

Trump's Oil Mogul Secretary of State Tillerson's Links to Russia

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The selection of ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson as Donald Trump's nominee for secretary of state is a political milestone. For the first time in US history, a corporate boss—and not just any executive, but the CEO of one of the world's largest and most profitable corporations—is being put in charge of foreign policy for the US government. Nothing could more clearly define the central goal of the Trump administration: to increase the profits and wealth of the American plutocracy.

Significantly, the Democratic Party has responded to the nomination by denouncing Tillerson's links to Russia, not his role as ExxonMobil CEO. Just as subservient to the billionaires as the Republicans, the Democrats have seized on Tillerson's myriad business dealings with Russia, the world's largest oil-producing nation, to push their campaign over Trump's alleged ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

This campaign revolves around bogus claims that "Russian hacking" dominated the US presidential election and contributed to Trump's narrow victory in the Electoral College. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has [explained](#), the claims of undue Russian influence on the election are the product of a vicious conflict over foreign policy with the US ruling elite, driven by the strategic defeat US imperialism has suffered in Syria and divisions over whether Washington's global military buildup should target Russia or China first.

The anti-Russia campaign to some extent cuts across party lines. It is noticeable that while most Senate Democrats expressed reservations about the Tillerson nomination, the most enraged denunciations came from Republicans with close links to the Pentagon.

Senator John McCain decried the fact that Tillerson received an award from Russian President Putin in 2011 after a major oil deal with the Russian oil giant Rosneft. "When he gets the friendship award from a butcher, frankly, it's an issue that I think needs to be examined," he said Sunday on Fox News.

Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, who opposed Trump for the Republican presidential nomination, initially tweeted a similar view, writing, "Being a 'friend of Vladimir' is not an attribute I am hoping for from a #SecretaryOfState."

Editorials in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* attacked the nomination along similar lines. The *Times* wrote, "In naming Mr. Tillerson to lead the State Department and having Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn as his national security adviser, Mr. Trump will have filled two top national security posts with pro-Russia apologists."

The *Post* warned that “[Tillerson’s] nomination could augur a sellout by Mr. Trump of vital US interests in Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere.” The newspaper suggested that Trump should be compelled to disclose “any investments or loans his companies have received from Russian firms and individuals.”

More telling are the aspects of the Tillerson nomination on which the Democrats and the liberal editorialists chose not to focus, including glaring conflicts of interest. Secretary of State Tillerson would play a critical role in a range of areas where ExxonMobil has huge profit interests:

- * The Keystone pipeline, which would connect Canada’s oil sands to US refineries, allowing Imperial Oil of Calgary (majority-owned by Exxon) to reach the world market.
- * Iraq, where Exxon has lucrative contracts with the Kurdish regional government to develop oilfields in the northern part of the country, in defiance of the US-backed central government in Baghdad.
- * Venezuela, which has been targeted by ExxonMobil for suits before international tribunals to the tune of billions of dollars.
- * The Persian Gulf, where ExxonMobil has some of its biggest deals, particularly with Saudi Arabia and Qatar.
- * Mexico, which has just opened its huge oil industry to foreign investment, under heavy US government pressure. ExxonMobil is a major player.

In the Trump administration, these are considered not conflicts, but pluses. Tillerson’s experience in bullying countries and buying presidents and prime ministers is exactly what is wanted in the Department of State. Hence his endorsement by such figures in the national security establishment (with close connections to the oil industry) as former secretaries of state James Baker and Condoleezza Rice, former Vice President Dick Cheney, and former Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

The Tillerson nomination is a milestone in another sense. It puts the finishing touches on a Trump administration that is dominated by multi-millionaires and billionaires. The billionaires begin with Trump himself, joined by Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross (with a \$3 billion fortune amassed from buying and closing coal mines, steel mills and auto parts plants), Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos (of the \$5 billion Amway fortune), and Small Business Administration chief Linda McMahon (the billionaire co-owner of World Wrestling Entertainment). Ross’s deputy at the Department of Commerce is also a billionaire, Todd Ricketts, heir to the TD Ameritrade fortune and owner of the Chicago Cubs.

The billionaires are joined by only slightly less wealthy bankers and CEOs: Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin (\$50–\$100 million) and Gary Cohn (\$300 million), who will head the National Economic Council, both from Goldman Sachs; Secretary of Labor Andrew Puzder (at least \$30 million in stock in his Carl’s Jr. and Hardee’s restaurant chains); and now Tillerson, whose personal fortune is well over \$300 million, including \$238 million in ExxonMobil shares and a pension valued at more than \$70 million.

There is no precedent for a US president selecting a cabinet with such a concentration of wealth. It demonstrates that the Trump administration is not an historical accident, but rather the culmination of a protracted political process in which a narrow, parasitic financial

aristocracy has come to dominate every American institution. American society is smothering in the grip of the super-rich.

Along with the billionaires, Trump has brought in right-wing political figures identified with the dismantling of the social programs and regulatory agencies they will oversee. These include Representative Tom Price, an enemy of Medicare and Medicaid, to head the Department of Health and Human Services; ultra-right former presidential candidate Ben Carson to head the Department of Housing and Urban Development; former Texas Governor Rick Perry to run the Department of Energy; and Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt, who is currently suing the Environmental Protection Agency to block anti-pollution rules, to run the EPA.

For the three top national security positions, Trump has selected retired generals: Michael Flynn as national security adviser, James Mattis to run the Department of Defense, and Robert Kelly to head the Department of Homeland Security.

There is nothing accidental here. The Trump administration represents the coming together of billionaire oligarchs, ultra-right ideologues and the military brass. It is, in the full sense of the terms, the most reactionary and anti-democratic government in the history of the United States.

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