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BY MELVIN GOODMAN

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Biden's Pentagon Pick: a Five-Sided Blunder



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President-elect Joe Biden has made so many excellent appointments to his Cabinet, particularly in the areas of the economy and health, that it is stunning to see such a worrisome appointment to the Pentagon. The nomination of retired Army General Lloyd J. Austin III will lead to an unnecessary battle over his required waiver as well as his confirmation. The opposition should not be dismissed as the usual progressive voices against a leading member of the military-industrial community, which Austin represents, but the need to maintain civilian control of the military as the Founding Fathers wished.

First of all, civilian control of the military has been under attack since the unfortunate passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act in 1986 that enhanced the political influence of the regional commanders-in-chief, such as General Anthony Zinni and David Petraeus, and marginalized the civilian leaders of the Department of Defense. These regional commanders became more

influential than U.S. ambassadors and assistant secretaries of state. The Act created a more powerful chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, allowing the chairman to bypass the secretary of defense and personally brief the president on war plans. Nevertheless, the Act passed the Senate with little discussion and without one vote of opposition.

President Ronald Reagan's strengthening of the uniformed military was at the expense of the Department of State. President Bill Clinton further weakened the State Department by abolishing the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and the United States Information Service. Clinton ignored the strong opposition of our diplomats when he pursued the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which continues to complicate U.S. relations with Russia. President Barack Obama demonstrated too much deference to the military, particularly in his first term, which then Vice President Biden tried to prevent.

Second, General Austin has an excellent background in operational and tactical issues, but he has never had to deal with serious strategic issues. The best secretaries of defense, Harold Brown and William Perry, have been serious strategic thinkers, and have made contributions to the development of strategic weapons as well as the conduct of arms control and disarmament. My 18 years on the faculty of the National War College led me to conclude that the professional military, which was strengthened by President Richard Nixon's elimination of the draft during the Vietnam War, has a dearth of strategic thinkers. General George Marshall received a waiver to serve as secretary of defense in 1950 because he was that rare strategic thinker. General James Mattis was no George Marshall, but he received such a waiver in 2017.

Third, General Austin has had limited experience in Washington, D.C., which would have exposed him to the demands and pressures of politics and policy. General Colin Powell succeeded as national security adviser for Reagan and secretary of state for President George W. Bush because he was a political general and had political mentors such as Henry Kissinger and James Baker. The same could be said for General Brent Scowcroft. The recent examples of Generals H.R. McMaster, John Kelly, and Michael Flynn illustrate the problems that our three and four-star generals have in negotiating the political waters on the other side of the Potomac.

One of the best directors at the Central Intelligence Agency was Navy Admiral Stansfield Turner, but he lacked Washington experience and was essentially run aground by a manipulative civilian decision maker, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who limited Turner's time with President Jimmy Carter and undercut Turner's senior intelligence analysts. Turner also had to deal with senior officials in the directorate of operations who opposed Turner's personnel cuts that were in fact ordered by the White House.

Fourth, Michele Flournoy reportedly did not get the nomination of secretary of defense because of her intense ties to the military-industrial complex. Well, Austin left the military in 2016 and immediately joined the board of United Technologies (jet engines and aviation

electronics), which soon thereafter merged with Raytheon Company (Patriot and Tomahawk missiles). Raytheon sells precision-guided bombs to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which have been used against civilians in Yemen. Austin is also a partner in an investment firm that has been buying small military contractors (rocket launching systems and machine guns.) According to the *New York Times*, Austin owns more than \$500 million in Raytheon stock, and has received \$1.4 million in stock and other compensation from United Technologies over the past four years. President Dwight D. Eisenhower's prescient warning about the military-industrial complex has never been more relevant in view of a bloated defense budget that has gone from \$560 billion to \$740 billion in the past four years. Fifth, there is no reason to believe that General Austin could be an effective voice in assessing the current shift in the Pentagon's budgetary and policy thinking that finds a deemphasis on counter-terrorism and an emphasis on military planning against both Russia and China. The effective counters toward Russia and China at this juncture should be found at the Department of State. The Pentagon's efforts to justify our excessive spending on defense will lead to tactic maneuvers in Central Europe and the Pacific that will merely worsen relations with both Beijing and Moscow. Group think on China has captured the incoming Biden administration, the Congress, and the pundit community. It needs to be challenged or an unneeded and unnecessary confrontation with China will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is too late for Biden to reverse direction at the Pentagon, but it is not too late for the Congress to do its job in denying a waiver and thus a confirmation of General Austin. As far back as 1997, senior Defense Department civilians, including then secretary of defense William Cohen, warned about a "chasm developing between the military and civilian worlds, where....the military doesn't understand...why criticism [of the military] is so quick and unrelenting." The all-volunteer military has drifted too far from the norms of American society, is inordinately right-wing politically, and is more religious (and fundamentalist) than America as a whole. We need a reformer at the Pentagon, not another four-star general.

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Melvin A. Goodman is a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy and a professor of government at Johns Hopkins University. A former CIA analyst, Goodman is the author of [Failure of Intelligence: The Decline and Fall of the CIA](#) and [National Insecurity: The Cost of American Militarism](#), and [A Whistleblower at the CIA](#). His most recent book is "American Carnage: The Wars of Donald Trump" (Opus Publishing), and he is the author of the forthcoming "The Dangerous National Security State" (2020)." Goodman is the national security columnist for counterpunch.org.