Biden's Transition Team Is Filled with War Profiteers, Beltway Chickenhawks, and Corporate Consultants

A glance at the Biden-Harris agency review teams should provide a rude awakening to anyone who believed a Biden administration could be "pushed to the left."

By Kevin Gosztola
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An eye-popping array of corporate consultants, war profiteers, and national security hawks have been appointed by President-elect Joe Biden to agency review teams that will set the agenda for his administration. A substantial percentage of them worked in the United States government when Barack Obama was president.

The appointments should provide a rude awakening to anyone who believed a Biden administration could be pressured to move in a progressive direction, especially on foreign policy.

If the agency teams are any indication, Biden will be firmly insulated from any pressure to depart from the neoliberal status quo, which the former vice president has pledged to restore. Instead, he is likely to be pushed in an opposite direction, towards an interventionist foreign policy dictated by elite Beltway interests and consumed by Cold War fever.

Regime change addicts and revolving doors

A prime example of the interventionist-minded establishment-oriented figures filling the Biden-Harris Defense Department agency team is Lisa Sawyer. She served as director for NATO and European strategic affairs for the National Security Council from 2014 to 2015, and worked for Wall Street's JPMorgan Chase as a foreign policy adviser. Sawyer was part of the Center for a New American Security's "Task Force on the Future of US Coercive Economic Statecraft," which essentially means she participated in meetings that focused on methods of economic warfare that could be used to destabilize countries that refused to bow to American empire.

Sawyer believes the US government is not doing enough to deter Russian "aggression," US troop levels in Europe should return to the levels they were at in 2012, and offensive weapons shipments to Ukraine should continue and increase in violation of the Minsk Agreements.

> "Instead of saying we will lift sanctions when Russia decides to comply with the next agreement, say that we will raise them until they do. Instead of kowtowing to Russia's supposed spears of influence, provide Ukraine the lethal assistance it so desperately needs and increase US support to vulnerable

nations in the gray zone," Sawyer [declared](#) when testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2017.

US assistant secretary of state for African affairs Linda Thomas-Greenfield was appointed leader of the Biden-Harris State Department team. She is a [stalwart ally](#) of former US national security adviser Susan Rice, who [pushed](#) for war in Libya, supported the invasion of Iraq, and was [involved](#) in the decision to remove peacekeepers from the United Nations which enabled Rwanda genocide.

As a developer and manager for US policy toward sub-Saharan Africa, she [cheered](#) President George W. Bush's Millennium Challenge Account, a neocolonialist policy [designed](#) to privilege US corporations and facilitate the economic exploitation of so-called emerging African economies.

Thomas-Greenfield has been a [part](#) of the Albright Stonebridge Group, a global consulting firm chaired by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright that lobbies for the defense industry.

Albright Stonebridge's [client list](#) has included the management firm of vulture capitalist GOP mega-donor Paul Singer. When the two Beltway teamed up to suck Argentina's economy dry during the country's last debt crisis, then-President Cristina Kirchner [accused](#) Albright of threatening to fund her opponents unless she ceded to her demands.

The State Department group also includes Dana Stroul, a fellow at the neoconservative Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), which was originally founded by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

As [The Grayzone's Ben Norton](#) reported, Stroul was enlisted by Senate Democrats in 2019 to join the "Syria Study Group" to help map out the next phase of the US dirty war in Syria. The recommendations included maintaining a military occupation of one-third of the country, the "resource rich part of Syria" in order to give the US leverage to "influence a political outcome."

> At a US gov-funded think tank, this official who oversaw Congress' Syria Study Group outlines the continued regime-change strategy.
>
> She says the US military "owned" 1/3rd of Syrian territory, including its oil/wheat-rich region. And the US is trying to block reconstruction funds [pic.twitter.com/NIEJ9elxhs](#)
>
> — Ben Norton (@BenjaminNorton) [November 5, 2019](#)

Stroul urged further economic sanctions against Damascus and the obstruction of reconstruction aid, which has already led to [shortages of oil and bread](#).

Ali Abunimah of the Electronic Intifada [noted](#) that Farooq Mitha, a former Pentagon official in the Obama administration, has been appointed to Biden's Pentagon transition team. Mitha was a board member of Emgage, a Muslim American PAC which has fostered [ties](#) to the Israel lobby, provoking angry condemnation from Palestine solidarity advocates. Mitha has reportedly attended AIPAC conferences.

Multiple Biden-Harris appointees back regime change in Venezuela. Paula Garcia Tufro was a [member](#) of Obama's National Security Council and is on the NSC team. She was at the NSC when Obama [declared](#) Venezuela a "national security threat" and has consorted with a D.C. group that represents failed coup plotter Juan Guaido.

Kelly Magsamen, the vice president of national security and international policy at the Center for American Progress and a former Pentagon and State Department official, is on the Biden-Harris NSC team. When Representative Ilhan Omar [grilled](#) Elliott Abrams, the special envoy to Venezuela, Magsamen rushed to the defense of her former boss, [calling](#) Abrams a "fierce advocate for human rights." (Abrams supported death squads in Central America in the 1980s.)

Kelly Magsamen @kellymagsamen — Follow

I worked for Elliott Abrams as a civil servant. He is a fierce advocate for human rights and democracy. Yes, he made serious professional mistakes and was held accountable. I'm a liberal but I'm also fair. We all have a lot of work to do together in Venezuela. We share goals.

5:50 PM - 13 Feb 2019

Former US ambassador to Mexico Roberta Jacobson is a member of the State Department transition team. Marketing herself as an expert on "Latin American business politics," Jacobson has also [worked](#) for the Albright Stonebridge Group consulting firm.

Jacobson helped devise the Obama administration's designation of Venezuela as a national security threat, setting the stage for the economic blockade imposed under Trump.

> "In a rude and petulant manner, Mrs. Jacobson tells us what to do," Venezuela's then-Foreign Minister Delcy Rodriguez [complained](#) at the time. "I know her very well because I have seen her personally, her way of walking, chewing. You need manners to deal with people and with countries."

Derek Chollet and Ellison Laskowski, both senior staffers at the German Marshall Fund (GMF), are also on Biden-Harris State Department group. GMF has pushed for a more belligerent US and European posture toward Russia while supporting a dubious information war project [called](#) Hamilton 68. This website claimed to be able to identify "Russian influence operations" while fueling social media censorship of accounts that promoted anti-imperialist narratives, misidentifying real people as "Russian bots," and [orchestrating smears](#) against Black Lives Matter protests by branding them as instruments of covert Russian influence.

Today, [@SecureDemocracy](#) designated [@theintercept](#) and [@Antiwarcom](#) as

key cogs in Russian influence operations. https://t.co/tEHwsvKsat pic.twitter.com/6ietGM5PSH

— Max Blumenthal (@MaxBlumenthal) September 28, 2017

The Biden-Harris intelligence team features Greg Vogle, the former CIA head of station in Afghanistan and a former partner at the McChrystal Group consulting firm founded by former commander of Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) Stanley McChrystal. Both JSOC and the CIA, as well as the paramilitary forces they trained, have committed war crimes in Afghanistan.

Vogle also found time to work for a US military contractor named DGC International that provides construction, fueling, oxygen, liquid nitrogen, and other logistical support to US military forces, cashing in on wars across the Middle East.

As Sarah Lazare reported for In These Times, "Of the 23 people who comprise the Department of Defense agency review team, eight of them — or just over a third — list their "most recent employment" as organizations, think tanks or companies that either directly receive money from the weapons industry, or are part of this industry." Those companies include Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, General Dynamics, and Lockheed Martin.

Vogle is joined on the intelligence team by Matt Olsen, the former National Counterterrorism Center director for Obama and briefly, the general counsel for the National Security Agency (NSA).

From 2006-2009, Olsen served as deputy attorney general for the Justice Department's National Security Division. There, he broke down barriers that prevented prosecutors from being able to use information collected through clandestine operations and warrantless surveillance in criminal cases. He also helped craft the FISA Amendments Act, which granted telecommunications companies immunity for their role in the NSA's warrantless wiretapping program established after the 9/11 attacks.

Olsen is a defender of backdoor searches of Americans' internet communications, having argued that the Fourth Amendment right to privacy is too cumbersome for the FBI to follow. He spent the months after NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden exposed mass surveillance programs working to discredit Snowden by accusing the whistleblower of aiding terrorists.

Another Snowden opponent on the Biden-Harris intelligence team is Bob Litt, who was the Office of Director of National Intelligence's top lawyer. When any media organization ran a story on some new aspect of the US surveillance apparatus, Litt was the national security state's spokesperson deployed to downplay or dismiss the revelation.

When Director of National Intelligence James Clapper was skewered for lying to Congress about the collection of Americans' phone metadata, for example, Litt rose to Clapper's defense, absurdly arguing the director was "surprised by the question and focused his mind on the collection of the content of Americans' communications."

In fact, the Biden-Harris agency review teams are packed with figures likely to enshrine lawlessness and disdain for civil liberties if they enter the administration.

Agents of injustice

They include Department of Justice review team member Marty Lederman. A Georgetown Law professor, Lederman was the deputy assistant attorney general in the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel from 2009 to 2010. He helped draft the "drone memo" that outlined the supposed "legal basis" for executing Anwar al-Awlaki, an Al Qaeda affiliated terrorism suspect without charge or trial, despite the fact that Al-Awlaki was an American citizen.

Joining Lederman is Barbara McQuade, an ex-MSNBC contributor and former US attorney in the Eastern District of Michigan, which has jurisdiction over Dearborn, Detroit, and Flint. During her time as the government's top prosecutor in Flint, McQuade had the power to bring charges against Michigan officials responsible for contaminating the city's water and lying to the public about it, but she waited out her tenure without doing anything of substance to hold them accountable.

McQuade's office was complicit in the racial profiling and intrusive surveillance of Arab, Muslim, and Sikh communities in Dearborn. She pursued the political prosecution of Rasmea Odeh, a prominent Palestinian American civil rights activist in Chicago, resulting in Odeh's deportation to Jordan.

Odeh was tortured by Israeli forces, the State Department knew she was accused of violence by the Israeli government, yet she was allowed to immigrate to the US in the 1990s. Nonetheless, Odeh was convicted of immigration fraud and deported to Jordan as part of an effort to salvage a larger FBI counterintelligence operation against antiwar and international solidarity activists.

Neil MacBride, the former US Attorney in the Eastern District of Virginia, is on the Biden-Harris Justice Department team too. Although his office did not indict WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, MacBride oversaw the grand jury that was empaneled to aid the US government in its efforts to destroy the media organization.

MacBride presided over the prosecution of CIA whistleblowers John Kiriakou and Jeffrey Sterling, enabling Obama to claim the dishonorable record of more prosecutions under the Espionage Act than all previous presidential administrations combined. MacBride also fought in federal court for the authority to force New York Times reporter James Risen to divulge his confidential sources in the Sterling case, threatening the correspondent with jail time if he refused.

At an Aspen Security Forum event in July 2013, MacBride was asked by Michael Isikoff, "Have you gone overboard, Neil?" MacBride replied, "No, I don't believe we have."

> MacBride oversaw grand jury investigation against WikiLeaks until he resigned from his position as US Attorney in August 2013. He prosecuted CIA whistleblowers @JohnKiriakou and Jeffrey Sterling (@S_UnwantedSpy).
>
> — Kevin Gosztola (@kgosztola) November 12, 2020

The Biden-Harris team leader for the Labor Department team is Chris Lu, a cheerleader for the Trans-Pacific Partnership corporate free trade deal as Obama's Deputy Secretary of Labor.

Half dozen or so of the appointees have links to Big Tech companies. Perhaps the most significant figure is Seth Harris, a lobbyist and former Obama Labor Department official who wrote a policy paper for the neoliberal Hamilton Project.

This paper provided the framework for the passage of Proposition 22 in California. Uber, Doordash, and Lyft spent around $200 million to campaign for the passage of this bill, which exempted them and other corporations from paying their employees benefits and blocked Uber and Lyft drivers from organizing a union.

Max Moran of The American Prospect contended Proposition 22 was Harris' audition for Labor Secretary in a Biden administration. Given its smashing success in duping supposedly progressive Californians of all demographics into supporting corporate oppression of workers, Harris has earned himself the job.

And like the interventionists that dominate the foreign policy review teams, Moran embodies Biden's pledge to big money donors: "Nothing will fundamentally change."

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