the aisle as an American patriot.

"DNI Coats' successor must put patriotism before politics, and remember that his oath is to protect the Constitution and the American people, not the President."

In particular, Democrats are demanding that Trump appoint Coats' deputy, career intelligence official Sue Gordon, as acting DNI while Ratcliffe's nomination goes through the Senate. Trump tweeted, "The Acting Director will be named shortly," but did not reveal his choice.

Whoever is chosen will add to the long list of "acting" officials, valued by Trump because they are not Senate-confirmed, making them more dependent on White House support and less subject to legislative oversight.

The addition of Ratcliffe will continue a process in which Trump has tightened his personal grip on the national security apparatus by installing in most of the key positions ultra-right political hacks whose only "qualification" is their loyalty to him.

Besides Mike Pompeo, a far-right congressman before he became CIA director and now secretary of state, Trump has installed as secretary of defense Mark Esper, a former Raytheon lobbyist and longtime Republican congressional aide. Trump's nominee for deputy secretary of defense, David Norquist, is the brother of longtime Republican anti-tax activist Grover Norquist; the nominee for UN ambassador, Kelly Craft, is the wife of coal billionaire and Republican campaign donor Joe Craft.

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