

Was Trump ousted from the military chain of command?

written by Greg Butterfield
January 18, 2021



Vice President Mike Pence inspects National Guard troops outside the Capitol, Jan. 14.

An unprecedented development took place during the Jan. 6 coup attempt at the Capitol building in Washington and in the days immediately after. It has big implications for people's democratic rights, as well as the expansion of U.S. military power in relation to civilian government bodies, and thus great importance to all workers and oppressed people fighting for their rights here and around the world.

Yet it has been carefully hidden from public view, with only a few veiled mentions in the most authoritative capitalist media.

It was first reported in a bulletin on the New York Times website's scrolling "Live Updates" on the Capitol attack. At 8:31 p.m. on Jan. 6, a short, four-paragraph article written by White House correspondent Maggie Haberman and Pentagon reporter Helene Cooper said, ["Trump rebuffed initial requests to deploy the National Guard to the Capitol. Pence gave the go-ahead."](#)

That day, pro-Trump white supremacists, led by a cadre of retired and off-duty military and police personnel, invaded the halls of Congress, egged on by President Donald Trump's call to overturn the results of November's election. The attempted coup sent elected officials inside scrambling for safety, including Vice President Mike Pence.

"President Trump initially rebuffed and resisted requests to mobilize the National Guard to quell violent protests at the Capitol, according to a person with knowledge of the events," Haberman and Cooper wrote.

"In the end, it was Vice President Mike Pence, defense and administration officials said, who approved the order to deploy. It was unclear why Mr. Trump, who is still technically the commander in chief, did not give the order.

“The order was initiated with the help of Pat A. Cipollone, the White House counsel, among other officials, according to the person with knowledge of the events.

“The Army activated 1,100 troops of the D.C. National Guard, an Army official said Wednesday, and Virginia’s governor dispatched members of the Virginia Guard along with 200 Virginia State Troopers to quell the violence in the nation’s capital. The troops were sent to the D.C. Armory to be deployed to the Capitol and to other points around Washington.”

Congress reconvened after the attackers were dispersed. They ratified Joe Biden’s election victory in the wee hours of Jan. 7.

Given the day’s dramatic events, most readers wouldn’t have noticed Haberman and Cooper’s fleeting update, or have given it a second thought if they had. But the implications for the U.S. political system are great.

Why? Because Vice President Pence, whose own life was put in danger by his boss, had overruled Trump on deploying National Guard troops in the capital city.

In U.S. states, it is the governor that calls the shots when deploying the National Guard. But the city of Washington, D.C. — a majority Black, super oppressed city — is akin to a colonial possession, not a state. Washington’s mayor, city council and other local officials do not have any say in deploying the National Guard. The only person with that power is the commander in chief of the U.S. military: the U.S. president.

How then was it possible for Pence to deploy the troops, in opposition to Trump?

More evidence emerges

Sometime after the initial report was posted, the Times’ bulletin was updated to include this additional paragraph, which has the character of a blatant attempt to

explain away what happened:

“Kash Patel, the chief of staff to Chris Miller, the acting defense secretary, responded: ‘The acting secretary and the president have spoken multiple times this week about the request for National Guard personnel in D.C. During these conversations, the president conveyed to the acting secretary that he should take any necessary steps to support civilian law enforcement requests in securing the Capitol and federal buildings.’”

But the following day, more details emerged about the seeming break in the military chain of command. This information was buried deep in a Washington Post article under the headline, [“After inciting mob attack, Trump retreats in rage. Then, grudgingly, he admits his loss,”](#) written by the Post’s White House Bureau Chief Philip Rucker and two other reporters.

“As a mob of Trump supporters breached police barricades and seized the Capitol, Trump was disengaged in discussions with Pentagon leaders about deploying the National Guard to aid the overwhelmed U.S. Capitol Police, according to two people familiar with the talks.

“Vice President Pence worked directly with acting Defense Secretary Christopher C. Miller and the Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, Gen. Mark A. Milley, as well as with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), concerning the unrest at the Capitol and military deployments, the people said.

“As for Trump, one of the people said, ‘he was completely, totally out of it.’ This person added, ‘He made no attempt to reach out to them.’”

This is important because it indicates that not only Vice President Pence and Pentagon officials, but also Democratic Party congressional leaders Nancy Pelosi

and Chuck Schumer and Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell were involved.

In a decision to break the military chain of command mandated by the U.S. Constitution, this makes sense. As speaker of the House of Representatives, Pelosi would be next in line as acting president if Pence were incapacitated.

Hidden from the masses

That Trump should be removed as commander-in-chief of the world's most powerful imperialist military machine is indisputable. It should have happened long ago.

But the problem, from the point of view of the class interests of the workers and oppressed, and of people's democratic rights generally, is how it was done.

Rather than invoke the 25th Amendment of the Constitution, which allows the vice president and a majority of the Cabinet to remove the president if they are unable to carry out their duties, the chain of command was broken behind the backs of the people, in secret.

Was there time to invoke the 25th Amendment during the crisis? Of course, we are not privy to the details. But it is indisputable that by the time the National Guard was mobilized on Pence's orders, the immediate danger was over and various local and federal police agencies had successfully cleared the far-right mob from the Capitol.

Even if the situation was so dire that the authoritative elected officials felt that it was impossible to follow constitutionally mandated procedure, they could have explained this publicly afterward while moving ahead to officially remove the president. But this didn't happen either.

Instead, Pence, Pentagon and White House officials, and congressional leaders of both capitalist parties have covered up what really happened.

The impeachment show

Two days later, on Jan. 8, [Trump made a statement](#) condemning the Capitol attack, in which he falsely stated that “I immediately deployed the National Guard and federal law enforcement to secure the building and expel the intruders.” Unusual for Trump, he read from a carefully worded script prepared for him in advance.

The same day, House Speaker Pelosi [wrote a letter](#) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and spoke with its head, Gen. Mark Milley, about “available precautions” to prevent Trump from unilaterally ordering a nuclear strike or other military attack during his last two weeks in office.

Milley was said to reassure Pelosi of the many safeguards in place by which military personnel could refuse to carry out such an order if they felt it was illegal.

On Jan. 12, the House of Representatives formally requested that Pence invoke the 25th Amendment to remove Trump from office. As expected, Pence refused, and the following day the House voted 232-197 to impeach Trump for “incitement of insurrection.” His impeachment trial in the Senate is not expected to begin until after Joe Biden’s inauguration on Jan. 20.

All of these developments amount to a show put on for public consumption and to assuage the anger of Congress members and others whose lives were endangered on Jan. 6.

The available evidence clearly indicates that Trump was removed from his role as commander in chief by the evening of Jan. 6, with the involvement of the Pentagon generals, Vice President Pence and congressional leaders.

A widely reprinted Jan. 15 Los Angeles Times article appeared under the title, [“Trump retreats from his job, and Pence fills the void as ‘acting’ president.”](#) While the article doesn’t explicitly address the military chain of command, it reports how

Pence has taken on the role of visiting and thanking the thousands of National Guard troops deployed in the capital ahead of the Inauguration.

What's the quid pro quo?

Why was Trump allowed to remain president for two weeks after the coup attempt, until his term expires at noon on Jan. 20?

Because, as Struggle-La Lucha has previously explained, Trump doesn't only represent himself, but a significant and increasingly desperate group within the capitalist ruling class that has deep roots in the state apparatus — that is, in police agencies and the military itself.

In removing Trump from the military chain of command, it was necessary to make a deal — not only with Trump, but with the class forces he represents. This is what makes the behind-the-scenes character of the events especially dangerous.

Some aspects of the deal are obvious. Trump read a scripted statement condemning the Capitol attack and didn't publicly expose his removal from the chain of command. In exchange, he was allowed to serve out the rest of his term without being removed under the 25th Amendment, which could have immediately subjected him to arrest for his role in the coup attempt.

Trump will instead be seen off with pomp and circumstance on the morning of Jan. 20 before flying to his base of operations at Mar-a-Lago in Florida.

The bigger question is: What guarantees and deals were made with the fracking billionaires and other Trump backers, who have been pushing for war with Iran to drive up their profits?

Whatever deal was made to subvert the military chain of command could paradoxically increase the danger of a U.S. war with Iran, Venezuela or other oil

producing countries, to appease the pro-Trump bosses.

Militarism breeds fascism

It's also important to ask what the Pentagon brass got out of the deal.

Trump appointed several loyalists to key positions in the "Defense" Department and National Security Agency after his election loss. No doubt they played key roles in various coup schemes and scenarios, including the Capitol attack. But so far, no one is officially asking questions about that — only about [individual military personnel and police](#) who participated in the assault.

There is instability inside the Pentagon, just as there is in all U.S. capitalist political institutions. The year 2020 saw the greatest mass uprising against racism in generations after the police murder of George Floyd. Then came a violent racist backlash by the police and neofascist groups, which culminated in the events of Jan. 6.

Trump and his backers pushed hard to involve the military in domestic repression, beyond the militarization of local police that has gone on for decades under Republicans and Democrats alike. His first [coup attempt on June 1, 2020](#), included direct involvement by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Milley, who later got cold feet.

At the same time, the global capitalist economic crisis, in tandem with the pandemic, is pushing the bosses toward ever more desperate measures to save their system. Historically, military expansion and war is their go-to solution.

That a struggle ensued inside the Pentagon for days after the Jan. 6 coup attempt is shown by the fact that it took another six days — until Jan. 12 — for the [Joint Chiefs to issue a statement](#) condemning the Capitol attack, affirming Joe Biden as the incoming commander-in-chief and reminding military personnel of their obligation to uphold the Constitution.

Only then, when the Pentagon had spoken, did the FBI and other sources begin to reveal the true intentions of the leaders of the Capitol assault to capture and execute Pence and members of Congress, the key role of military and police personnel, etc.

This was also the cue for an extraordinary military occupation of Washington by [25,000 National Guard troops](#), repressive agencies and police departments from across the U.S. While this massive armed presence may deter another fascist incursion at the Inauguration, it could also expose the ongoing instability within these state forces — perhaps violently so.

The occupation certainly poses a threat to the oppressed residents of D.C. It is unlikely that the military will retreat from the streets after Biden is sworn in.

The colossal expansion of the U.S. military, police and prisons over the last 40 years has been the breeding ground for the growth of the fascist movement in the U.S. Further expansion of military power won't stem the tide of fascist violence. It will hasten it.

An independent people's investigation of the Jan. 6 coup attempt is urgently needed. At the top of its agenda must be to uncover and expose the deals that were cut behind the backs of the masses to stave off the collapse of the crisis-ridden U.S. political system.

Impeach the Pentagon and the police state!

