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A New John Ratcliffe or the Same Old Story?



Photograph Source: Office of Congressman John Ratcliffe – Public Domain

Last summer, Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats was forced to resign because of his assessments of Russia and North Korea that opposed the personal and political views of Donald Trump. The removal of Coats meant there was no longer a member of the national security team willing to contradict the views of the president. For the past year, moreover, as a result of the purge of intelligence personnel, the top two positions in the Office of the DNI and the Department of Homeland Security were occupied by “acting” officials who had not received congressional confirmation.

Last month, the acting director of national intelligence, Joseph Maquire, was forced to resign because he permitted his deputy to brief the congressional intelligence committees

on a continued Russian interference campaign against U.S. governance. On both occasions, Trump selected a loyalist from the House of Representatives, John Ratcliffe (R/TX), to serve as the director of national intelligence. Last year, there was bipartisan opposition to Ratcliffe; this month he will be easily confirmed on the basis of a strict party line vote. What happened?

Ratcliffe was denied a hearing a year ago because he had no national security experience and made false claims in his resume in order to create the impression of experience. Ratcliffe had falsely claimed on his website that he “arrested over 300 illegal immigrants in a single day” and had “put terrorists” in prison. In actual fact, Ratcliffe had not tried a single terrorism case during his time as a U.S. federal prosecutor in Texas.

Since the creation of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in the wake of the 9/11 intelligence failure, the office has never been led by someone with no national security or international relations experience. The support for Ratcliffe from Senator Susan Collins (R/ME) is particularly stunning because she co-wrote the law that created the DNI.

Trump has no stronger loyalist in the House of Representatives than Ratcliffe, who was particularly hostile to Robert Mueller, the former special counsel, during hearings in July 2019, and very aggressive in defending Trump in this year’s impeachment process. At last week’s confirmation hearings by the Senate intelligence committee, Ratcliffe continued to defend Trump’s positions on various issues, including Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. The chairman of the committee, Senator Richard Burr (R/TX), who considered Ratcliffe much too political for the position of DNI in 2019, suddenly found him “incredibly transparent” and determined he was “more than capable” of being DNI. What happened?

If anything, Ratcliffe appears to be more of a loyalist now than he was a year ago. When Senator Tom Cotton (R/AR) argued the specious line from Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that the novel coronavirus could not have originated in a public market, Ratcliffe agreed. When Cotton, the strongest Trump loyalist in the Senate, pressed Ratcliffe to agree that the president is allowed to set intelligence priorities, Ratcliffe signed on. Of course, the president can set analytical or covert priorities in the field of intelligence, but Ratcliffe needed to acknowledge the importance of the overall intelligence process.

Well, there has been one major change since the initial nomination of Ratcliffe and that would be the newly vulnerable position of the chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, Richard Burr. We learned in April that Burr sold \$1.7 million in stocks shortly after receiving a sensitive briefing from the intelligence community about the pandemic and shortly before the stock market crash. Burr went from someone who had a low-volume trading history to someone who unloaded a significant portion of his net worth. The matter is now being investigated by the Senate Ethics Committee.

I have some experience with this kind of congressional cowardice. When I was testifying to the Senate intelligence committee in 1991 to block the confirmation of Robert Gates as director of central intelligence, there were three prominent Democrats (John Glenn, Alan Cranston, and Dennis DeConcini) who were clearly opposed to confirming Gates but voted to do so because of their own ethical issues in the Senate and their fear of punishment. These senators had received campaign funding from Charles Keating, a central figure in the multibillion-dollar savings-and-loan scandal of the 1980s.

The vice chairman of the Ethics Committee, moreover, was Warren Rudman, who sat on the intelligence committee, and was the most aggressive cheerleader on behalf of Gates and the White House. In any event, the Republican Senators circled the wagons on Gates' behalf, and he was confirmed. Once again, the Republicans are circling the wagons on behalf of the White House so that Ratcliffe will be confirmed.

As a former whistleblower regarding the politicization of intelligence at the Central Intelligence Agency in the 1980s, I am particularly sensitive to Ratcliffe's unwillingness to use his confirmation hearings to defend the laws that protect whistleblowers. Senator Ron Wyden (D/OR) did his best to get some sign of support from Ratcliffe for whistleblowers, but had no success. Ratcliffe would not have appeared in an impeachment process to display his support for the Trump presidency if it had not been for a courageous whistleblower from the CIA.

Nevertheless, the headlines of America's two major newspapers, the Washington Post and the New York Times," suggest that they too are willing to forgive and forget. The Post headlined that "Ratcliffe vows independence if confirmed as spy chief," and the Times trumpeted that "Ratcliffe Vows 'Unvarnished Truth' as Spy Chief." It seems that we have become so accustomed to the plethora of lies from the White House, that false statements on the Hill are not so meaningful. CounterPunch 11.05.2020