

Biden's Defense Secretary Pick Shows the Revolving Door for Military Contractors Remains

Industry ties were simply taken for granted in Biden's defense secretary sweepstakes.

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President-elect Joe Biden has tapped retired Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III for the powerful role of defense secretary, news outlets revealed December 7. Speculation over who Biden would pick had been brewing for weeks. All three top contenders for the position — Obama administration alum Michèle Flournoy, former Homeland Security Director Jeh Johnson and Austin — have direct financial ties to the military industry, and none can be described as even nominally progressive on foreign policy. Austin, arguably, is not the worst among them: Flournoy comes with an especially hawkish record, the most military industry ties, and an [ideological pro-war](#) gusto that sets her apart. But it's difficult to breathe a sigh of relief about the advance of a retired general who oversaw wars in Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq and Syria, and who is on the Board of Directors for the powerful weapons company Raytheon.

Austin is still [listed](#) by Raytheon, one of the largest weapons companies in the world, as a member of its board. Raytheon is a [major supplier](#) of bombs to the U.S.-Saudi coalition that began waging war on Yemen during the Obama-Biden administration (a war Austin oversaw), and the company has aggressively lobbied against any curbs on U.S. weapons sales to the coalition. In just one example, an Amnesty International [report](#) determined that Raytheon manufactured the bomb that killed six people, children among them, at a home in Yemen's Ta'iz governorate in June 2019. Mark Esper, who served as Donald Trump's Secretary of Defense before he was [fired](#) last month, was a former lobbyist for Raytheon — a record for which he, rightly, attracted considerable flak.

But Austin's military industry ties don't stop there. As was [first reported](#) by *The American Prospect*, Austin — along with Flournoy — is also a [partner](#) at Pine Island Capital Partners. Here's how the *New York Times* [described](#) the firm in an article published on November 28: "Pine Island Capital has been on something of a buying spree this year, purchasing the weapons system parts manufacturer [Precinmac](#) and a company until recently known as [Meggitt Training Systems](#) and now known as InVeris, which sells computer-simulated weapons training systems to the Pentagon and law enforcement agencies." The same day, *The Daily Poster* [reported](#) that the company has boasted that its team's inclusion of former government and military officials will help boost profits.

Austin, who served in powerful military roles under Obama, is known for not hogging the spotlight, and following orders (likely [war crimes](#) among them) when Obama dealt them out. In a world of larger-than-life, pro-war personalities like Jim Mattis and Stanley McChrystal, this has caused some to hope he is not the most harmful option. But when it came to his

actual positions — things that matter when you're secretary of defense — Austin often found himself to the right of a president who, despite his 2008 campaign trail image, was no dove. In 2010, as the top commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, Austin [advised](#) President Obama against withdrawing troops from Iraq, and said he should instead leave 24,000 troops in the country (there were about 45,000 at the time). Obama, however, overrode this recommendation, and Austin ended up presiding over a significant troop withdrawal. As head of Central Command, which oversees the Middle East, Austin would go on to recommend in 2014 that Obama send a “modest contingent of American troops, principally Special Operations forces, to advise and assist Iraqi army units” in the fighting of ISIS, [as paraphrased by](#) the *Washington Post*. Obama also initially rejected this recommendation, deploying 475 troops, ostensibly to provide training, intelligence and equipment, and initiating an air war on ISIS that continues to [kill civilians](#) to this day.

Austin would preside over an expansion of this war, which by his retirement in 2016 saw 3,600 U.S. troops deployed to Iraq, and U.S. Special Forces to Syria (although this did not prevent him from being [criticized from the right](#) for not doing enough to escalate military intervention in Syria). He led Central Command during the war in Afghanistan, as well as when the Obama administration initiated U.S. participation in the war on Yemen, which erupted under his charge into a full-blown humanitarian crisis that has escalated under President Trump.

And then, of course, there is the fact that Austin is a retired general who has been tapped to oversee an agency that is supposed to be run by civilians (although, when other candidates are so closely tied to the military industry, the line between civilian and non-civilian is blurred across the board). Because Austin has only been out of the military for four years, he will need a congressional waiver to serve in the role of defense secretary, as did Mattis, the first defense secretary under President Trump. If approved, Austin will be the first Black defense secretary in U.S. history.

That Austin was chosen to head the Pentagon shows that the U.S. political imagination around war and militarism remains trapped within Washington's revolving door of weapons industry contractors and government officials. And it shows that the status quo of the Obama years — which brought us drone wars around the world, protracted occupation in Afghanistan and catastrophe in Yemen — lives on with the incoming Biden administration.

It's worth also taking note of the other top contenders who, even though they didn't make the slot, nonetheless are close to the Biden administration and are almost certain to continue exerting some influence. Former Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson is on the board of directors for weapons company Lockheed Martin. Like Raytheon, Lockheed Martin has profited considerably from the U.S. war in Yemen, even as the war has fallen out of favor among the mainstream of the Democratic Party. That company infamously manufactured the bomb that [killed](#) 26 children when it struck a school bus in northern Yemen in August 2018.

Under the Obama administration, Johnson presided over a significant escalation in raids and deportations, as well as the practice of incarcerating children in immigration detention centers. In an [open letter](#) written to Johnson in August 2016, 22 mothers held with their children at the Berks Family Residential Center in Pennsylvania pleaded for their freedom. “Our children, who range in age from 2 to 16, have been deprived of a normal life,” they wrote.

But it is Flournoy whose record attracted the lion's share of concern from many anti-war activists. In addition to Pine Island Capital Partners, she is also on the [board](#) of military contractor Booz Allen Hamilton, which "[paid her about \\$440,000](#) in the last two years, much of it stock awards," [according to](#) the *New York Times*. She also cofounded Center for a New American Security (CNAS) — a hawkish center-left think tank that receives significant funding from the weapons industry, including Raytheon and Lockheed Martin, where Austin and Johnson are respectively affiliated. Flournoy is also co-founder and managing partner of WestExec Advisors, a consulting firm that [includes](#) military contractors among its clients. Antony Blinken, Biden's pick for secretary of state, is also one of WestExec's cofounders, and the organization is a "strategic partner" of Pine Island Capital Partners.

Beyond these defense industry ties, Flournoy's hawkish track record has earned her significant ire from anti-war activists. While this record [can be traced back](#) all the way to the Clinton administration, it was the Obama administration where she exerted considerable influence, as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from 2009 to 2012, as well as through her role at CNAS. Flournoy [pushed to](#) escalate the war in Afghanistan, [strongly pressed for](#) the 2011 military intervention in Libya, opposed the complete withdrawal of troops from Iraq, and as recently as 2019 [opposed](#) a ban on selling weapons to Saudi Arabia. In a recent [letter](#) to President-elect Joe Biden, progressive groups, including the Yemen Relief and Reconstruction Foundation and Yemeni Alliance Committee, stated, "We are concerned that Ms. Flournoy has a record of ill-advised foreign policy positions that have often conflicted with your own, and has an opaque history of private-sector activity — including 'shadow lobbying' for military contractors — which has raised questions about potential conflicts of interest."

Flournoy has her defenders, particularly among "national security professionals" who celebrated the potential high-level advancement of a woman, infuriating the anti-war feminists [I spoke to](#). And [some groups](#) that consider themselves liberal or progressive on foreign policy expressed reticence about opposing her. Although she did not get the position, it will be important to keep an eye on Flournoy, who will no doubt continue to exert influence from CNAS.

If one believes, as I do, that the U.S. military is not a force for good in the world, it is doubtful that there is such a thing as a "good" secretary of defense. There is, however, the possibility of reducing — even marginally — the harm the U.S. military inflicts across the globe. The field of potential nominees was, from an anti-war perspective, dismal: None of Biden's picks for secretary of defense were going to be progressive, even according to Washington's standards. His occasional rhetoric around ending "forever wars" aside, Biden [never really gave us](#) any reason to think he'd steer a course that veers very far from the wars and interventions he supported — either overtly or tacitly — during the Obama administration, not to mention during his [long political career](#) before that. While one must not flatten differences between candidates, it is also important not to sound a note of triumph when the absolute worst is avoided but an unacceptable status quo remains, as [some have done](#) with respect to the president-elect's other appointments. Especially when it comes to foreign policy — where the president has the most power to act without Congress, and where Biden's appointments have [uniformly](#) avoided meaningful concessions to the Left — sugarcoating reality is ill-advised.

It's not too much to ask, at the very least, that "public servants" elevated to the highest echelons of power not take over agencies that regulate and patronize the corporations they were well-compensated board members of weeks before taking office, and will likely be again once they leave office in a few years. Even setting aside ideological opposition to U.S.

empire or the inertia of violence that defines U.S. militarism across the globe, basic good government types can see the inherent conflicts of interest in the revolving door between industry and government. This revolving door was simply taken for granted in Biden's defense secretary sweepstakes. Certainly, there has to be someone in the "national security" world not drowning in the largesse of Raytheon, Booz Allen or Lockheed Martin. And if there isn't, what does this say about the fundamental nature of the U.S. war machine and who it serves?

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