

Washington's Secret Wars

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The Trump White House Monday issued a so-called “War Powers” letter addressed to Speaker of the House Paul Ryan and the president pro tempore of the Senate, Orin Hatch, to “keep the Congress informed about deployments of United States Armed Forces equipped for combat.”

In 1973, against the backdrop of the debacle of the Vietnam War, the US Congress, overriding the veto of then-President Richard Nixon, passed the War Powers Act. The aim of the legislation was to prevent future presidents from waging undeclared and open-ended wars with little or no accountability to Congress, which under the US Constitution has the exclusive power to declare war.

It gave the president the right to use military force at his discretion for up to 60 days—itsself a huge concession of power to the executive branch—but required withdrawal after a total of 90 days if Congress failed to vote its approval of military action.

While still on the books, the War Powers Act has long ago been turned into a dead letter by the quarter century of interrupted US wars of aggression that have followed the Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union, all waged without a declaration of war by Congress.

Both Democrats and Republicans in Congress have willingly acquiesced in the de facto concentration of dictatorial power in the hands of the “commander in chief” in the all-important matter of the waging of foreign wars.

The latest letter from the Trump administration, however, represents another qualitative step in this protracted degeneration of American democracy and the elimination of the last pretenses of civilian control over the military. Failing to even keep Congress “informed” about US combat deployments, the document, for the first time, omitted any information about the number of troops participating in Washington's multiple wars and military interventions.

The letter acknowledges that the US is continuing and escalating the longest war in its history, the 16-year-long intervention in Afghanistan, stating that the American military is engaged in “active hostilities” against not only Al Qaeda and ISIS, but also the Taliban and any forces that “threaten the viability of the Afghan government” and its security forces. How many troops are engaged in this open-ended conflict is kept secret.

Similarly, the letter refers to a “systematic campaign of airstrikes” that have killed and wounded tens of thousands in Iraq and Syria, along with the deployment of ground troops in both countries. But again, their number is concealed.

It also mentions, for the first time, that “a small number” are deployed inside Yemen, where a US-backed Saudi force is carrying out a near genocidal war that has left millions on the brink of mass starvation.

It goes on to make reference to US military operations in Libya, East Africa, Africa’s Lake Chad Basin and Sahel Region and the Philippines, as well as deployments of forces in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Cuba.

In sync with Trump’s “War Powers letter” the Pentagon has issued a report listing the current location of fully 44,000 troops deployed across the globe as “unknown.” During a Pentagon press briefing last Wednesday, Army Col. Rob Manning declared that the US military’s aim was to “balance informing the American public with the imperative of operational security and denying the enemy any advantage.”



MARJAH, Helmand province, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan – Corporal Mark Hickok, a 23-year-old combat engineer from North Olmstead, Ohio, patrols through a field during a clearing mission April 9. Marines with Company B, 1st Tank Battalion, learned basic route clearance techniques from engineers like Hickok, who are deployed with 1st Combat Engineer Battalion. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. John M. McCall)

This was the same specious argument made by Trump last August when he announced his plan for an escalation of America’s war in Afghanistan.

“We will not talk about numbers of troops or our plans for further military activities,” he said. “Conditions on the ground, not arbitrary timetables, will guide our strategy from now on. America’s enemies must never know our plans or believe they can wait us out. I will not say when we are going to attack, but attack we will.”

The Trump White House has removed caps imposed on troop levels under the Obama administration, leaving it up to the military commanders to escalate US deployments at will. Obama’s caps themselves were routinely circumvented through so-called temporary deployments that saw far more troops sent into US wars than were officially on the books.

The secrecy surrounding troop deployments has been highlighted in recent months following the October firefight in Niger that killed four special operations troops and brought

out in the open the deployment of some 1,000 US troops in the central West African country and on its borders, an intervention about which leading members of the US Senate claimed to have known nothing. This was followed by the so-called slip of the tongue by the commander of US special operations forces in Iraq and Syria who told a Pentagon press conference that 4,000 US troops were on the ground in Syria. He quickly caught himself and repeated the official figure of 500. Subsequently, the Pentagon allowed that the real number was over 2,000.

Meanwhile, figures posted by the Pentagon last month—with little media attention—revealed that the number of US troops deployed in the Middle East as a whole had soared by 33 percent over the previous four months, with the sharpest increases taking place in a number of Persian Gulf countries, indicating advanced preparations for a new US war against Iran.

These deployments are kept secret or effectively concealed not out of any concern about “tipping off the enemy,” which in virtually every case is well aware of the level of US military aggression against their countries. Rather, it is aimed at keeping the information from the American people, which has no interest in continuing the ongoing military interventions in Afghanistan, the Middle East and Africa, much less launching new and potentially world catastrophic wars against Iran, North Korea and even China and Russia.

In terms of the waging of semi-secret wars abroad, as with attacks on democratic rights and the social conditions of the working class at home, Trump represents not an aberration, but rather the culmination of protracted processes that have unfolded under both Democratic and Republican administrations, which have ceded ever greater power over US foreign policy to US military commanders. This trend has only deepened under Trump, with an active duty general serving as national security advisor, and two recently retired Marine generals filling the posts of defense secretary and White House chief of staff.

With US forces on the borders of North Korea, China, and Russia on a hair-trigger, the continuous assertion of ever greater war-making powers to the military brass massively increases the danger that a miscalculation, misunderstanding, or accident could quickly lead to full-scale nuclear war.

Trump’s further assault on the War Powers Act has elicited no protest from the Democrats in Congress. They are not opposed to the government’s domination by the military or the drive to war. Their differences are merely of a tactical character, expressed in a campaign of anti-Russia hysteria waged in collaboration with sections of the US military and intelligence apparatus in preparation for a new and far more terrible conflagration.

Both parties represent a parasitic financial oligarchy that relies ever more heavily upon militarism and war to defend its wealth and domination. These parties, along with the other institutions of the US ruling establishment, have no interest in reining in the generals or upholding constitutional government and democratic rights. Rather, they are collaborating in the emergence of a system based upon the unfettered domination of the military, working in tandem with Wall Street, in which elections, the Congress and other civilian bodies are becoming little more than window-dressing.

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