



Trump picked an anti-immigrant hardliner to protect refugees

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President Trump tapped anti-immigration hardliner Ronald Mortensen last week to lead the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, whose mission is to "provide protection, ease suffering, and resolve the plight of persecuted and uprooted people around the world."

But Mortensen may have a hard time clearing the Senate. Arizona Republican Sen. Jeff Flake, who has regularly tussled with Trump over immigration, tweeted a link to a Politico article about Mortensen with the caption, "This nominee will not have my support." And Mortensen has publicly attacked Florida Sen. Marco Rubio as "extremely gullible and naive" on immigration in 2015 and Arizona Sen. John McCain for wanting to "roll out the welcome mat for ISIS on America's southern border" in 2014.

Mortensen is a fellow of the Center for Immigration Studies, an anti-immigration think tank that has been accused of publishing false or misleading information to justify hard-line immigration policy, like trumping up [the link between criminality and illegal immigration](#), which has been [repeatedly debunked](#). In 2007, The Southern Poverty Law Center labeled the Center for Immigration Studies as a hate group due to "its repeated circulation of white nationalist and anti-Semitic writers" and "its record of publishing reports that hype the criminality of immigrants." The Center rejects the "hate group" label.

As it stands now, Mortensen will have a tough time getting out of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, where he needs all the Republican members to vote his way to get out of committee. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell can still put his nomination to the full Senate for a vote, but with a narrow 51-49 majority, it's unclear if Mortensen can pass there, even with Vice President Mike Pence casting a tie-breaking vote.

Democrats appear to be united against him. "It is one thing to hold conservative views. It is wholly another to support and espouse the extreme policies of an anti-immigrant hate organization," wrote Maryland Sen. Ben Cardin, a Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, in a statement to VICE News.

Sens. Rubio and McCain did not respond to a request for comment.

“The myth of the law-abiding illegal alien is just that”

Critics say Mortensen’s unsympathetic characterizations of immigrants make him an unsuitable candidate for the position, which among other things would be responsible for protecting and supporting some of the world’s most vulnerable people.

“The myth of the law-abiding illegal alien is just that,” Mortensen wrote in an op-ed for the Hill last year. “A myth.”

"DREAMER GANG-BANGERS"

In a blog post on the Center’s website from March 2017, Mortensen railed against the fact that an individual has to be convicted of a crime before being denied protections under DACA, which shields young immigrants, also known as Dreamers, from deportation.

“This means Dreamer gang-bangers, Dreamer identity thieves, Dreamer sexual predators, Dreamers who haven't paid income taxes, and Dreamers committing a wide range of other crimes all qualify for DACA status as long as they haven't been convicted of their crimes,” he wrote.

“I am deeply concerned with Mr. Mortensen’s deep involvement with some of our nation’s most anti-immigrant organizations,” said New Jersey Sen. Robert Menendez, the ranking Democrat on the Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee, in a statement last week. “I find some of his past statements not only offensive and inaccurate but fundamentally in contradiction of American values and history.”

Mortensen declined to comment on concerns surrounding his nomination in an email to VICE News. “As the President's nominee, I respect the Senate's role in reviewing my nomination and won't have any comments at this time,” Mortenson wrote.

Of all of Mortensen’s positions, his association with the Center for Immigration Studies is most troubling to his critics.

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“If you’re coming from somewhere like CIS, you’re coming in with the view that refugees could never assimilate, could never integrate, could never really be an American,” said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. “It’s going to color the entire organization. How they think about refugees. The amount of effort they put into resettling refugees.”

Mortensen also hasn't held back in attacking Republican lawmakers he considers as welcoming to immigrants. For example, last year, he wrote a blog post calling Flake “an illegal alien crime denier.”

Mortensen, a Utah native, has also called out the Mormon Church for its pro-family approach to immigration, accusing top officials of selling out to preserve its own interests in Central America.

Working in Mortensen's favor, however, could be his prior experience at the State Department. He was a foreign service officer for 19 years, up until 1997. He also held various advisory and administrative roles with the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, which coordinates the American government's response to overseas disasters.

"He has worked on humanitarian responses that saved lives and alleviated the suffering of millions of people in Iraq, Syria, Mali, Libya, Haiti, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Pakistan, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and many other countries in West Africa," the White House said in a statement when announcing Mortensen's nomination.

ANTI-IMMIGRANT NETWORK

If confirmed, Mortensen would join a growing number of government officials with direct ties to groups like the Center for Immigration Studies. The Center is part of the "Tanton Network," a web of anti-immigrant think-tanks and advocacy groups that all trace back to a man called John Tanton, a hardline nativist who's been railing against immigration, legal and illegal, since the 1970's.

Tanton's fringe ideas on immigration were once an anathema to the Republican party, but that is no longer the case, as evident by the ascent of Tanton disciples to senior government positions under the Trump Administration. Jon Feere, former legally policy analyst at the Center for Immigration Studies has served as senior advisor to outgoing ICE director Thomas Homan since Jan. 2017. Julie Kirchner, former executive director of Federation for American Immigration Reform (or FAIR, another Tanton offshoot), is serving as USCIS ombudsman. And Robert Law, following in Kirchner's footsteps, left his position as lobbying director at FAIR to take a job as senior policy advisor at USCIS.

There are others whom Trump has repeatedly turned to for immigration policy advice who also have relationships to groups like FAIR or CIS, including Attorney General Jeff Sessions, senior policy advisor Stephen Miller, and candidate for U.S. Senate, former Pennsylvania congressman Lou Barletta.

Mortensen was an outspoken supporter of Trump's candidacy in 2016. "I am very concerned that we are now controlled by political and business elites," Mortensen wrote in a Aug. 28, 2016 [op-ed in the Salt Lake Tribune](#). "These elites, along with their fellow travelers in the media, have driven the United States into record debt, entangled us in foreign adventures that drain our national treasury and literally killed the American dream for millions of Americans."