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Trump appoints budget director Mick Mulvaney as acting White House chief of staff

On Friday, hours after former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie withdrew from consideration as the replacement for the fired former Marine Gen. John Kelly as White House chief of staff, President Trump suddenly announced via Twitter that the current director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Mick Mulvaney, would become acting chief of staff on January 2.

The announcement—Mulvaney had not been formally interviewed for the post—only heightened the atmosphere of crisis and disarray surrounding the Trump administration. Christie’s Friday midday note to Trump citing “family” reasons for his withdrawal came one day after he met with the president and First Lady Melania in the White House residence. It followed last week’s withdrawal by Trump’s first choice, Georgia Republican political operative Nick Ayers, the chief of staff to Vice President Mike Pence.

The sense of chaos was compounded by conflicting statements from the White House on Mulvaney’s future role. A spokesperson at first said Mulvaney would resign as budget director and be replaced by his deputy at the OMB, Russ Vought. This was soon contradicted by White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, who said Mulvaney was not resigning as head of the OMB. He would retain that position despite spending all his time as Trump’s chief of staff. Day-to-day direction of the budget office would be turned over to Vought.

A senior administration official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said there would be no end date to Mulvaney's tenure as Trump's chief of staff. "He's the acting chief of staff, which means he's the chief of staff," the aide said.

The naming of Mulvaney has the character of a further circling of the wagons around a narrow core of Trump family members in a legally and politically besieged White House. The former congressman from South Carolina made his name as a far-right budget hawk and enemy of social programs, including basic entitlement programs such as Social Security and Medicare. He was elected to Congress in 2010 as part of the Tea Party wave and helped found the extreme right Freedom Caucus. He played a prominent role in the partial shutdowns of the federal government of 2013 and 2015, primarily over Obamacare and funding for Planned Parenthood, respectively.

However, as Trump's budget director he jettisoned his supposed aversion to deficits to promote the \$1.5 trillion Trump tax cut for corporations and the rich and a massive increase in Pentagon spending, well aware that these sops to the financial oligarchy and the military/intelligence war plotters would balloon the federal deficit and national debt.

He is effectively abandoning the running of the government's budget office under conditions where the budget gap widened to \$305 billion in October and November compared to \$202 billion for the same period in 2017. This is despite the continuation of austerity for the working class, including new cuts in Medicaid, food stamps and other social programs. In Trump's first full fiscal year in office, which ended in September, the deficit surged to \$779 billion, the biggest gap since 2012, when the economy was still reeling from the recession that followed the 2008 Wall Street crash, and will hit \$1 trillion before 2020.

Mulvaney's particular role in relation to the budget has been to push for raising the Social Security retirement age and ending Medicare as a universal entitlement by imposing means-testing.

Last year, Trump appointed Mulvaney as acting head of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) after the White House forced out the director installed by the Obama administration. The CFPB is a largely token and toothless agency whose purported mandate is to protect consumers from fraud and swindling by the banks. Ferociously opposed by Wall Street, Trump targeted it for decimation and handed the job to Mulvaney. He promptly blocked new investigations by the body and further curtailed its already limited powers. His permanent successor, Kathleen Kraninger, was sworn in this week.

On Saturday, the *Daily Beast* posted a video of a November 2016 event in South Carolina, held only days before the presidential election, in which Mulvaney defended his support for Trump as a “lesser evil” to Hillary Clinton, stating he was backing Trump “as enthusiastically as I can, given the fact that I think he’s a terrible human being.”

His office dismissed the video as “old news” and stressed Mulvaney’s political and personal affinity for Trump. In fact, according to press reports, Mulvaney has spent his two years in the administration seeking to curry the president’s favor, becoming a golf buddy and something of a confidante. He has actively campaigned for the White House chief of staff job for over a year, telling Trump, according to the *New York Times*, that “he was right for it because he was the only person in the administration leading a department that was not mired in scandal.”

This was reportedly said in July, the month that saw the resignation of Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt, a longtime oil industry mouthpiece, as a result of multiple ethics scandals. And on Saturday, one day after the announcement on Mulvaney, the head of the Interior Department, Ryan Zinke, a tool of energy and timber interests, resigned under fire for his own raft of ethics violations.

Trump, reportedly incensed over the decision of Ayers, Christie and others to withdraw from the running for his chief of staff post, picked Mulvaney because, according to a “senior administration official” who briefed reporters on the condition of anonymity, “the president liked him, they get along.”

The undignified spectacle of Trump’s search for his third chief of staff in less than two years—following the firing of Reince Priebus and then Kelly—comes in the midst of growing legal and political threats to his administration. Last week saw the sentencing of Trump’s personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, to three years in prison on charges that include election finance law violations connected to pre-election payoffs to two women who threatened to go public with allegations of sexual affairs with Trump. Cohen testified, and federal prosecutors affirmed, that he acted under the direction and at the behest of Trump, thereby implicating the president in a felony.

The charge was buttressed by the admission from the publisher of the *National Enquirer* tabloid, David Pecker, that he engaged in a scheme to suppress such damaging stories at the direction of Trump, and a recording of a meeting from August of 2015, taped by Cohen, in which he, Pecker and Trump discussed the scheme.

These criminal allegations come together with many indications that Special Counsel Robert Mueller is stepping up his pursuit of Trump for possible collusion with Russia

and/or obstruction of justice in connection with the phony allegations of Russian “meddling” in the 2016 election.

Together with last week’s largely symbolic Senate vote, including the votes of seven Republicans, calling for an end to US backing for Saudi Arabia in the war in Yemen, in response to the murder of Saudi regime critic Jamal Khashoggi and Trump’s open defense of the murderers, these developments reflect a decline in confidence within the ruling class in the ability of Trump to handle the mounting economic and geo-political crises facing US imperialism and to deal with the growth of working class resistance within the United States and internationally.

The response of the Democrats to this mounting crisis, despite talk of possible impeachment when the Democratic-controlled House takes office next month, was summed up by Senator Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, who complained that Mulvaney was not “the kind of peacemaker” needed to overcome partisan differences. “My fear is he will exacerbate divisions at a time when they need to be bridged,” he told reporters.