

Offensive Questioning Of Saule Omarova By Senator Kennedy (R-LA) Fits Repeated Pattern Of Insulting Public Officials Of Color And Supporting Racist Nominees Under Trump

SUMMARY: Senator John Neely Kennedy (R-LA) has received criticism for his treatment of Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (OCC) nominee Saule Omarova. Fitting into larger attacks on Omarova as a “radical” nominee, Kennedy suggested Omarova may harbor loyalty to communism, citing her membership in a youth group in her birth country of the Soviet Union. Kennedy remarked he didn’t “know whether to call [her] ‘professor’ or ‘comrade.’” Omarova noted that participation in the group was mandatory, and that she had renounced her Soviet citizenship. Kennedy received bipartisan criticism over his remarks, with Senator Sherrod Brown (D-OH) accusing him of “character assassination,” while Senator Thom Tillis (R-NC) attempted to separate Republican criticisms from Kennedy’s by saying they were grounded on “legitimate policy differences.”

But Kennedy’s comments to Omarova fit a broader pattern of harsh questioning and insinuations against public officials of color, both in terms of Biden nominees and internationally:

- Amidst a confirmation campaign that received criticism from Native American groups for use of coded dog whistle language, Senator Kennedy accused Deb Haaland, nominee for Secretary of the Interior, of being a “neo-socialist left-of-Lenin whack job.” Kennedy would go on to apologize for the remarks.
- Senator Kennedy joined in on attacks on judicial nominee Myrna Perez, who received criticism for advocacy against Republican laws which limited voting. Kennedy accused Perez of finding “new rights” in the Constitution and of advancing a Democratic voting rights agenda, later going on to accuse Perez of dodging his questions.
- On his personal Twitter account, Kennedy insinuated the Ethiopian Director-General of the World Health Organization, Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus, was “a suck up to the Communist party of China.” Kennedy also posted an edited video showing Dr. Tedros in Xi Jinping’s pocket.

Kennedy has not shown a similar roughness when dealing with Trump-era nominees who faced their own history of offensive comments. Kennedy supported Richard Grenell for ambassador to Germany, despite a long history of sexist comments against figures ranging from Michelle Obama to Calista Gingrich, as well as denigrating the gold star family of Khzir Khan; and Kennedy supported Mike Pompeo to be Secretary of State, despite previous denigrating comments on homosexuality and retweeting a blog accusing former President Obama of being an “evil Muslim communist usurper.”

Senator John Kennedy (R-LA) Criticized Biden Comptroller Nominee Saule Omarova For Being “Radical,” Invoking Her Childhood In The Former Soviet Union

Biden’s Nominee For Comptroller Of The Currency, Saule Omarova, Earned Support From Democrats While Republicans Called Her A “Radical” Nominee Who Would Nationalize Banking. “President Biden has nominated Saule Omarova, a law professor at Cornell University, to be the next head of the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (OCC), which is responsible for regulating the assets held by more than 1,000 banks. [...] Progressives have applauded her nomination, seeing in Omarova a person who would bring a tougher approach to banks at an agency that has been criticized for being too friendly with the sector. But there

was no indication any Republican on the committee will back her. Omarova's critics say she is a 'radical' nominee who wants to nationalize banking." [NPR, [11/18/21](#)]

Senator John Neely Kennedy (R-LA) Suggested Omarova May Harbor Loyalty To Communism Based On Omarova's Membership In A Childhood Soviet Youth Group That Omarova Was Required To Join.

"But her confirmation hearing erupted into partisan sniping Thursday over her biography, after Sen. John Neely Kennedy (R-La.) suggested Omarova may harbor loyalties to the Communist ideology of the regime that brutalized her family. 'I don't know whether to call you 'professor' or 'comrade,'" Kennedy told Omarova, after pressing her to produce a letter of resignation from a Soviet youth group to which she was required to belong when she was a girl. 'Senator, I'm not a Communist,' Omarova said. 'I do not subscribe to that ideology. I could not choose where I was born.'" [Washington Post, [11/18/21](#)]

- **Omarova Noted That, In The Soviet Union, Membership In The Young Communist Group Was Mandatory.** "GOP Sen. John Kennedy (La.) pressed Omarova himself, demanding she share more regarding her membership in group 'the Young Communists' (a mandated youth program in the Soviet Union, Omarova said), adding he did not know whether to call her 'professor or comrade.' Some gasps followed." [The Week, [11/18/21](#)]
- **Kennedy To Omarova: "I Don't Know Whether To Call You 'Professor' Or 'Comrade.'" "I don't know whether to call you 'professor' or 'comrade,'" Kennedy told Omarova, after pressing her to produce a letter of resignation from a Soviet youth group to which she was required to belong when she was a girl.** [Washington Post, [11/18/21](#)]

Senator Brown (D-OH) Accused Senator Kennedy Of "Character Assassination" Based On His Questioning Of Omarova's Youth, Noting She Had Renounced Her Soviet Citizenship. "Kennedy's line of questioning prompted a rare interruption from Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), who chairs the committee. Brown said Omarova renounced her Soviet citizenship. Kennedy protested Brown's interjection, calling it a violation of 'senatorial courtesy.' Brown replied that 'senatorial courtesy is also not doing character assassination.'" [Washington Post, [11/18/21](#)]

Republican Senator Thom Tillis (R-NC) Implicitly Rebuked Kennedy Following His Comments, Saying Outside Of Kennedy Republican Concerns Had Been Focused On "Legitimate Policy Differences." "Following Kennedy's remarks, fellow Republican Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina implicitly rebuked him. 'I want to make a few things crystal clear: Republican concerns with this nominee are directly tied solely to your extensive written record,' he told Omarova. 'With the exception of some of the comments that my friend and colleague Senator Kennedy made, I think we've tried to focus on what we believe are legitimate policy differences.'" [Politico, [11/18/21](#)]

Senator Kennedy's Attacks On Omarova Fit Larger Pattern Of Attacks On Public Officials Of Color, Such As Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, Judicial Nominee Myrna Perez, And World Health Organization's Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus

Senator Kennedy Had Previously Apologized Deb To Interior Nominee Deborah Haaland, After Kennedy Referred To Her As A "Left-Of-Lenin Whack Job"

Representative Deb Haaland, Biden's Nominee For Interior Secretary, Was The First Native American Cabinet Nominee, And Faced An Embattled Confirmation Process. "When Representative Deb Haaland was tapped in December to be President Biden's interior secretary, the decision was hailed as historic. She was the first Native American ever nominated to serve in cabinet — in this case to head a

department that, for much of the nation's history, has mistreated and neglected Indigenous Americans. On Tuesday, when she faces her confirmation hearing, another label will be applied to her nomination: embattled." [New York Times, [2/22/21](#)]

As Haaland Faced A Contentious Confirmation Hearing, Senator Kennedy Said He Felt Haaland Was A "Neo-Socialist Left-Of-Lenin Whack Job." "Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., said Wednesday he'll vote to confirm nominee Deb Haaland to be Interior secretary, a significant boost to her prospects. [...] It is unclear how much support Haaland will get from Republicans, but if all 50 Democratic members are unified she won't need any GOP votes to win confirmation. 'She's got a lot of opposition,' Sen. John Kennedy, R-La., told reporters. 'I'm not impressed with what I've seen so far. I think she's a radical. I think she's a neo-socialist left-of-Lenin whack job.'" [NBC News, [2/24/21](#)]

Democrats And Native American Groups Criticized Loaded Language Used Against Haaland, Such As "Radical," As A Dog Whistle. "Some Democrats and Native American advocates called the frequent description of Haaland as 'radical' a loaded reference to her tribal status. 'That kind of language is sort of a dog whistle for certain folks that see somebody who is an Indigenous woman potentially being in a position of power,' said Ta'jin Perez with the group Western Native Voice." [LA Times, [2/23/21](#)]

Senator Kennedy Apologized For Calling Haaland Was "Left-Of-Lenin Whack Job," Saying He Had "Felt Bad About That All Day." "Sen. John Kennedy apologized on Thursday for calling President Joe Biden's Interior Department nominee, Deb Haaland, a 'whack job.' The Louisiana Republican said he regretted the remark about Haaland, explaining that he was searching for another word before calling her 'a neo-socialist, left-of-Lenin whack job.' 'I apologize. I was searching for a word for extremist, which I think is more neutral,' Kennedy said. 'And I should have said extremist. I never should have said whack job.' He offered the apology after an interview on another subject but said he had 'felt bad about that all day' on Wednesday after tagging Haaland with the barb." [Politico, [2/25/21](#)]

Senator Kennedy Accused Judicial Nominee Myrna Perez Of Advocating To Unconstitutionally "Create New Rights" Over Republican Voting Laws

Biden Judicial Nominee Myrna Perez Was Criticized By Republicans For A Belief In A "Living Constitution" And Advocacy Against Republican Election Laws. "Senate Republicans on Wednesday slammed Myrna Perez, one of President Joe Biden's judicial nominees, for her history of advocacy against a series of Republican-sponsored election laws. Several senators also criticized Perez, who until recently was the director of voting rights at the liberal Brennan Center for Justice, for her self-professed belief in a 'living Constitution.' Perez also came under fire for an essay published after her nomination in which she accused state Republicans of attempting to make elections 'less free' in the wake of the 2020 presidential election." [Yahoo, [7/14/21](#)]

Senator Kennedy Repeatedly Asked Perez Whether Judges Could Find "New Rights" In The Constitution, Accusing Her Of Being Appointed To Advance A Democratic Voting Rights Agenda And Dodging His Questions. "But with other senators, Perez frequently dodged questions about her constitutional opinions and her past statements on voting rights. Louisiana Sen. John Kennedy repeatedly asked Perez if her belief in a living Constitution meant that she believed judges could find 'new rights' in the document. Perez told Kennedy that, as a judge, she would look primarily at precedent when determining whether a right is present but unstated in the Constitution. 'It bothers me that you're dodging my questions,' Kennedy replied, after telling Perez that he believed Biden had appointed her to the federal bench to advance a voting rights agenda that Democrats have been unable to move forward in Congress." [Yahoo, [7/14/21](#)]

Senator Kennedy Accused Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus, The Ethiopian Director-General Of The World Health Organization, Of Being In The Pocket Of Communist China

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus Was Elected Director-General Of The World Health Organization In May 2017, Following A Public Health Role In The Country Of Ethiopia. “Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus was elected WHO Director-General for a five-year term by WHO Member States at the Seventieth World Health Assembly in May 2017. In doing so, he was the first WHO Director-General elected from among multiple candidates by the World Health Assembly, and was the first person from the WHO African Region to head the world’s leading public health agency. [...] Following his studies, Dr Tedros returned to Ethiopia to support the delivery of health services, first working as a field-level malariologist, before heading a regional health service and later serving in Ethiopia’s federal government for over a decade as Minister of Health and Minister of Foreign Affairs.” [World Health Organization – “Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus,” accessed [11/19/21](#)]

Senator Kennedy Accused Dr. Tedros Of Being “A Suck Up To The Communist Party Of China. “No one’s mistaking Dr. Tedros for Mel Gibson in Braveheart. He is a suck up to the Communist Party of China.” The tweet included an edited video which showed Dr. Tedros in Xi Jinping’s pocket.



[Twitter - @JohnKennedyLA, [3/31/21](#)] (VIDEO)

Senator Kennedy Previously Had No Issue Supporting Nominees Who Had Made Offensive Comments About Race And Gender During The Trump Administration, Including Richard Grenell And Mike Pompeo

Senator Kennedy Voted For Richard Grenell To Be Ambassador To Germany, Despite A History Of Sexist And Offensive Statements

CNBC: Ric Grenell’s Twitter Was A “Strong Source Of Condensed And Contentious Pro-Trump Arguments,” Including “Sharper-Tongued Tussles” That Matched Trump’s Online Presence. “When it comes to members of the Trump administration, Twitter giveth and Twitter taketh away. [...] Yet while Twitter is clearly a problem for Barr, Trump has found his ultimate tweeting wingman in U.S. Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell. As followers of Grenell’s Twitter feed already know, it’s a strong source of condensed and contentious pro-Trump arguments. That includes getting into some sharper-tongued tussles online in a way not all that different from Trump’s own nasty social media encounters. Grenell may be a top diplomat, but there’s very little that’s diplomatic about his bare-fisted approach on Twitter.” [CNBC, [2/18/20](#)]

During His Ambassadorship Hearing, Grenell Faced Criticism For Sexist Comments About The Appearance Of High-Profile Women, Including Michelle Obama, Madeleine Albright, And Callista Gingrich. “The Senate voted Thursday to confirm Richard Grenell — a Republican commentator, operative and former aide to new national security adviser John Bolton — as the next ambassador to Germany, despite objections from Democrats that his past epithets about prominent female politicians made him unfit for the job. [...] Grenell’s policy views, however, are not at the heart of the objections against him. Instead, Democrats

have focused on the undiplomatic tone Grenell has struck in several comments on his Twitter profile and as a frequent commentator on Fox News, where he has jeered about the appearance of several high-profile political women, including Michelle Obama, Hillary Clinton, Madeleine Albright and Callista Gingrich, Trump's ambassador to the Vatican." [Washington Post, [4/26/18](#)]

2016: Grenell Tweeted That Khizr Khan, Father Of A Fallen Soldier, Had Only Criticized Donald Trump Was "All About His Business" Which Involves Visas. "Fox News contributor and Republican consultant Richard Grenell suggested Monday that the reason father of a fallen soldier Khizr Khan criticized Donald Trump and sparked an ongoing feud was to enrich his business. 'Mr. Khan entered the political debate,' Grenell argued. 'His ongoing media campaign on immigration is all about his business.' He linked to a Washington Examiner article detailing Khan's day job as a lawyer and how he specializes in immigration law and obtaining a controversial form of visa." [Mediaite, [8/1/16](#)]

April 2018: Grenell Was Confirmed To Be Ambassador To Germany In A 56-42 Vote, With Senator Kennedy Voting 'Aye.' All 'nay' votes came from Democrats. [US Senate – 115th Congress Roll Call #85, [4/26/18](#)]

Senator Kennedy Voted For Mike Pompeo To Be Secretary Of State, Despite A History Of Controversial Statements

As A Congressional Candidate, Mike Pompeo's Campaign Tweeted And Posted On Facebook A Link To A Blog That Uses A Racial Slur To Refer To His Democratic Opponent And Calls President Obama An 'Evil Muslim Communist USURPER.'" "Republican congressional candidate Mike Pompeo apologized Thursday after his campaign posted on its Twitter feed and Facebook page a link to a blog that uses a racial slur to refer to his Democratic opponent and calls President Obama an 'evil muslim communist USURPER.'" [CBS News, [08/12/10](#)]

While Mike Pompeo Was A Member Of Congress, "He Seemingly Endorsed The Notion That Homosexuality Is A 'Perversion.'" "He seemingly endorsed the notion that homosexuality is a 'perversion.'" [Vox, [04/12/18](#)]

While Mike Pompeo Was A Member Of Congress, He Falsely "Accused The American Muslim Community Of Being 'Silent' About The Boston Marathon Bombing." "In a 2013 floor speech, he accused the American Muslim community of being 'silent' about the Boston Marathon bombing (they weren't) and then claimed that their so-called silence 'casts doubt upon the commitment to peace among adherents of the Muslim faith.'" [Vox, [04/12/18](#)]

April 2018: Pompeo Was Confirmed To Be Secretary Of State In A 57-42 Vote, With Senator Kennedy Voting 'Aye.' [US Senate – 115th Congress Roll Call #84, [4/26/18](#)]