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Trump's parade and the threat of military dictatorship

The order given by President Donald Trump to the Pentagon's top brass to draw up plans for a military parade down Washington's Pennsylvania Avenue later this year is a political development that should be approached with deadly seriousness.

The *Washington Post* reported that the demand for the parade was delivered by Trump to senior military officials, including his defense secretary, the recently retired Marine Gen. James "Mad Dog" Mattis, and Gen. Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a January 18 meeting in the "the tank," the Joint Chiefs' secret meeting room at the Pentagon.

"This is being worked at the highest levels of the military," a military official speaking on the condition of anonymity told the *Post*. Possible dates for the parade include Memorial Day, July 4 and Veterans Day.

Some media reports have attributed Trump's demand to his envy of a military parade he attended in France with French President Emmanuel Macron, watching French troops march down the Avenue des Champs-Élysées along with tanks and other military vehicles on Bastille Day last July.

While there have been critical and ironic pieces published in the corporate media about the planned parade, one can count on all of the major newspapers and broadcast networks to become willing cheerleaders once the troops and tanks are parading down Pennsylvania Avenue.

There is far more at work here than some impressionistic whim of the US president. The French parade merely provided a pretext for Trump to express a militaristic agenda that he has held since well before taking office, based upon fascistic views imbibed as a child from his father, a former KKK member, and nurtured at a private military school.

In an interview with the *Washington Post* before his January 2017 inauguration, Trump declared:

“We’re going to show the people as we build up our military... That military may come marching down Pennsylvania Avenue. That military may be flying over New York City and Washington, DC, for parades. I mean, we’re going to be showing our military.”

Documents obtained months after the inauguration showed that top members of Trump’s Presidential Inaugural Committee approached the Pentagon asking for a list and photographs of tanks, missile launchers and other military vehicles that could be deployed in the inaugural parade. The Pentagon at that time was extremely reluctant to organize such a deployment, and Trump’s aides dropped the proposal.

Instead, the inauguration included the strange and unsettling episode of 10 military officers representing the different branches of the armed services marching up behind the incoming president and standing briefly in formation as he delivered his speech, only to disperse moments later after another officer approached with a whispered command. Neither the Pentagon nor the Trump White House has ever explained the incident, which appeared to have been an abortive attempt to provide a militaristic backdrop to Trump’s fascistic rant.

If Trump’s longstanding desire to see tanks rolling down the main thoroughfare linking Capitol Hill and the White House and take the salute as commander-in-chief from America’s uniformed legions is now about to be fulfilled, it is because of deep-going changes in US society and the capitalist state apparatus.

The last major military parade in the United States was organized under the administration of President George H.W. Bush over a quarter-century ago to celebrate the first one-sided and criminal US war against Iraq. Described by US officials themselves as a “turkey shoot,” the war saw the US military slaughter tens of thousands of defenseless Iraqi troops, mainly through relentless air strikes, while suffering little more than 100 American combat fatalities. Bombs and missiles laid waste to much of the country’s basic infrastructure. This, combined with punishing sanctions, led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands more Iraqis, most of them children.

That parade was meant to celebrate Washington's supposed "unipolar moment" and the boast by Bush that with the bloodletting in Iraq, the US had finally "kicked the Vietnam syndrome." As the intervening quarter-century of continuous war has made clear, however, the Gulf War represented only a nodal point in the deepening crisis of US and world imperialism and the accelerating breakdown of the post-World War II order.

The parade was a shameful episode that elicited little enthusiasm and did nothing to dent the hostility to militarism and prevalence of antiwar sentiment among broad sections of the population.

What will Trump's parade celebrate? US military forces are engaged in combat across broad swathes of the world, with US warplanes simultaneously bombing at least seven different countries, with no discernible path to "victory" in any one of them.

Administration officials claim the spectacle on Pennsylvania Avenue is being organized to show "love and respect" for the troops. This shopworn lie is used by every capitalist ruling class to hide its indifference and contempt for those it employs as cannon fodder in the pursuit of imperialist conquest and global profit interests.

If anything, the parade will represent a celebration of militarism and the thoroughgoing militarization of the US government, with the present administration dominated by a cabal of retired and active-duty generals, including Mattis, White House Chief of Staff Gen. John Kelly (ret.) and National Security Advisor Gen. H.R. McMaster.

It will be staged as a show of strength and intimidation against all real and potential enemies, both foreign and domestic, of this quasi-military regime. It will put some teeth into the rhetorical threats of Trump, who has denounced those failing to stand and applaud his State of the Union address as "un-American" and "treasonous."

The parade will be staged as the American high command steers the US military from its two-decade-long focus on a "global war on terror" to the preparation for "great power" conflict, i.e., military confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia and China, as spelled out in the series of national strategy, defense and nuclear posture documents released over the past several weeks.

This strategic shift is bound up with a massive buildup of the US military, which already spends more on arms than the next eight powers combined.

More than half a century ago, in his farewell speech as president, Dwight Eisenhower warned against the extreme threat to American democracy posed by the rise of a "military-industrial complex." The intervening period has seen the uninterrupted growth of this

combined power of the Pentagon and a corporate-financial oligarchy beyond anything that the long-dead Ike could have ever imagined.

This process finds its diseased expression not merely in the person of Donald Trump, but in changes in forms of rule. The last vestiges of democracy are increasingly incompatible with a social order dominated by a handful of plutocrats who have amassed staggering amounts of wealth at the expense of the working class, the vast majority of the population. New forms of rule are emerging, with the outlines of a quasi-military regime becoming visible. This has become apparent in the ongoing budget process, in which Congress is preparing a bipartisan package that provides a \$160 billion increase in military spending over two years while leaving 700,000 young undocumented immigrants facing deportation and setting the stage for massive cuts in social programs to pay for the arms buildup.

Trump's defense secretary, Gen. Mattis, took the podium at the White House press conference Wednesday to celebrate this deal, which he played the predominant role in dictating. He repeatedly testified before Congress, appearing not as a supplicant seeking funds, but as a military chieftain giving the civilians their marching orders and indicating that any failure to provide unfettered funding to the Pentagon would be a stab in the back to the nation's troops.

The Democratic Party "opposition" to Trump is of entirely fraudulent and diversionary character. To the extent that they have opposed his administration, it has been from the right, based on demands for a more bellicose posture against Russia. Meanwhile, they and the so-called liberal media, led by the *New York Times*, have promoted the group of generals that are running the White House as "the adults in the room," who would supposedly restrain Trump.

There have always been factional divisions within the US military command between a more or less apolitical layer that accepts the constitutional principle of civilian control and an element, represented by the likes of generals Douglas MacArthur and Curtis Lemay in the 1950s, who are prepared under the right circumstances to carry out a military coup.

Decades of continuous war, the "all-volunteer" force, and the increasing separation of the military, as a separate caste, from the civilian population have given rise to an increasingly politicized and right-wing layer at the top of the uniformed hierarchy. There is every reason to believe that elements like the virulently anti-immigrant Kelly as well as Mattis and McMaster are every bit as reactionary as Trump himself, if not more so.

Allied with Wall Street and the CIA, these elements are moving toward de facto military rule, with civilian government increasingly reduced to the role of political facade.

It is not so far-fetched to raise the question: If they deploy the troops on the streets of Washington, how do we know that they will ever get them off again? Or will this demonstration prove to be the first step in the permanent military occupation of America's capital?