

Trump's Secretary of Defense General Mattis Presided over Slaughter of Civilians in Fallujah

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President-elect Donald Trump has selected retired Marine General James Mattis to exercise civilian control over the Department of Defense. Originally known as the Department of War, it was renamed Department of Defense in 1949. But war is precisely what Mattis, known as "Mad Dog," has enthusiastically done throughout his career.

In 2005, Mattis declared, "It's fun to shoot some people." That was one year after he oversaw the Battle of Fallujah in Iraq, which began in April 2004, after four Blackwater Security Consulting mercenaries were killed and their bodies mutilated. In retaliation, US forces attacked the city and killed 736 people. At least 60 percent of them were women and children, according to independent journalist Dahr Jamail, who interviewed doctors at Fallujah General Hospital and at other small clinics inside the city both during and after the April siege.

In November 2004 NBC News correspondent Kevin Sites, embedded with the US Marines, heard Staff Sgt. Sam Mortimer radio that "everything to the west is weapons free." Weapons Free, explained Sites, "means the Marines can shoot whatever they see — it's all considered hostile." The rules of engagement come from the top, and Mattis was in charge.



Gen. James Mattis at his confirmation hearing in front of the Senate Armed Services Committee in Washington, July 27, 2010. President-elect Donald Trump has chosen Mattis as his pick for secretary of defense. (Photo: Brendan Smialowski / The New York Times)

Collective punishment against an occupied population constitutes a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Yet, according to the Study Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, the US attack on Fallujah in November 2004 killed between 4,000 and 6,000 civilians. Targeting civilians is a war crime.

Mattis' enthusiasm for battle may lead us into a war with Iran. A vigorous critic of the nuclear deal with Iran, Mattis said in an April 2016 speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies that the Iranian regime is "the single most enduring threat to stability and peace in the Middle East." He added, however, "there's no going back" on the deal and it would be an issue for the next president.

CIA Director John Brennan recently warned of the dangers of canceling the Iran deal, saying it would be "disastrous" and "the height of folly." In a BBC interview, Brennan explained that

dismantling the deal would set off an arms race in the Middle East and embolden the hard-liners in the Iranian government.

To his credit, Mattis has been clear-eyed about blowback from US policy on Israel. He noted the United States is paying a “security price” in the Middle East because the US is considered biased in favor of Israel, and Israel is in danger of becoming an “apartheid” state.

“I paid a military security price every day as a commander of CENTCOM because the Americans were seen as biased in support of Israel,” Mattis said at the Aspen Security Forum in Colorado in 2013, adding that this perception undercuts support from “all the moderate Arabs who want to be with us, because they can’t come out publicly in support of people who don’t show respect for the Arab Palestinians.”

Mattis criticized Israel for building settlements in the occupied West Bank, saying they “are going to make it impossible to maintain the two-state option.” He added that the settlements might weaken Israel as a Jewish and Democratic state and could lead to apartheid.

“If I’m in Jerusalem and I put 500 Jewish settlers out here to the east and there’s 10,000 Arab settlers in here, if we draw the border to include them, either it ceases to be a Jewish state or you say the Arabs don’t get to vote — apartheid,” Mattis said.

Also to his credit, Mattis opposes torture — because it doesn’t work. During the presidential campaign, Trump pledged to reinstitute waterboarding, saying he would “bring back a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding” because suspected terrorists “deserve it anyway, for what they’re doing.”

Waterboarding has long been considered torture, which is a war crime. Indeed, after World War II, the United States tried, convicted and hanged Japanese military leaders for waterboarding.

Trump may have changed his mind about torture after conferring with Mattis. Trump told The New York Times that when he asked Mattis what the general thought of waterboarding, Mattis replied, “I’ve never found it to be useful. I’ve always found, give me a pack of cigarettes and a couple of beers and I do better with that than I do with torture.” Trump said he was “very impressed by that answer. I was surprised, because [Mattis is] known as being like the toughest guy.”

Indeed, former high-level FBI interrogators, including Ali Soufan and Dan Coleman, maintain that a person being tortured will say anything to get the torture to stop — even providing false information. The best results, interrogators add, are obtained with humane methods.

Moreover, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence concluded, “the use of the CIA’s enhanced interrogation techniques was not an effective means of obtaining accurate information or gaining detainee cooperation.”

“If there’s any concern at all [about Mattis], it’s the principle of civilian control over the military. This role was never intended to be a kind of Joint Chiefs of Staff on steroids, and that’s the biggest single risk tied to Mattis,” a former senior Pentagon official told The Washington Post. The framers of the Constitution were wary of putting the military in charge of making foreign policy, which explicitly resides in the executive branch; that is, the

president as commander-in-chief and his secretary of defense.

Trump has also chosen notorious hawks Michael Flynn for National Security Advisor and Mike Pompeo for CIA Director.

But the president-elect has stated, "We will use military force only in cases of vital necessity to the national security of the United States. We will put an end to attempts of imposing democracy and overthrowing regimes abroad, as well as involving ourselves in situations in which we have no right to intervene."

Let's hope Trump can maintain that position in the face of inevitable militaristic advice from Mattis, Flynn and Pompeo. Trump frequently makes contradictory statements about foreign policy. During the campaign, he insisted that he opposed the Iraq War and Libya regime change, when in fact he supported both. In fact, Trump called for all US troops in the Middle East to overthrow Libyan president Muammar Gaddafi.

It is our challenge to hold Trump's feet to the fire in every way we can — speaking out, writing, demonstrating, and pressuring Congress and the White House. We cannot relent in demanding peace.

Marjorie Cohn is professor emerita at Thomas Jefferson School of Law, former president of the National Lawyers Guild and on the advisory board of Veterans for Peace. Her books include Cowboy Republic: Six Ways the Bush Gang Has Defied the Law; The United States and Torture: Interrogation, Incarceration, and Abuse and Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral, and Geopolitical Issues.

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