

# Questions for General James Mattis, Nominee for Secretary of Defense



**The National  
Security Program**

In December, President-elect Donald Trump nominated General James Mattis to be Secretary of Defense. This memo provides a brief biography of the General and a list of questions senators could ask him during the confirmation hearing.

## Biography

General Mattis served as a Marine Corps officer for more than 40 years. He enlisted in 1969 in his home state of Washington and then earned a bachelor's degree from Central Washington University in 1971, and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in 1972. Mattis went on to have a highly distinguished military career commanding troops in combat on multiple occasions, including: the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, an assault battalion in the Persian Gulf War; at the beginning of the war in Afghanistan Mattis commanded Task Force 58, becoming the first Marine to command a Navy Task Force in combat; later in Afghanistan, Mattis commanded the 7th Marine regiment, and the 1st Marine Expeditionary Brigade as a Brigadier General; in Iraq, Mattis commanded

the 1st Marine Division during the 2003 invasion and subsequent stability and counterinsurgency operations.

In 2005, Mattis was promoted to Lieutenant General and took command of the Marine Corps Combat Development Command. In 2007, Mattis was awarded the rank of General to head U.S. Joint Forces Command. NATO then appointed Mattis as Supreme Allied Commander Transformation. His most recent post was as Commander of U.S. Central Command from August 2010 until he retired from the Marine Corps in March 2013. Since retiring from the military, Mattis has worked for FWA Consultants and the Hoover Institution, and served on the Boards of Directors for General Dynamics and Theranos (which is now under criminal investigation for distributing blood-testing technology without FDA approval). Mattis is also co-editor of *Warriors & Citizens: American Views of Our Military*, a book published in August 2016.

The National Security Act of 1947 included a provision stating, “a person who has within ten years been on active duty as a commissioned officer in a Regular component of the armed services shall not be eligible for appointment as Secretary of Defense.” The National Defense Authorization Act for 2008 later reduced this to seven years, but, with not quite four years of separation from military service, Mattis needs a waiver of this statute from Congress to serve as Secretary of Defense.

## Questions

### Russia

President-elect Trump has displayed a fondness for Russian president Vladimir Putin that has troubled many in the national security community. He has also repeatedly denied that Russian operatives were involved in hacking the servers of U.S. politicians and interfering in the 2016 elections. However, the overwhelming consensus among the Intelligence Community is that Russian government agencies were the source of such efforts.

- Should Americans view Russia as a friend or a foe?
- The U.S. Intelligence Community concluded that Russia interfered in the 2016 election and did so to help President-elect Trump and hurt candidate Hillary Clinton. Did you read the intelligence report? Do you agree with the conclusions?
- In your experience, do you think the U.S. Intelligence Community politicizes intelligence or do they generally do the best job they possibly can?
- Do you think President Obama's response to Russia's interference too strong, too weak, or about right? What would an appropriate response have been? Should the military have responded to these provocations? If so, how?
- Do you think America has deterred future Russian interference in our country's elections and in democracies elsewhere in the world?
- Do you share President-elect Trump's opinion of Vladimir Putin? Should the U.S. be increasing ties with a regime that continues to undermine democratic processes in the U.S. and Europe, and indiscriminately kills thousands of civilians in Syria?
- What do you think of the President-elect's choice to ignore the conclusions of the IC regarding such Russian hacking? Is that a responsible action to take on the part of a man tasked with defending the United States?

## **Iran**

You have spoken out repeatedly on the dangers posed by Iran, in particular, you have been critical of their actions against U.S. troops during the Iraq War. But, while you've been critical of the deal that prevents Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, you've recommended not walking away from it or ripping it up, as President-elect Trump repeatedly pledged to do on the campaign trail.

- What do you see as the benefits of the deal currently? What do you think the consequences would be of breaking the agreement? In particular, what do you think ending the deal would do to our intelligence gathering capabilities on Iran's intentions and progress on their nuclear program?
- If the diplomatic framework that keeps Iran's nuclear ambitions in check falls apart, how would you ensure that intelligence relating to Iran's nuclear intentions and capabilities is accurate? What lessons did you learn from the Iraq pre-war intelligence gathering efforts and how would you ensure that we do not ask thousands of American servicemembers to risk their lives because of bad intelligence?
- If the President-elect insists on pursuing a military option against Iran, what steps would you take to ensure that Congress and the American people have a role in authorizing that conflict? Do you believe the U.S. should go it alone if our allies do not agree that such an option is necessary? And how would you fulfill your obligations to Congress in ensuring that this body has both all the necessary pre-war intelligence and an exit strategy for such a conflict?

## **Rational Decision-making**

As the Secretary of Defense, you will be in charge of the nation's largest security enterprise, including the nation's combat troops, extensive intelligence reports, and the defense industrial base. The President-elect has repeatedly tweeted responses to international crises, his opinion on major weapons systems, and greetings to foreign leaders, often giving contradictory guidance.

- Do you expect the President-elect to cease tweeting once sworn into office?

- How do you intend to gather candid feedback from intelligence analysts or defense contractors when the President-elect is publicly contradicting their views and exposing them to adverse financial or personal consequences?
- How will you ensure the President-elect does not make arbitrary or capricious decisions that harm our service members, our allies, and the defense industrial base?

## **Waiver**

As you're aware, Congress has to grant you a waiver to serve as Secretary of Defense because you haven't been out of military service for the mandated seven-year period. Some have expressed concern that providing you with this waiver undermines civilian control of the military, something the requirement was meant to ensure.

- Do you believe, as our founding fathers did, in the necessity of civilian control of the military?
- Do you believe that your recent departure from active-duty military service will in any way complicate your ability to serve as Secretary of Defense?
- President-elect Trump has nominated a historic number of former generals and Admirals to key Cabinet posts. What problems, if any, do you feel this poses? While you and the other military leaders are highly qualified, is there a danger of groupthink or a potential downside of not having greater diversity in the national security Cabinet?

## **ISIS**

The President-elect has repeatedly refused to articulate his strategy to defeat ISIS and has claimed to know more than U.S. Generals do on fighting ISIS. The President-elect has also argued in favor of torture, indiscriminately bombing the families of terrorists, and potentially committing ground troops in the Middle East. However, given the complexity of the situation on the ground in Iraq and Syria, these actions

would be insufficient, and likely counterproductive, for restoring stability to the region.

- Has the President-elect informed you of his strategy to defeat ISIS? Has he directed you to develop a different strategy than the one the U.S. has been pursuing for the past three years?
- As operations by Iraqi forces to retake Mosul from ISIS continue, what does the Administration have planned to prevent a security vacuum in Iraq? Once operations to remove ISIS are complete, will the Administration work with the Iraqi government to have some U.S. troops stay in Iraq? What if you are unable to agree on a status of forces agreement? Are you committed to providing full and timely briefings to Congress on the U.S. strategy against ISIS?
- Amid a civil war in Syria, how should the U.S. expand its efforts to defeat ISIS in its stronghold of Raqqa? Do you agree with the President-elect's statements that the U.S. should let Russia fight ISIS for us? Do you support sending U.S. ground troops into Iraq and Syria?
- We have seen repeatedly that a military-only option has not led to long-term stability in either Iraq or Syria. How would you propose handling the region so that U.S. troops are not sent back repeatedly to patch worsening security situations?

## **Nuclear Weapons**

President-elect Trump has said some very disturbing things about nuclear weapons. He has spoken in favor of proliferation, saying South Korea, Japan, and Saudi Arabia should acquire their own nuclear weapons. He's said the U.S. needs to be more unpredictable when it comes to the use of nuclear weapons. He openly questioned why the U.S. makes nuclear weapons if we don't use them.

- Do you agree with President-elect Trump's statements that the U.S. should be more unpredictable with nuclear weapons?
- Do you support South Korea, Japan, and Saudi Arabia acquiring nuclear weapons?
- What would you do if the President orders a nuclear first strike, absent a conflict authorized by Congress? Do you believe that such action would be a responsible exercise of the President's Commander in Chief authority?

## **NATO**

During the presidential campaign, President-elect Trump called NATO "obsolete" and vowed that the U.S. would not come to the defense of our NATO allies unless they paid their dues—despite the fact that NATO allies came to the U.S.'s defense after 9/11. You previously served as Supreme Allied Commander of Transformation.

- Do you personally share President-elect Trump's view that NATO is obsolete?
- If a NATO ally invokes Article V, the collective self-defense clause, will the U.S. come to their aid?
- You've spoken out against Russian aggression, whereas President-elect Trump has been hesitant to discuss Russia's interference in Europe or its hacking of the U.S. election. Does the President believe there is a need for NATO to counter Russia, and how do you believe NATO should respond to Russian aggression?

## **Torture and Killing Civilians**

During his campaign, President-elect Trump publicly called for U.S. forces to use torture in the War on Terror. This brought tremendous condemnation from our allies and enemies alike. Also, many, including you, General Mattis, have declared that torture is largely ineffective at getting reliable intelligence. After Trump met with you he said you

told him, “give me a pack of cigarettes and a couple of beers and I do better with that than I do with torture.”

- Do you still believe that torture is ineffective? Please explain why.
- If President-elect Trump called upon you, or anyone at the Department of Defense, to torture suspected terrorists, would you comply with his request?
- Do you believe, like President-elect Trump has said, that killing the innocent families of terrorists is an effective strategy to defeat ISIS and like-minded terrorist groups? Would you agree that could result in further recruitment for terrorist groups and hurt our relationship with countries in the Middle East?

#### TOPICS

**DEFENSE POLICY** 153

**NATIONAL SECURITY & POLITICS** 82