

## **Who Rules America?**

### **The Power Elite in the Time of Trump**

**James Petras**

#### **Introduction**

In the last few months, several competing political, economic and military sectors - linked to distinct ideological and ethnic groups - have clearly emerged at the centers of power.

We can identify some of the key competing and interlocking directorates of the power elite:

1. Free marketers, with the ubiquitous presence of the '*Israel First*' crowd.
2. National capitalists, linked to rightwing ideologues.
3. Generals, linked to the national security and the Pentagon apparatus, as well as defense industry.
4. Business elites, linked to global capital.

This essay attempts to define the power wielders and evaluate their range of power and its impact.

#### **The Economic Power Elite: Israel-Firsters and Wall Street CEO's**

*'Israel Firsters'* dominate the top economic and political positions within the Trump regime and, interestingly, are among the Administration's most vociferous opponents. These include: the Federal Reserve Chairwoman, Janet Yellen, as well as her Vice-Chair, Stanley Fischer, an Israeli citizen and former (sic) Governor of the Bank of Israel.

Jared Kushner, President Trump's son-in-law and an Orthodox Jew, acts as his top adviser on Middle East Affairs. Kushner, a New Jersey real estate mogul, set himself up as the archenemy of the economic nationalists in the Trump inner circle. He supports every Israeli power and land grab in the Middle East and works closely with David Friedman, US Ambassador to Israel (and fanatical supporter of the illegal Jewish settlements) and Jason Greenblatt, Special Representative for International negotiations. With three Israel-Firsters determining Middle East policy, there is not even a fig leaf of balance.

The Treasury Secretary is Steven Mnuchin, a former Goldman Sachs executive, who leads the neo-liberal free market wing of the Wall Street sector within the Trump regime. Gary Cohn, a longtime Wall Street influential, heads the National Economic Council. They form the core business advisers and lead the neo-liberal anti-nationalist Trump coalition committed to undermining economic nationalist policies.

An influential voice in the Attorney General's office is Rod Rosenstein, who appointed Robert Mueller the chief investigator, which led to the removal of nationalists from the Trump Administration.

The fairy godfather of the anti-nationalist Mnuchin-Cohn team is Lloyd Blankfein, Goldman Sach's Chairman. The '*Three Israel First bankerteers*' are spearheading the fight to deregulate the banking sector, which had ravaged the economy, leading to the 2008 collapse and foreclosure of millions of American homeowners and businesses.

The '*Israel-First*' free market elite is spread across the entire ruling political spectrum, including ranking Democrats in Congress, led by Senate Minority leader Charles Schumer and the Democratic Head of the House Intelligence Committee Adam Schiff. The Democratic Party *Israel Firsters* have allied with their free market brethren in pushing for investigations and mass media campaigns against Trump's economic nationalist supporters and their eventual purge from the administration.

### **The Military Power Elite: The Generals**

The military power elite has successfully taken over from the elected president in major decision-making. Where once the war powers rested with the President and the Congress, today a collection of fanatical militarists make and execute military policy, decide war zones and push for greater militarization of domestic policing. Trump has turned crucial decisions over to those he fondly calls '*my Generals*' as he continues to dodge accusations of corruption and racism.

Trump appointed Four-Star General James 'Mad Dog' Mattis (retired USMC) - a general who led the war in Afghanistan and Iraq - as Secretary of Defense. Mattis (whose military 'glories' included bombing a large wedding party in Iraq) is leading the

campaign to escalate US military intervention in Afghanistan – a war and occupation that Trump had openly condemned during his campaign. As Defense Secretary, General ‘Mad Dog’ pushed the under-enthusiastic Trump to announce an increase in US ground troops and air attacks throughout Afghanistan. True to his much-publicized *nom-de-guerre*, the general is a *rabid* advocate for a nuclear attack against North Korea.

Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster (an active duty Three Star General and long time proponent of expanding the wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan) became National Security Adviser after the purge of Trump’s ally Lt. General Michael Flynn, who opposed the campaign of confrontation and sanctions against Russia and China. McMaster has been instrumental in removing ‘*nationalists*’ from Trumps administration and joins General ‘Mad Dog’ Mattis in pushing for a greater build-up of US troops in Afghanistan.

Lt. General John Kelly (Retired USMC), another Iraq war veteran and Middle East *regime change* enthusiast, was appointed White House Chief of Staff after the ouster of Reince Priebus.

The Administration’s *Troika of three generals* share with the neoliberal *Israel First* Senior Advisors to Trump, Stephen Miller and Jared Kushner, a deep hostility toward Iran and fully endorse Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu’s demand that the 2015 Nuclear Accord with Tehran be scrapped.

Trump’s *military directorate* guarantees that spending for overseas wars will not be affected by budget cuts, recessions or even national disasters.

The ‘*Generals*’, the *Israel First* free marketers and the Democratic Party elite lead the fight against the economic nationalists and have succeeded in ensuring that Obama Era military and economic empire building would remain in place and even expand.

### **The Economic Nationalist Elite**

The leading strategist and ideologue of Trump’s economic nationalist allies in the White House was Steve Bannon. He had been chief political architect and Trump adviser during the electoral campaign. Bannon devised an election campaign favoring domestic manufacturers and American workers against the Wall Street and multinational corporate free marketers. He developed Trump’s attack on the global trade agreements, which had led to the export of capital and the devastation of US manufacturing labor.

Equally significant, Bannon crafted Trumps early public opposition to the generals’ 15-year trillion-dollar intervention in Afghanistan and the even more costly series of wars in the Middle East favored by the *Israel-Firsters*, including the ongoing proxy-mercenary war to overthrow the secular nationalist government of Syria.

Within 8 month of Trump’s administration, the combined forces of the free market economic and military elite, the Democratic Party leaders, overt militarists in the Republican Party and their allies in the mass media succeeded in purging Bannon – and marginalized the mass support base for his ‘America First’ economic nationalist and anti-‘regime change’ agenda.

The anti-Trump ‘*alliance*’ will now target the remaining few economic nationalists in the administration. These include: the CIA Director Mike Pompeo, who

favors protectionism by weakening the Asian and NAFTA trade agreements and Peter Navarro, Chairman of the White House Trade Council. Pompeo and Navarro face strong opposition from the ascendant neoliberal Zionist troika now dominating the Trump regime.

In addition, there is Secretary of Commerce, Wilbur Ross, a billionaire and former director of Rothschild Inc., who allied with Bannon in threatening import quotas to address the massive US trade deficit with China and the European Union.

Another Bannon ally is US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer a former military and intelligence analyst with ties to the newsletter Breitbart. He is a strong opponent of the neoliberal, globalizers in and out of the Trump regime.

'*Senior Adviser*' and Trump speechwriter, Stephen Miller actively promotes the travel ban on Muslims and stricter restrictions on immigration. Miller represents the *Bannon wing* of Trump's zealously pro-Israel cohort.

Sebastian Gorka, Trump's Deputy Assistant in military and intelligence affairs, was more an ideologue than analyst, who wrote for Breitbart and rode to office on Bannon's coat tails. Right after removing Bannon, the '*Generals*' purged Gorka in early August on accusations of '*anti-Semitism*'.

Whoever remains among Trump's economic nationalists are significantly handicapped by the loss of Steve Bannon who had provided leadership and direction. However, most have social and economic backgrounds, which also link them to the

military power elite on some issues and with the pro-Israel free marketers on others. However, their core beliefs had been shaped and defined by Bannon.

### **The Business Power Elite**

Exon Mobile CEO Rex Tillerson, Trump's Secretary of State and former Texas Governor Rick Perry, Energy Secretary lead the business elite. Meanwhile, the business elite associated with US manufacturing and industry have little direct influence on domestic or foreign policy. While they follow the Wall Street free marketers on domestic policy, they are subordinated to the military elite on foreign policy and are not allied with Steve Bannon's ideological core.

Trump's business elite, which has no link to the economic nationalists in the Trump regime, provides a friendlier face to overseas economic allies and adversaries.

### **Analysis and Conclusion**

The power elite cuts across party affiliations, branches of government and economic strategies. It is not restricted to either political party, Republican or Democratic. It includes free marketers, some economic nationalists, Wall Street power brokers and militarists. All compete and fight for power, wealth and dominance within this administration. The correlation of forces is volatile, changing rapidly in short periods of time – reflecting the lack of cohesion and coherence in the Trump regime.

Never has the US power elite been subject to such monumental changes in composition and direction during the first year of a new regime.

During the Obama Presidency, Wall Street and the Pentagon comfortably shared power with Silicon Valley billionaires and the mass media elite. They were united in pursuing an imperial ‘globalist’ strategy, emphasizing multiple theaters of war and multi-lateral free trade treaties, which was in the process of reducing millions of American workers to permanent helotry.

With the inauguration of President Trump, this power elite faced challenges and the emergence of a new strategic configuration, which sought drastic changes in US political economic and military policy.

The architect of the Trump’s campaign and strategy, Steve Bannon, sought to displace the global economic and military elite with his alliance of economic nationalists, manufacturing workers and protectionist business elites. Bannon pushed for a major break from Obama’s policy of multiple permanent wars to expanding the domestic market. He proposed troop withdrawal and the end of US military operations in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, while increasing a combination of economic, political and military pressure on China. He sought to end sanctions and confrontation against Moscow and fashion economic ties between the giant energy producers in the US and Russia.

While Bannon was initially the chief strategist in the White House, he quickly found himself faced with powerful rivals inside the regime, and ardent opponents among Democratic and Republican globalists and especially from the Zionist – neoliberals who systematically maneuvered to win strategic economic and policy positions within the regime. Instead of being a coherent platform from which to formulate a new radical

economic strategy, the Trump Administration was turned into a chaotic and vicious ‘*terrain for struggle*’. The Bannon’s economic strategy barely got off the ground.

The mass media and operatives within the state apparatus, linked to Obama’s permanent war strategy, first attacked Trump’s proposed economic reconciliation with Russia. To undermine any ‘de-escalation’, they fabricated the Russian spy and election manipulation conspiracy. Their first successful shots were fired at Lt. General Michael Flynn, Bannon’s ally and key proponent for reversing the Obama/Clinton policy of military confrontation with Russia. Flynn was quickly destroyed and openly threatened with prosecution as a ‘*Russian agent*’ in whipped-up hysteria that resembled the heydays of Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Key economic posts in the Trump regime were split between the Israel-Firster neoliberals and the economic nationalists. The ‘*Deal Maker*’ President Trump attempted to harness Wall Street-affiliated neoliberal Zionists to the economic nationalists, linked to Trump’s working class electoral base, in formulating new trade relations with the EU and China, which would favor US manufacturers. Given the irreconcilable differences between these forces, Trump’s naïve ‘*deal*’ weakened Bannon, undermined his leadership and wrecked his nationalist economic strategy.

While Bannon had secured several important economic appointees, the Zionist neoliberals undercut their authority. The Fischer-Mnuchin-Cohn cohort successfully set a competing agenda.

The entire Congressional elite from both parties united to paralyze the Trump-Bannon agenda. The giant corporate mass media served as a hysterical and rumor-laden megaphone for zealous Congressional and FBI investigators magnifying every nuance of Trump's US Russia relations in search of conspiracy. The combined state-Congressional and Media apparatus overwhelmed the unorganized and unprepared mass base of Bannon electoral coalition which had elected Trump.

Thoroughly defeated, the toothless President Trump retreated in desperate search for a new power configuration, turning his day-to-day operations over to '*his generals*'. The elected civilian President of the United States embraced *his generals*' pursuit of a new military-globalist alliance and escalation of military threats foremost against North Korea, but including Russia and China. Afghanistan was immediately targeted for an expanded intervention.

Trump effectively replaced Bannon's economic nationalist strategy with a revival Obama's multi-war military approach.

The Trump regime re-launched the US attacks on Afghanistan and Syria – exceeding Obama's use of drone attacks on suspected Muslim militants. He intensified sanctions against Russia and Iran, embraced Saudi Arabia's war against the people of Yemen and turned the entire Middle East policy over to his ultra-Zionist Political Advisor (Real Estate mogul and son-in-law) Jared Kushner and US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman.

Trump's retreat turned into a grotesque rout. The Generals embraced the neoliberal Zionists in Treasury and the Congressional global militarists. Communication Directory Anthony Scaramucci was fired. Trump's Chief of Staff General Joe Kelly purged Steve Bannon. Sebastian Gorka was kicked out.

The eight months of internal struggle between the economic nationalists and the neoliberals has ended: The Zionist-globalist alliance with *Trump's Generals* now dominate the Power Elite.

Trump is desperate to adapt to the new configuration, allied to his own Congressional adversaries and the rabidly anti-Trump mass media.

Having all but decimated Trump's economic nationalists and their program, the Power Elite then mounted a series of media-magnified events centering around a local punch-out in Charlottesville, Virginia between 'white supremacists' and 'anti-fascists'. After the confrontation led to death and injury, the media used Trump's inept attempt to blame both 'baseball bat'-wielding sides, as proof of the President's links to neo-Nazis and the KKK. Neoliberal and Zionists, within the Trump administration and his business councils, all joined in the attack on the President, denouncing his failure to immediately and unilaterally blame rightwing extremists for the mayhem.

Trump is turning to sectors of the business and Congressional elite in a desperate attempt to hold onto waning support via promises to enact massive tax cuts and deregulate the entire private sector.

The decisive issue was no longer over one policy or another or even strategy. Trump had already lost on all accounts. The *'final solution'* to the problem of the election of Donald Trump is moving forward step-by-step – his impeachment and possible arrest by any and all means.

What the rise and destruction of economic nationalism in the 'person' of Donald Trump tells us is that the American political system cannot tolerate any capitalist reforms that might threaten the imperial globalist power elite.

Writers and activists used to think that only democratically elected socialist regimes would be the target of systematic coup d'état. Today the political boundaries are far more restrictive. To call for *'economic nationalism'*, completely within the capitalist system, and seek reciprocal trade agreements is to invite savage political attacks, trumped up conspiracies and internal military take-overs ending in 'regime change'.

The global-militarist elite purge of economic nationalists and anti-militarists was supported by the entire US left with a few notable exceptions. For the first time in history the left became an organizational weapon of the pro-war, pro-Wall Street, pro-Zionist Right in the campaign to oust President Trump. Local movements and leaders, notwithstanding, trade union functionaries, civil rights and immigration politicians, liberals and social democrats have joined in the fight for restoring the worst of all worlds: the Clinton-Bush-Obama/Clinton policy of permanent multiple wars, escalating confrontations with Russia, China, Iran and Venezuela and Trump's deregulation of the US economy and massive tax-cuts for big business.

We have gone a long-way backwards: from elections to purges and from peace agreements to police state investigations. Today's economic nationalists are labeled '*fascists*'; and displaced workers are '*the deplorables*'!

Americans have a lot to learn and unlearn. Our strategic advantage may reside in the fact that political life in the United States cannot get worse – we really have touched bottom and (barring a nuclear war) we can only look up.