

# Twelve Days in December

DEC. 12, 2016

**O**n Dec. 1, Donald J. Trump announced he would nominate retired Marine Corps Gen. James N. Mattis to be Secretary of Defense. Mattis isn't a reliable airpower advocate but is generally well-regarded in defense circles.

One small catch, though: It is, technically, illegal for Mattis to be Defense Secretary. As a retired general, Mattis is statutorily barred from the job for at least seven years from his retirement, just three years ago. This law is in place to preserve civilian control of the military, a hallmark of American governance. Congress has only granted one exception to this rule—for Gen. George C. Marshall in 1950. Lawmakers intended that as a one-time only exemption.

This unconventional nomination was just the first item in a laundry list of defense-related controversies that emerged, large and small, over the first 12 days of December. Trump is clearly not bound by convention, so observers are left to wonder if this was an extraordinary series of events—or if EVERY 12 days will be this exciting.

On Dec. 3, the President-elect took a congratulatory phone call from Taiwan's President. Many China experts (and the Chinese government) took great offense at this, because this is just not done. Since President Richard M. Nixon shifted US recognition of China from Taipei to Beijing (both governments claim jurisdiction over the same territory), the US has performed a delicate dance. The US officially recognizes the communist Chinese government while at the same time trading heavily with democratic Taiwan, selling it arms and pledging to defend it.

The vagaries of the China/Taiwan situation could fill this entire magazine, but the status quo since 1979 has been that the US officially acts as if the Taiwanese government does not exist, while at the same working hard to prevent war. Trump was unimpressed by any of this and refused to accept a status quo where a communist nation would tell him who he is allowed to speak to. He took the call from President Tsai Ing-wen.

On Dec. 6, Trump took aim at the nascent Air Force One replacement program. He tweeted, "Cancel order!" writing, "Boeing is building a brand-new 747 Air Force One for future Presidents, but costs are out of control, more than \$4 billion."

Boeing is "currently under contract for \$170 million to help determine the capabilities of these complex military aircraft that serve the unique requirements of the President of the United States," read a Boeing statement in response.

The Air Force is working deliberately to avoid the cost growth that previously killed the Navy's Marine One helicopter

## Take nothing for granted in the Trump administration.

replacement program. Building a secure transport for the President is inherently expensive. There will be much more to come on this, to be sure.

On Dec. 11, Trump was disputing the CIA's assessment that Russian hackers attempted to swing the election in his favor.

"I think it's ridiculous," Trump said in a Fox News interview.

Fox's Chris Wallace noted, "You've said repeatedly you don't believe the Intelligence Community's analysis that the Russians were involved."

"Take a look. They're not sure," Trump replied. "They don't know and I don't know."

A healthy dose of skepticism is a good thing, but Trump is hopefully listening to what the Intelligence Community has to say and weighing the evidence before making up his mind. As President, he is guaranteed to be surprised by the complexity of the international crises that will pop up and suck him in.

Trump stated in the interview that the tri-service F-35 strike fighter program costs "hundreds of billions of dollars, and it's out of control." On Dec. 12, he added via Twitter that "billions of dollars can and will be saved on military (and other) purchases," after Inauguration Day, Jan. 20.

Details were not forthcoming, but there is very recent, Obama-administration precedent for strong-arming defense contractors. Just this fall, DOD unilaterally set the terms for a purchase of 57 F-35s at a price of \$6.1 billion. "After 14 months of good-faith negotiations, it was clear that further negotiations" would go nowhere, said a program spokesman. The government unilaterally set a price it considered "fair and reasonable," the spokesman continued. Lockheed Martin did not like the contract, but the alternative was to reject it and walk away.

US voters elected Donald Trump in large part because he promised to shake up the Washington establishment. If the 1,460 days of his first term are anything like the first 12 days of December 2016, he will certainly do that. ★



USAF photo by SMSgt. Kevin Wallace

The Air Force One airplanes are nearly 30 years old.