

Rolling Heads at the Pentagon: Trump as Sacker-in-Chief

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*A sense of redundancy might encourage calm. The job is done, however well or poorly. The legacy charted. But in the case of **President Donald Trump**, there is still much to be done. Leaving aside his priority of fortifying himself in the White House against any bailiff onslaught by president-elect Joe Biden, he is busy making decisions. One of them is something that this administration will always be remembered for: sackings.*

The sacking of **Defence Secretary Mark Esper** was in keeping with a recently minted tradition. Trump has made a habit of cycling through appointees, notably those in the Defence Department. Five acting or confirmed defence secretaries during the course of a presidential term is a spanking record and unlikely to be outdone for some years.

It was Esper who showed alarm at the possibility that troops would be deployed against protesters and did little to hide that fact. As [he explained](#) in the Pentagon briefing room on June 3,

“The option to use active duty troops in a law enforcement role should only be used as a matter of last resort and only in the most urgent and dire situations. We are not in one of those situations now. I do not support invoking the Insurrection Act.”

Solid stuff from someone the president had mocked for undue subservience as Yesper, a tag he expressed resentment over [in an interview](#) given to *Military Times* a few days before his sacking.

“My frustration is I sit there and say, ‘Hm, 18 Cabinet members. Who’s pushed back more than anybody? Name another Cabinet secretary that’s pushed back.’”

He was hardly top of the cabinet pops, and so, the beleaguered commander-in-chief, wishing for some gratuitous blood, found Esper’s exposed head. “Mark Esper,” came the president’s [tweet](#), “has been terminated. I would like to thank him for his service.” His replacement: Christopher C. Miller, Director of the National Counterterrorism Centre.

I am pleased to announce that Christopher C. Miller, the highly respected Director of the National Counterterrorism Center (unanimously confirmed by the Senate), will be Acting Secretary of Defense, effective immediately..

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [November 9, 2020](#)

What makes this unusual is that transitions are usually periods of dull resignation and tidying up. Job massacres do not tend to figure. But Trump was rarely ordinary in anything concerning White House business, often reprising his role from *The Apprentice* as firer-in-chief.

Talking heads have found such moves not merely poor form but disconcerting. Former assistant Secretary of Defence during the Reagan administration, **Lawrence Korb**, [was concerned](#) with appearances. “This is purely an act of retaliation by a president thinking more about his petty grievances than about the good of the country.” It conveyed a “message... that Trump is going to continue his disruptive policies for the rest of his time in office.”

House speaker Nancy Pelosi [saw](#) a continuing pattern of behaviour. “The abrupt firing of Secretary Esper is disturbing evidence that President Trump is intent on using his final days in office to sow chaos in our American Democracy and around the world.” Nothing new on that front, then.

Similarly, **Rep. Adam Smith**, a Washington Democrat, [was concerned](#) that others – namely the enemies of the United States – might be enthused by such cavalier sackings. “Dismissing politically appointed national security leaders during a transition is a destabilizing move that will only embolden our adversaries and put our country at greater risk.”

Conservative think tankers such as Kori Schake at the American Enterprise Institute agree, [suggesting](#) that Trump was not living up to the expectations of the imperial military establishment. “Firing a competent defence secretary within two months remaining in his term is exactly the kind of petty recklessness that made so much of the Republic defence establishment support Joe Biden for president.”

Given the tenure of the Trump administration, and the propensity to prevent appointees from resting on their laurels, it is doubtful whether these adversaries would care one way or the other. But the psyche of the imperium not only demands lusty enemies, but demands that they take interest, gazing across oceans and deserts at what Freedom’s Land will be up to next. Democratic Senator from Virginia **Mark Warner** [promotes](#) the worn view that “our adversaries are already seeking vulnerabilities they can exploit in order to undermine American global leadership and national security during this transition period.”

In the radio chatterverse, NPR’s Greg Myre [was also worried](#) about what the sacking would do to confidence in the already nerve shattered ranks of US allies. “[T]he world doesn’t take a timeout during a US presidential transition.” This speculation tends to forget that such allies have generally adapted to Trump’s tongue lashings over defence expenditure or pulling their weight, and anticipate the next erratic move as a matter of course. The rickety US alliance system has also come in for some suggested revisions, notably in the form of French President Emmanuel Macron’s notion of [strategic autonomy](#).

Esper’s removal is part of a transition spring clean in the dying days of the Trump presidency. Anthony Tata, a retired brigadier-general, former superintendent of Wake County Schools and North Carolina Department of Transportation chief, has been shoehorned into the role of Pentagon’s policy chief. Tata [struggled with Senate confirmation](#) earlier in the summer, a situation aided by past statements of some factual elasticity. (Neither he, nor the truth, tend to trouble each other.) In 2018, he accused President

Barack Obama for being a Muslim “terrorist leader”. He has also had his sights on former CIA Director John Brennan, [giving firm advice](#) on Twitter that has since been removed: “Might be a good time to pick your poison: firing squad, public hanging, life sentence as a prison b*tch, or just suck on your pistol.”

In all this clouded mess, acting undersecretary of defence for policy, James H. Anderson, also handed in his resignation papers, along with Joseph D. Kernan, undersecretary of defence for intelligence. To make the picture that more interesting, Tata had been, in effect, Anderson’s deputy, in circumvention of Senate confirmation protocols. Not only has Trump proven to be the firing boss par excellence; he continues to fiddle protocol and muddy convention. Expect more heads to roll.

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