

General Kelly's Tirade and the Threat of Military Dictatorship in America

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Two-and-a-half weeks after the deaths of four US Special Forces troops during a firefight in the landlocked West African nation of Niger, the American media has remained fixated on the ugly controversy surrounding President Donald Trump's condolence call to the grieving widow of one of the soldiers, made as she was driving to the airport to meet his coffin.

Accounts given by both family members and Democratic Congresswoman Frederica Wilson, who was in the car when the call came over the speaker phone, leave no doubt that the indifference of the billionaire conman in the White House to the death of a 25-year-old African-American soldier from an impoverished Florida town and his incapacity to express empathy for the family came through loud and clear.

Out of his mouth, the phrase "he knew what he signed up for" to describe the path that led Sgt. La David Johnson to his death had all of the warmth of his attitude toward the layoff of one of his casino employees or the losses his multiple bankruptcies inflicted on business partners. It is of a piece with his tossing of rolls of paper towels to desperate victims of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico.

Sergeant Johnson's widow was reportedly distraught over Trump's call, noting that the US president did not even know her husband's name.

The episode encapsulated not merely the sociopathic personality of the US president, but the attitude of America's ruling oligarchy toward the members of the all-volunteer army that it employs to pursue its profit interests by means of military aggression all over the world.

Behind the backs of the American people, the Pentagon has steadily escalated its military intervention in Africa, with between 650 and 800 US troops deployed in Niger and another 400 or more on the ground in Somalia. At least 1,700 US special operations troops are deployed across the continent, more than in any other region of the globe outside of the Middle East. Under the cloak of the "war on terrorism," US imperialism is flexing its military might in a bid to counter growing Chinese economic influence in a region rich in strategic resources.

The controversy over Trump's call to the family of Sergeant Johnson was not only politically damaging to the White House, it cut across Washington's global aims. To put out the fire, the administration called in the White House chief of staff, retired Marine Gen. John Kelly, whose son was killed by a land mine in Afghanistan in 2010.

There had been widespread speculation in the media that Kelly had remained silent and out of the public eye because of disgust with Trump's handling of the Niger casualties and the

president's attempt to present his own attitude to American war dead as superior to that of his predecessors in the Oval Office.

On Thursday, however, Kelly obligingly turned his son's death into a political asset for Donald Trump, while invoking the supposed superiority of the military over civilian society and its institutions in order to intimidate the media. This tactic included Kelly's exclusion of anyone save members of Gold Star families (which have lost loved ones in combat) or reporters who knew such families from questioning him.

It was largely successful, finding immediate reflection in the tone adopted by a cowed media. One of the first reporters daring to pose a question to the general began by giving out the Marine Corps motto—*Semper Fi*—establishing his loyalty to the military.

The message was further driven home on Friday when it emerged that Kelly had falsely accused Congresswoman Wilson of bragging at a public ceremony about securing funding for a government building in Miami named after slain FBI agents. When a reporter pointed out that his charge was a lie, the White House press secretary responded:

"If you want to get into a debate with a four-star Marine general, I think that that's something highly inappropriate."

There has always been a certain tension between military and civilian life. Even during the Second World War, when masses of civilians entered the armed forces, GIs referred with a measure of contempt to those not serving as "feather merchants." Kelly, however, spoke, with a distinct tone of bitterness and resentment, as the representative of a military caste that has become increasingly alienated from and hostile to civilian society and civilian authority.

"They are the best 1 percent this country produces," he said, referring to Washington's all-volunteer military. "Most of you, as Americans, don't know them. Many of you don't know anyone who knows any one of them. But they are the very best this country produces, and they volunteer to protect our country when there's nothing in our country anymore that seems to suggest that selfless service to the nation is not only appropriate, but required. But that's all right."

He went on to compound his defense of the military against supposed civilian contempt and indifference with the expression of extreme right-wing views.

"You know, when I was a kid growing up, a lot of things were sacred in our country," he said. "Women were sacred, looked upon with great honor. That's obviously not the case anymore as we see from recent cases. Life—the dignity of life—is sacred. That's gone. Religion, that seems to be gone as well."

While the invocation of women and religion as "sacred" hardly calls to mind the image of Donald Trump, it does resonate, along with "the dignity of life," i.e., the banning of abortion, with the key political constituency of the Christian right.

The appointment of Kelly, like that of Gen. James "Mad Dog" Mattis (ret.) as secretary of

defense and active-duty Gen. H.R. McMaster as national security advisor, was supported by the Democratic Party and the media as a welcome turn by the Trump administration. The *New York Times* referred to the retired and active-duty generals that dominate the Trump cabinet as “the adults in the room,” while the *Washington Post* referred to them as “voices for moderation” and “moral authorities.”

In reality, these senior career military officers are, if anything, to the right of Donald Trump. They see the pseudo-populist and nationalist demagoguery of the US president as a useful instrument for advancing the political agenda of the vast “military industrial complex” against which President Dwight Eisenhower warned more than half a century ago, and which has since become the dominant force within the American state.

The politics of these generals and ex-generals should come as no surprise. While Kelly hails the “one percent,” referring to the volunteer troops, many of them economic conscripts brought into the military from poor and working-class backgrounds, he and those like him are part of another 1 percent, drawing down military pensions totaling over \$200,000 a year while earning hundreds of thousands more by serving as advisors and board members for military contractors and arms manufacturers.

This intersection of a right-wing military caste and a parasitic capitalist oligarchy under conditions of ever widening social inequality is one of the sharpest expressions of the decay of American capitalism and the thorough erosion of any social or political foundation for democratic forms of rule.

Among Kelly’s most significant remarks was his denunciation of the Democratic congresswoman who criticized Trump’s insensitivity to the family of the slain soldier as part of “the long tradition of empty barrels making the most noise,” a definition he undoubtedly would find appropriate for the entire US Congress, the media and other civilian institutions. The “full barrels” are the barrels of the guns employed by the American military.

The Democratic Party poses no opposition to the growing military domination of the American government. On the contrary, it has promoted it, opposing Trump from the right on issues of foreign policy and accusing him of insufficient deference to the military and intelligence apparatus and a reluctance to carry out a military escalation against Russia.

Congresswoman Wilson, the immediate object of Kelly’s ire, is an unabashed supporter of the Pentagon in general and US military intervention in Africa in particular. She is best known in Congress for championing legislation promoting US military deployments in Nigeria and elsewhere under the human rights pretext of intervening to rescue kidnapped Nigerian schoolgirls.

Kelly’s extraordinary intervention at Thursday’s White House press conference constitutes a sharp warning. Anyone who thinks that “it can’t happen here,” that a US government that has sponsored countless coups and regime-change operations around the globe cannot itself become the target of a military takeover, is making a serious political mistake.

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