



As the President's behavior grew increasingly erratic, General Mark Milley told his staff, "I will fight from the inside." Photo illustration by Klawe Rzczy; Source photographs from Getty; National Archives / Newsmakers

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INSIDE THE WAR BETWEEN TRUMP AND HIS GENERALS

How Mark Milley and others in the Pentagon handled the national-security threat posed by their own Commander-in-Chief.

By Susan B. Glasser and Peter Baker

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In the summer of 2017, after just half a year in the White House, Donald Trump flew to Paris for Bastille Day celebrations thrown by Emmanuel Macron, the new French President. Macron staged a spectacular martial display to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the American entrance into the First World War. Vintage tanks rolled down the Champs-Élysées as fighter jets roared overhead. The event seemed to be calculated to appeal to Trump—his sense of showmanship and grandiosity—and he was visibly delighted. The French general in charge of the parade turned to one of his American counterparts and said, “You are going to be doing this next year.”

Sure enough, Trump returned to Washington determined to have his generals throw him the biggest, grandest military parade ever for the Fourth of July. The generals, to his bewilderment, reacted with disgust. “I’d rather swallow acid,” his Defense Secretary, James Mattis, said. Struggling to dissuade Trump, officials pointed out that the parade would cost millions of dollars and tear up the streets of the capital.

But the gulf between Trump and the generals was not really about money or practicalities, just as their endless policy battles were not only about clashing views on whether to withdraw from Afghanistan or how to combat the nuclear threat posed by North Korea and Iran. The divide was also a matter of values, of how they viewed the United States itself. That was never clearer than when Trump told his new chief of staff, John Kelly—like Mattis, a retired Marine Corps general—about his vision for Independence Day. “Look, I don’t want any wounded guys in the parade,” Trump said. “This doesn’t look good for me.” He explained with distaste that at the Bastille Day parade there had been several formations of injured veterans, including wheelchair-bound soldiers who had lost limbs in battle.

Kelly could not believe what he was hearing. “Those are the heroes,” he told Trump. “In our society, there’s only one group of people who are more heroic than they are—and they are buried over in Arlington.” Kelly did not mention that his own son Robert, a lieutenant killed in action in Afghanistan, was among the dead interred there.

“I don’t want them,” Trump repeated. “It doesn’t look good for me.”

The subject came up again during an Oval Office briefing that included Trump, Kelly, and Paul Selva, an Air Force general and the vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Kelly joked in his deadpan way about the parade. “Well, you know, General Selva is going to be in charge of organizing the Fourth of July parade,” he told the President. Trump did not understand that Kelly was being sarcastic. “So, what do you think of the parade?” Trump asked Selva. Instead of telling Trump what he wanted to hear, Selva was forthright.

“I didn’t grow up in the United States, I actually grew up in Portugal,” Selva said. “Portugal was a dictatorship—and parades were about showing the people who had the guns. And in this country, we don’t do that.” He added, “It’s not who we are.”

Even after this impassioned speech, Trump still did not get it. “So, you don’t like the idea?” he said, incredulous.

“No,” Selva said. “It’s what dictators do.”

The four years of the Trump Presidency were characterized by a fantastical degree of instability: fits of rage, late-night Twitter storms, abrupt dismissals. At first, Trump, who had dodged the draft by claiming to have bone spurs, seemed enamored with being Commander-in-Chief and with the national-security officials he’d either appointed or inherited. But Trump’s love affair with “my generals” was brief, and in a statement for this article the former President confirmed how much he had soured on them over time. “These were very untalented people and once I realized it, I did not rely on them, I relied on the real generals and admirals within the system,” he said.

It turned out that the generals had rules, standards, and expertise, not blind loyalty. The President’s loud complaint to John Kelly one day was typical: “You fucking generals, why can’t you be like the German generals?”

“Which generals?” Kelly asked.

“The German generals in World War II,” Trump responded.

“You do know that they tried to kill Hitler three times and almost pulled it off?” Kelly said.

But, of course, Trump did not know that. “No, no, no, they were totally loyal to him,” the President replied. In his version of history, the generals of the Third Reich had been completely subservient to Hitler; this was the model he wanted for his military. Kelly told Trump that there were no such American generals, but the President was determined to test the proposition.

By late 2018, Trump wanted his own handpicked chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He had tired of Joseph Dunford, a Marine general who had been appointed chairman by Barack Obama, and who worked closely with Mattis as they resisted some of Trump’s more outlandish ideas. Never mind that Dunford still had most of a year to go in his term. For months, David Urban, a lobbyist who ran the winning 2016 Trump campaign in Pennsylvania, had been urging the President and his inner circle to replace Dunford with a more like-minded chairman, someone less aligned with Mattis, who had commanded both Dunford and Kelly in the Marines.



"Michael, your father and I are worried that you're awfully young to be singing the blues."



Cartoon by David Sipress

Mattis's candidate to succeed Dunford was David Goldfein, an Air Force general and a former F-16 fighter pilot who had been shot down in the Balkans and successfully evaded capture. No one could remember a President selecting a chairman over the objections of his Defense Secretary, but word came back to the Pentagon that there was no way Trump would accept just one recommendation. Two obvious contenders from the Army, however, declined to be considered: General Curtis Scaparrotti, the NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, told fellow-officers that there was "no gas left in my tank" to deal

with being Trump's chairman. General Joseph Votel, the Central Command chief, also begged off, telling a colleague he was not a good fit to work so closely with Mattis.

Urban, who had attended West Point with Trump's Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, and remained an Army man at heart, backed Mark Milley, the chief of staff of the Army. Milley, who was then sixty, was the son of a Navy corpsman who had served with the 4th Marine Division, in Iwo Jima. He grew up outside Boston and played hockey at Princeton. As an Army officer, Milley commanded troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, led the 10th Mountain Division, and oversaw the Army Forces Command. A student of history who often carried a pile of the latest books on the Second World War with him, Milley was decidedly not a member of the close-knit Marine fraternity that had dominated national-security policy for Trump's first two years. Urban told the President that he would connect better with Milley, who was loquacious and blunt to the point of being rude, and who had the Ivy League pedigree that always impressed Trump.

Milley had already demonstrated those qualities in meetings with Trump as the Army chief of staff. "Milley would go right at why it's important for the President to know this about the Army and why the Army is the service that wins all the nation's wars. He had all those sort of elevator-speech punch lines," a senior defense official recalled. "He would have that big bellowing voice and be right in his face with all the one-liners, and then he would take a breath and he would say, 'Mr. President, our Army is here to serve you. Because you're the Commander-in-Chief.' It was a very different approach, and Trump liked that." And, like Trump, Milley was not a subscriber to the legend of Mad Dog Mattis, whom he considered a "complete control freak."

Mattis, for his part, seemed to believe that Milley was inappropriately campaigning for the job, and Milley recalled to others that Mattis confronted him at a reception that fall, saying, "Hey, you shouldn't run for office. You shouldn't run to be the chairman." Milley later told people that he had replied sharply to Mattis, "I'm not lobbying for any fucking thing. I don't do that." Milley eventually raised the issue with Dunford. "Hey, Mattis has got this in his head," Milley told him. "I'm telling you it ain't me." Milley even claimed that he had begged Urban to cease promoting his candidacy.

In November, 2018, the day before Milley was scheduled for an interview with Trump, he and Mattis had another barbed encounter at the Pentagon. In Milley's recounting of the

episode later to others, Mattis urged him to tell Trump that he wanted to be the next Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, rather than the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Milley said he would not do that but would instead wait to hear what the President wanted him to do. This would end whatever relationship the two generals had.

When Milley arrived at the White House the next day, he was received by Kelly, who seemed to him unusually distraught. Before they headed into the Oval Office to meet with Trump, Milley asked Kelly what he thought.

“You should go to Europe and just get the fuck out of D.C.,” Kelly said. The White House was a cesspool: “Just get as far away as you can.”

In the Oval Office, Trump said right from the start that he was considering Milley for chairman of the Joint Chiefs. When Trump offered him the job, Milley replied, “Mr. President, I’ll do whatever you ask me to do.”

For the next hour, they talked about the state of the world. Immediately, there were points of profound disagreement. On Afghanistan, Milley said he believed that a complete withdrawal of American troops, as Trump wanted, would cause a serious new set of problems. And Milley had already spoken out publicly against the banning of transgender troops, which Trump was insisting on.

“Mattis tells me you are weak on transgender,” Trump said.

“No, I am not weak on transgender,” Milley replied. “I just don’t care who sleeps with who.”

There were other differences as well, but in the end Milley assured him, “Mr. President, you’re going to be making the decisions. All I can guarantee from me is I’m going to give you an honest answer, and I’m not going to talk about it on the front page of the *Washington Post*. I’ll give you an honest answer on everything I can. And you’re going to make the decisions, and as long as they’re legal I’ll support it.”

As long as they’re legal. It was not clear how much that caveat even registered with Trump. The decision to name Milley was a rare chance, as Trump saw it, to get back at Mattis. Trump would confirm this years later, after falling out with both men, saying that he had picked Milley only because Mattis “could not stand him, had no respect for him, and would not recommend him.”

Late on the evening of December 7th, Trump announced that he would reveal a big personnel decision having to do with the Joint Chiefs the next day, in Philadelphia, at the hundred-and-nineteenth annual Army-Navy football game. This was all the notice Dunford had that he was about to be publicly humiliated. The next morning, Dunford was standing with Milley at the game waiting for the President to arrive when Urban, the lobbyist, showed up. Urban hugged Milley. “We did it!” Urban said. “We did it!”

But Milley’s appointment was not even the day’s biggest news. As Trump walked to his helicopter to fly to the game, he dropped another surprise. “John Kelly will be leaving toward the end of the year,” he told reporters. Kelly had lasted seventeen months in what he called “the worst fucking job in the world.”

For Trump, the decision was a turning point. Instead of installing another strong-willed White House chief of staff who might have told him no, the President gravitated toward one who would basically go along with whatever he wanted. A week later, Kelly made an unsuccessful last-ditch effort to persuade Trump not to replace him with Mick Mulvaney, a former congressman from South Carolina who was serving as Trump’s budget director. “You don’t want to hire someone who’s going to be a yes-man,” Kelly told the President. “I don’t give a shit anymore,” Trump replied. “I want a yes-man!”

A little more than a week after that, Mattis was out, too, having quit in protest over Trump’s order that the U.S. abruptly withdraw its forces from Syria right after Mattis had met with American allies fighting alongside the U.S. It was the first time in nearly four decades that a major Cabinet secretary had resigned over a national-security dispute with the President.

The so-called “axis of adults” was over. None of them had done nearly as much to restrain Trump as the President’s critics thought they should have. But all of them—Kelly, Mattis, Dunford, plus H. R. McMaster, the national-security adviser, and Rex Tillerson, Trump’s first Secretary of State—had served as guardrails in one way or another. Trump hoped to replace them with more malleable figures. As Mattis would put it, Trump was so out of his depth that he had decided to drain the pool.

On January 2, 2019, Kelly sent a farewell e-mail to the White House staff. He said that these were the people he would miss: “The selfless ones, who work for the American people so hard and never lowered themselves to wrestle in the mud with the pigs. The ones who

stayed above the drama, put personal ambition and politics aside, and simply worked for our great country. The ones who were ethical, moral and always told their boss what he or she NEEDED to hear, as opposed to what they might have wanted to hear.”

That same morning, Mulvaney showed up at the White House for his first official day as acting chief of staff. He called an all-hands meeting and made an announcement: O.K., we’re going to do things differently. John Kelly’s gone, and we’re going to let the President be the President.

In the fall of 2019, nearly a year after Trump named him the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Milley finally took over the position from Dunford. Two weeks into the job, Milley sat at Trump’s side in a meeting at the White House with congressional leaders to discuss a brewing crisis in the Middle East. Trump had again ordered the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria, imperilling America’s Kurdish allies and effectively handing control of the territory over to the Syrian government and Russian military forces. The House—amid impeachment proceedings against the President for holding up nearly four hundred million dollars in security assistance to Ukraine as leverage to demand an investigation of his Democratic opponent—passed a nonbinding resolution rebuking Trump for the pullout. Even two-thirds of the House Republicans voted for it.

At the meeting, the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, pointed out the vote against the President. “Congratulations,” Trump snapped sarcastically. He grew even angrier when the Senate Democratic leader, Chuck Schumer, read out a warning from Mattis that leaving Syria could result in the resurgence of the Islamic State. In response, Trump derided his former Defense Secretary as “the world’s most overrated general. You know why I fired him? I fired him because he wasn’t tough enough.”

Eventually, Pelosi, in her frustration, stood and pointed at the President. “All roads with you lead to Putin,” she said. “You gave Russia Ukraine and Syria.”

“You’re just a politician, a third-rate politician!” Trump shot back.

Finally, Steny Hoyer, the House Majority Leader and Pelosi’s No. 2, had had enough.

“This is not useful,” he said, and stood up to leave with the Speaker.

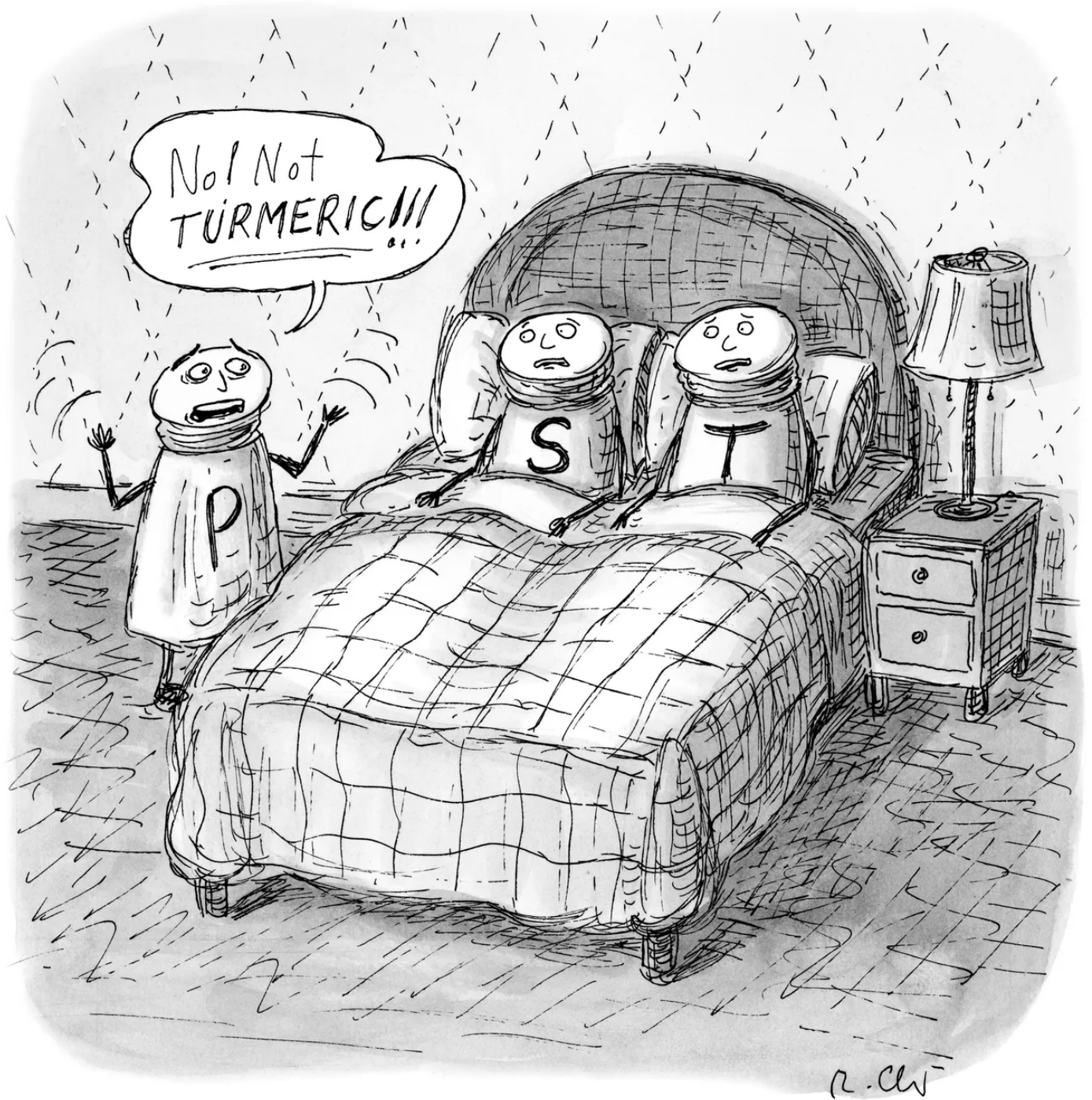
“We’ll see you at the polls,” Trump shouted as they walked out.

When she exited the White House, Pelosi told reporters that she left because Trump was having a “meltdown.” A few hours later, Trump tweeted a White House photograph of Pelosi standing over him, apparently thinking it would prove that she was the one having a meltdown. Instead, the image went viral as an example of Pelosi confronting Trump.

Milley could also be seen in the photograph, his hands clenched together, his head bowed low, looking as though he wanted to sink into the floor. To Pelosi, this was a sign of inexplicable weakness, and she would later say that she never understood why Milley had not been willing to stand up to Trump at that meeting. After all, she would point out, he was the nonpartisan leader of the military, not one of Trump’s toadies. “Milley, you would have thought, would have had more independence,” she told us, “but he just had his head down.”

In fact, Milley was already quite wary of Trump. That night, he called Representative Adam Smith, a Washington Democrat and the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, who had also been present. “Is that the way these things normally go?” Milley asked. As Smith later put it, “That was the moment when Milley realized that the boss might have a screw or two loose.” There had been no honeymoon. “From pretty much his first day on the job as chairman of the Joint Chiefs,” Smith said, “he was very much aware of the fact that there was a challenge here that was not your normal challenge with a Commander-in-Chief.”

Early on the evening of June 1, 2020, Milley failed what he came to realize was the biggest test of his career: a short walk from the White House across Lafayette Square, minutes after it had been violently cleared of Black Lives Matter protesters. Dressed in combat fatigues, Milley marched behind Trump with a phalanx of the President’s advisers in a photo op, the most infamous of the Trump Presidency, that was meant to project a forceful response to the protests that had raged outside the White House and across the country since the killing, the week before, of George Floyd. Most of the demonstrations had been peaceful, but there were also eruptions of looting, street violence, and arson, including a small fire in St. John’s Church, across from the White House.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

In the morning before the Lafayette Square photo op, Trump had clashed with Milley, Attorney General William Barr, and the Defense Secretary, Mark Esper, over his demands for a militarized show of force. “We look weak,” Trump told them. The President wanted to invoke the Insurrection Act of 1807 and use active-duty military to quell the protests. He wanted ten thousand troops in the streets and the 82nd Airborne called up. He demanded

that Milley take personal charge. When Milley and the others resisted and said that the National Guard would be sufficient, Trump shouted, “You are all losers! You are all fucking losers!” Turning to Milley, Trump said, “Can’t you just shoot them? Just shoot them in the legs or something?”

Eventually, Trump was persuaded not to send in the military against American citizens. Barr, as the civilian head of law enforcement, was given the lead role in the protest response, and the National Guard was deployed to assist police. Hours later, Milley, Esper, and other officials were abruptly summoned back to the White House and sent marching across Lafayette Square. As they walked, with the scent of tear gas still in the air, Milley realized that he should not be there and made his exit, quietly peeling off to his waiting black Chevy Suburban. But the damage was done. No one would care or even remember that he was not present when Trump held up a Bible in front of the damaged church; people had already seen him striding with the President on live television in his battle dress, an image that seemed to signal that the United States under Trump was, finally, a nation at war with itself. Milley knew this was a misjudgment that would haunt him forever, a “road-to-Damascus moment,” as he would later put it. What would he do about it?

In the days after the Lafayette Square incident, Milley sat in his office at the Pentagon, writing and rewriting drafts of a letter of resignation. There were short versions of the letter; there were long versions. His preferred version was the one that read in its entirety:

I regret to inform you that I intend to resign as your Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Thank you for the honor of appointing me as senior ranking officer. The events of the last couple weeks have caused me to do deep soul-searching, and I can no longer faithfully support and execute your orders as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It is my belief that you were doing great and irreparable harm to my country. I believe that you have made a concerted effort over time to politicize the United States military. I thought that I could change that. I’ve come to the realization that I cannot, and I need to step aside and let someone else try to do that.

Second, you are using the military to create fear in the minds of the people—and we are trying to protect the American people. I cannot stand idly by and participate in that attack, verbally or otherwise, on the American people. The American people trust their military and they trust us to protect them against all enemies, foreign and domestic, and our military will do just that. We will not turn our back on the American people.

Third, I swore an oath to the Constitution of the United States and embodied within that Constitution is the idea that says that all men and women are created equal. All men and women are created equal, no matter who you are, whether you are white or Black, Asian, Indian, no matter the color of your skin, no matter if you're gay, straight or something in between. It doesn't matter if you're Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jew, or choose not to believe. None of that matters. It doesn't matter what country you came from, what your last name is—what matters is we're Americans. We're all Americans. That under these colors of red, white, and blue—the colors that my parents fought for in World War II—means something around the world. It's obvious to me that you don't think of those colors the same way I do. It's obvious to me that you don't hold those values dear and the cause that I serve.

And lastly it is my deeply held belief that you're ruining the international order, and causing significant damage to our country overseas, that was fought for so hard by the Greatest Generation that they instituted in 1945. Between 1914 and 1945, 150 million people were slaughtered in the conduct of war. They were slaughtered because of tyrannies and dictatorships. That generation, like every generation, has fought against that, has fought against fascism, has fought against Nazism, has fought against extremism. It's now obvious to me that you don't understand that world order. You don't understand what the war was all about. In fact, you subscribe to many of the principles that we fought against. And I cannot be a party to that. It is with deep regret that I hereby submit my letter of resignation.

The letter was dated June 8th, a full week after Lafayette Square, but Milley still was not sure if he should give it to Trump. He was sending up flares, seeking advice from a wide circle. He reached out to Dunford, and to mentors such as the retired Army general James Dubik, an expert on military ethics. He called political contacts as well, including members of Congress and former officials from the Bush and Obama Administrations. Most told him what Robert Gates, a former Secretary of Defense and C.I.A. chief, did: “Make them fire you. Don't resign.”

“My sense is Mark had a pretty accurate measure of the man pretty quickly,” Gates recalled later. “He would tell me over time, well before June 1st, some of the absolutely crazy notions that were put forward in the Oval Office, crazy ideas from the President, things about using or not using military force, the immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan, pulling out of South Korea. It just went on and on.”

Milley was not the only senior official to seek Gates's counsel. Several members of Trump's national-security team had made the pilgrimage out to his home in Washington State during the previous two years. Gates would pour them a drink, grill them some salmon, and help them wrestle with the latest Trump conundrum. “The problem with resignation is you can only fire that gun once,” he told them. All the conversations were variations on a

theme: “ ‘How do I walk us back from the ledge?’ ‘How do I keep this from happening, because it would be a terrible thing for the country?’ ”

After Lafayette Square, Gates told both Milley and Esper that, given Trump’s increasingly erratic and dangerous behavior, they needed to stay in the Pentagon as long as they could. “If you resign, it’s a one-day story,” Gates told them. “If you’re fired, it makes it clear you were standing up for the right thing.” Gates advised Milley that he had another important card and urged him to play it: “Keep the chiefs on board with you and make it clear to the White House that if you go they all go, so that the White House knows this isn’t just about firing Mark Milley. This is about the entire Joint Chiefs of Staff quitting in response.”

Publicly, Lafayette Square looked like a debacle for Milley. Several retired generals had condemned his participation, pointing out that the leader of a racially diverse military, with more than two hundred thousand active-duty Black troops, could not be seen opposing a movement for racial justice. Even Mattis, who had refrained from openly criticizing Trump, issued a statement about the “bizarre photo op.” The *Washington Post* reported that Mattis had been motivated to do so by his anger at the image of Milley parading through the square in his fatigues.

Whatever their personal differences, Mattis and Milley both knew that there was a tragic inevitability to the moment. Throughout his Presidency, Trump had sought to redefine the role of the military in American public life. In his 2016 campaign, he had spoken out in support of the use of torture and other practices that the military considered war crimes. Just before the 2018 midterms, he ordered thousands of troops to the southern border to combat a fake “invasion” by a caravan of migrants. In 2019, in a move that undermined military justice and the chain of command, he gave clemency to a Navy SEAL found guilty of posing with the dead body of a captive in Iraq.

Many considered Trump’s 2018 decision to use the military in his preëlection border stunt to be “the predicate—or the harbinger—of 2020,” in the words of Peter Feaver, a Duke University expert on civil-military relations, who taught the subject to generals at command school. When Milley, who had been among Feaver’s students, called for advice after Lafayette Square, Feaver agreed that Milley should apologize but encouraged him not to resign. “It would have been a mistake,” Feaver said. “We have no tradition of resignation in protest amongst the military.”

Milley decided to apologize in a commencement address at the National Defense University that he was scheduled to deliver the week after the photo op. Feaver's counsel was to own up to the error and make it clear that the mistake was his and not Trump's. Presidents, after all, "are allowed to do political stunts," Feaver said. "That's part of being President."

Milley's apology was unequivocal. "I should not have been there," he said in the address. He did not mention Trump. "My presence in that moment, and in that environment, created a perception of the military involved in domestic politics." It was, he added, "a mistake that I have learned from."

At the same time, Milley had finally come to a decision. He would not quit. "Fuck that shit," he told his staff. "I'll just fight him." The challenge, as he saw it, was to stop Trump from doing any more damage, while also acting in a way that was consistent with his obligation to carry out the orders of his Commander-in-Chief. Yet the Constitution offered no practical guide for a general faced with a rogue President. Never before since the position had been created, in 1949—or at least since Richard Nixon's final days, in 1974—had a chairman of the Joint Chiefs encountered such a situation. "If they want to court-martial me, or put me in prison, have at it," Milley told his staff. "But I will fight from the inside."

Milley's apology tour was private as well as public. With the upcoming election fuelling Trump's sense of frenetic urgency, the chairman sought to get the message to Democrats that he would not go along with any further efforts by the President to deploy the machinery of war for domestic political ends. He called both Pelosi and Schumer. "After the Lafayette Square episode, Milley was extremely contrite and communicated to any number of people that he had no intention of playing Trump's game any longer," Bob Bauer, the former Obama White House counsel, who was then advising Joe Biden's campaign and heard about the calls, said. "He was really burned by that experience. He was appalled. He apologized for it, and it was pretty clear he was digging his heels in."

On Capitol Hill, however, some Democrats, including Pelosi, remained skeptical. To them, Lafayette Square proved that Milley had been a Trumpist all along. "There was a huge misunderstanding about Milley," Adam Smith, the House Armed Services Committee chairman, recalled. "A lot of my Democratic colleagues after June 1st in particular were

concerned about him.” Smith tried to assure other Democrats that “there was never a single solitary moment where it was possible that Milley was going to help Trump do anything that shouldn’t be done.”

And yet Pelosi, among others, also distrusted Milley because of an incident earlier that year in which Trump ordered the killing of the Iranian commander Qassem Suleimani without briefing congressional leaders in advance. Smith said Pelosi believed that the chairman had been “evasive” and disrespectful to Congress. Milley, for his part, felt he could not disregard Trump’s insistence that lawmakers not be notified—a breach that was due to the President’s pique over the impeachment proceedings against him. “The navigation of Trumpworld was more difficult for Milley than Nancy gives him credit for,” Smith said. He vouched for the chairman but never managed to convince Pelosi.

How long could this standoff between the Pentagon and the President go on? For the next few months, Milley woke up each morning not knowing whether he would be fired before the day was over. His wife told him she was shocked that he had not been cashiered outright when he made his apology.

Esper was also on notice. Two days after Lafayette Square, the Defense Secretary had gone to the Pentagon pressroom and offered his own apology, even revealing his opposition to Trump’s demands to invoke the Insurrection Act and use the active-duty military. Such a step, Esper said, should be reserved only for “the most urgent and dire of situations.” Trump later exploded at Esper in the Oval Office about the criticism, delivering what Milley would recall as “the worst reaming out” he had ever heard.

The next day, Trump’s latest chief of staff, Mark Meadows, called the Defense Secretary at home—three times—to get him to recant his opposition to invoking the Insurrection Act. When he refused, Meadows took “the Tony Soprano approach,” as Esper later put it, and began threatening him, before eventually backing off. (A spokesperson for Meadows disputed Esper’s account.) Esper resolved to stay in office as long as he could, “to endure all the shit and run the clock out,” as he put it. He felt that he had a particular responsibility to hold on. By law, the only person authorized to deploy troops other than the President is the Secretary of Defense. Esper was determined not to hand that power off to satraps such as Robert O’Brien, who had become Trump’s fourth and final national-security adviser, or Ric

Grenell, a former public-relations man who had been serving as acting director of National Intelligence.

Both Esper and Milley found new purpose in waiting out the President. They resisted him throughout the summer, as Trump repeatedly demanded that active-duty troops quash ongoing protests, threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act, and tried to stop the military from renaming bases honoring Confederate generals. “They both expected, literally on a daily basis, to be fired,” Gates recalled. Milley “would call me and essentially say, ‘I may not last until tomorrow night.’ And he was comfortable with that. He felt like he knew he was going to support the Constitution, and there were no two ways about it.”

Milley put away the resignation letter in his desk and drew up a plan, a guide for how to get through the next few months. He settled on four goals: First, make sure Trump did not start an unnecessary war overseas. Second, make sure the military was not used in the streets against the American people for the purpose of keeping Trump in power. Third, maintain the military’s integrity. And, fourth, maintain his own integrity. In the months to come, Milley would refer back to the plan more times than he could count.

Even in June, Milley understood that it was not just a matter of holding off Trump until after the Presidential election, on November 3rd. He knew that Election Day might well mark merely the beginning, not the end, of the challenges Trump would pose. The portents were worrisome. Barely one week before Lafayette Square, Trump had posted a tweet that would soon become a refrain. The 2020 Presidential race, he warned for the first time, would end up as “the greatest Rigged Election in history.”

By the evening of Monday, November 9th, Milley’s fears about a volatile post-election period unlike anything America had seen before seemed to be coming true. News organizations had called the election for Biden, but Trump refused to acknowledge that he had lost by millions of votes. The peaceful transition of power—a cornerstone of liberal democracy—was now in doubt. Sitting at home that night at around nine, the chairman received an urgent phone call from the Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. With the possible exception of Vice-President Mike Pence, no one had been more slavishly loyal in public, or more privately obsequious, to Trump than Pompeo. But even he could not take it anymore.

“We’ve got to talk,” Pompeo told Milley, who was at home in Quarters Six, the red brick house that has been the official residence of chairmen of the Joint Chiefs since the early nineteen-sixties. “Can I come over?”

Milley invited Pompeo to visit immediately.

“The crazies have taken over,” Pompeo told him when they sat down at Milley’s kitchen table. Not only was Trump surrounded by the crazies; they were, in fact, ascendant in the White House and, as of that afternoon, inside the Pentagon itself. Just a few hours earlier, on the first workday after the election was called for Biden, Trump had finally fired Esper. Milley and Pompeo were alarmed that the Defense Secretary was being replaced by Christopher Miller, until recently an obscure mid-level counterterrorism official at Trump’s National Security Council, who had arrived at the Pentagon flanked by a team of what appeared to be Trump’s political minders.

For Milley, this was an ominous development. From the beginning, he understood that “if the idea was to seize power,” as he told his staff, “you are not going to do this without the military.” Milley had studied the history of coups. They invariably required the takeover of what he referred to as the “power ministries”—the military, the national police, and the interior forces.

As soon as he’d heard about Esper’s ouster, Milley had rushed upstairs to the Secretary’s office. “This is complete bullshit,” he told Esper. Milley said that he would resign in protest. “You can’t,” Esper insisted. “You’re the only one left.” Once he cooled off, Milley agreed.

In the coming weeks, Milley would repeatedly convene the Joint Chiefs, to bolster their resolve to resist any dangerous political schemes from the White House now that Esper was out. He quoted Benjamin Franklin to them on the virtues of hanging together rather than hanging separately. He told his staff that, if need be, he and all the chiefs were prepared to “put on their uniforms and go across the river together”—to threaten to quit en masse—to prevent Trump from trying to use the military to stay in power illegally.

Soon after Miller arrived at the Pentagon, Milley met with him. “First things first here,” he told the new acting Defense Secretary, who had spent the previous few months running the

National Counterterrorism Center. “You are one of two people in the United States now with the capability to launch nuclear weapons.”

A Pentagon official who had worked closely with Miller had heard a rumor about him potentially replacing Esper more than a week before the election. “My first instinct was this is the most preposterous thing I’ve ever heard,” the official recalled. But then he remembered how Miller had changed in the Trump White House. “He’s inclined to be a bit of a sail, and as the wind blows he will flap in that direction,” the official said. “He’s not an ideologue. He’s just a guy willing to do their bidding.” By coincidence, the official happened to be walking into the Pentagon just as Miller was entering—a video of Miller tripping on the stairs soon made the rounds. Accompanying him were three men who would, for a few weeks, at least, have immense influence over the most powerful military in the world: Kash Patel, Miller’s new chief of staff; Ezra Cohen, who would ascend to acting Under-Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security; and Anthony Tata, a retired general and a talking head on Fox News, who would become the Pentagon’s acting head of policy.



“Something tells me you’re the kind of guy who always wears his baseball cap backward.”



Cartoon by William Haefeli

It was an extraordinary trio. Tata’s claims to fame were calling Obama a “terrorist leader”—an assertion he later retracted—and alleging that a former C.I.A. director had threatened to assassinate Trump. Patel, a former aide to Devin Nunes, the top Republican on the House Intelligence Committee, had been accused of spreading conspiracy theories claiming that Ukraine, not Russia, had interfered in the 2016 election. Both Trump’s third national-

security adviser, John Bolton, and Bolton's deputy, Charles Kupperman, had vociferously objected to putting Patel on the National Security Council staff, backing down only when told that it was a personal, "must-hire" order from the President. Still, Patel found his way around them to deal with Trump directly, feeding him packets of information on Ukraine, which was outside his portfolio, according to testimony during Trump's first impeachment. (In a statement for this article, Patel called the allegations a "total fabrication.") Eventually, Patel was sent to help Ric Grenell carry out a White House-ordered purge of the intelligence community.

Cohen, who had worked earlier in his career at the Defense Intelligence Agency under Michael Flynn, had initially been hired at the Trump National Security Council in 2017 but was pushed out after Flynn's swift implosion as Trump's first national-security adviser. When efforts were later made to rehire Cohen in the White House, Bolton's deputy vowed to "put my badge on the table" and quit. "I am not going to hire somebody that is going to be another cancer in the organization, and Ezra is cancer," Kupperman bluntly told Trump. In the spring of 2020, Cohen landed at the Pentagon, and following Trump's post-election shakeup he assumed the top intelligence post at the Pentagon.

Milley had firsthand reason to be wary of these new Pentagon advisers. Just before the election, he and Pompeo were infuriated when a top-secret Navy SEAL Team 6 rescue mission to free an American hostage held in Nigeria nearly had to be cancelled at the last minute. The Nigerians had not formally approved the mission in advance, as required, despite Patel's assurances. "Planes were already in the air and we didn't have the approvals," a senior State Department official recalled. The rescue team was kept circling while diplomats tried to track down their Nigerian counterparts. They managed to find them only minutes before the planes would have had to turn back. As a result, the official said, both Pompeo and Milley, who believed he had been personally lied to, "assigned ill will to that whole cabal." The C.I.A. refused to have anything to do with Patel, Pompeo recalled to his State Department staff, and they should be cautious as well. "The Secretary thought these people were just wackadoodles, nuts, and dangerous," a second senior State Department official said. (Patel denied their accounts, asserting, "I caused no delay at all.")

After Esper's firing, Milley summoned Patel and Cohen separately to his office to deliver stern lectures. Whatever machinations they were up to, he told each of them, "life looks really shitty from behind bars. And, whether you want to realize it or not, there's going to

be a President at exactly 1200 hours on the twentieth and his name is Joe Biden. And, if you guys do anything that's illegal, I don't mind having you in prison." Cohen denied that Milley said this to him, insisting it was a "very friendly, positive conversation." Patel also denied it, asserting, "He worked for me, not the other way around." But Milley told his staff that he warned both Cohen and Patel that they were being watched: "Don't do it, don't even try to do it. I can smell it. I can see it. And so can a lot of other people. And, by the way, the military will have no part of this shit."

Part of the new team's agenda soon became clear: making sure Trump fulfilled his 2016 campaign promise to withdraw American troops from the "endless wars" overseas. Two days after Esper was fired, Patel slid a piece of paper across the desk to Milley during a meeting with him and Miller. It was an order, with Trump's trademark signature in black Sharpie, decreeing that all four thousand five hundred remaining troops in Afghanistan be withdrawn by January 15th, and that a contingent of fewer than a thousand troops on a counterterrorism mission in Somalia be pulled out by December 31st.

Milley was stunned. "Where'd you get this?" he said.

Patel said that it had just come from the White House.

"Did you advise the President to do this?" he asked Patel, who said no.

"Did you advise the President to do this?" he asked Miller, who said no.

"Well, then, who advised the President to do it?" Milley asked. "By law, I'm the President's adviser on military action. How does this happen without me rendering my military opinion and advice?"

With that, he announced that he was putting on his dress uniform and going to the White House, where Milley and the others ended up in the office of the national-security adviser, Robert O'Brien.

"Where did this come from?" Milley demanded, putting the withdrawal order on O'Brien's desk.

"I don't know. I've never seen that before," O'Brien said. "It doesn't look like a White House memo."

Keith Kellogg, a retired general serving as Pence's national-security adviser, asked to see the document. "This is not the President," he said. "The format's not right. This is not done right."

"Keith, you've got to be kidding me," Milley said. "You're telling me that someone's forging the President of the United States' signature?"

The order, it turned out, was not fake. It was the work of a rogue operation inside Trump's White House overseen by Johnny McEntee, Trump's thirty-year-old personnel chief, and supported by the President himself. The order had been drafted by Douglas Macgregor, a retired colonel and a Trump favorite from his television appearances, working with a junior McEntee aide. The order was then brought to the President, bypassing the national-security apparatus and Trump's own senior officials, to get him to sign it.

Macgregor often appeared on Fox News demanding an exit from Afghanistan and accused Trump's advisers of blocking the President from doing what he wanted. "He needs to send everyone out of the Oval Office who keeps telling him, 'If you do that and something bad happens, it's going to be blamed on you, Mr. President,' " Macgregor had told Tucker Carlson in January. "He needs to say, 'I don't give a damn.' "

On the day that Esper was fired, McEntee had invited Macgregor to his office, offered him a job as the new acting Defense Secretary's senior adviser, and handed him a handwritten list of four priorities that, as Axios reported, McEntee claimed had come directly from Trump:

1. Get us out of Afghanistan.
2. Get us out of Iraq and Syria.
3. Complete the withdrawal from Germany.
4. Get us out of Africa.

Once the Afghanistan order was discovered, Trump's advisers persuaded the President to back off, reminding him that he had already approved a plan for leaving over the following few months. "Why do we need a new plan?" Pompeo asked. Trump relented, and O'Brien then told the rest of the rattled national-security leadership that the order was "null and void."

The compromise, however, was a new order that codified the drawdown to twenty-five hundred troops in Afghanistan by mid-January, which Milley and Esper had been resisting, and a reduction in the remaining three thousand troops in Iraq as well. The State Department was given one hour to notify leaders of those countries before the order was released.

Two nightmare scenarios kept running through Milley's mind. One was that Trump might spark an external crisis, such as a war with Iran, to divert attention or to create a pretext for a power grab at home. The other was that Trump would manufacture a domestic crisis to justify ordering the military into the streets to prevent the transfer of power. Milley feared that Trump's "Hitler-like" embrace of his own lies about the election would lead him to seek a "Reichstag moment." In 1933, Hitler had seized on a fire in the German parliament to take control of the country. Milley now envisioned a declaration of martial law or a Presidential invocation of the Insurrection Act, with Trumpian Brown Shirts fomenting violence.

By late November, amid Trump's escalating attacks on the election, Milley and Pompeo's cooperation had deepened—a fact that the Secretary of State revealed to Attorney General Bill Barr over dinner on the night of December 1st. Barr had just publicly broken with Trump, telling the Associated Press in an interview that there was no evidence of election fraud sufficient to overturn the results. As they ate at an Italian restaurant in a Virginia strip mall, Barr recounted for Pompeo what he called "an eventful day." And Pompeo told Barr about the extraordinary arrangement he had proposed to Milley to make sure that the country was in steady hands until the Inauguration: they would hold daily morning phone calls with Mark Meadows. Pompeo and Milley soon took to calling them the "land the plane" phone calls.

"Our job is to land this plane safely and to do a peaceful transfer of power the twentieth of January," Milley told his staff. "This is our obligation to this nation." There was a problem, however. "Both engines are out, the landing gear are stuck. We're in an emergency situation."

In public, Pompeo remained his staunchly pro-Trump self. The day after his secret visit to Milley's house to commiserate about "the crazies" taking over, in fact, he refused to acknowledge Trump's defeat, snidely telling reporters, "There will be a smooth transition—

to a second Trump Administration.” Behind the scenes, however, Pompeo accepted that the election was over and made it clear that he would not help overturn the result. “He was totally against it,” a senior State Department official recalled. Pompeo cynically justified this jarring contrast between what he said in public and in private. “It was important for him to not get fired at the end, too, to be there to the bitter end,” the senior official said.

Both Milley and Pompeo were angered by the bumbling team of ideologues that Trump had sent to the Pentagon after the firing of Esper, a West Point classmate of Pompeo’s. The two, who were “already converging as fellow-travellers,” as one of the State officials put it, worked even more closely together as their alarm about Trump’s post-election conduct grew, although Milley was under no illusions about the Secretary of State. He believed that Pompeo, a longtime enabler of Trump who aspired to run for President himself, wanted “a second political life,” but that Trump’s final descent into denialism was the line that, at last, he would not cross. “At the end, he wouldn’t be a party to that craziness,” Milley told his staff. By early December, as they were holding their 8 A.M. land-the-plane calls, Milley was confident that Pompeo was genuinely trying to achieve a peaceful handover of power to Biden. But he was never sure what to make of Meadows. Was the chief of staff trying to land the plane or to hijack it?

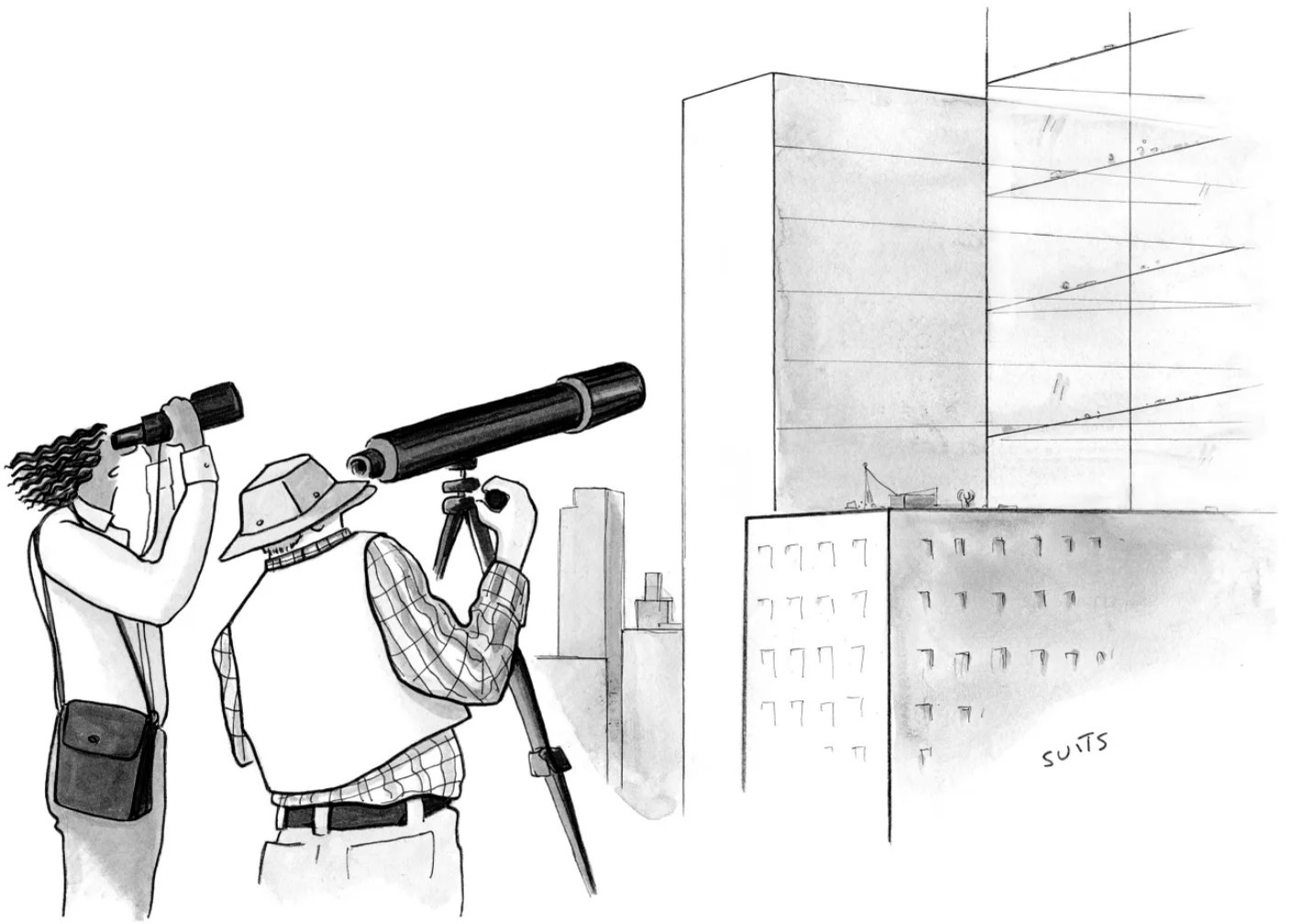
Most days, Milley would also call the White House counsel, Pat Cipollone, who was hardly a usual interlocutor for a chairman of the Joint Chiefs. In the final weeks of the Administration, Cipollone, a true believer in Trump’s conservative agenda, was a principal actor in the near-daily drama over Trump’s various schemes to overturn his election defeat. After getting off one call with Cipollone, Milley told a visitor that the White House counsel was “constructive,” “not crazy,” and a force for “trying to keep guardrails around the President.”

Milley continued to reach out to Democrats close to Biden to assure them that he would not allow the military to be misused to keep Trump in power. One regular contact was Susan Rice, the former Obama national-security adviser, dubbed by Democrats the Rice Channel. He also spoke several times with Senator Angus King, an Independent from Maine. “My conversations with him were about the danger of some attempt to use the military to declare martial law,” King said. He took it upon himself to reassure fellow-senators. “I can’t tell you why I know this,” but the military will absolutely do the right thing, he would tell them, citing Milley’s “character and honesty.”

Milley had increasing reason to fear that such a choice might actually be forced upon him. In late November, Trump pardoned Michael Flynn, who had pleaded guilty to charges of lying to the F.B.I. about his contacts with Russia. Soon afterward, Flynn publicly suggested several extreme options for Trump: he could invoke martial law, appoint a special counsel, and authorize the military to “rerun” an election in the swing states. On December 18th, Trump hosted Flynn and a group of other election deniers in the Oval Office, where, for the first time in American history, a President would seriously entertain using the military to overturn an election. They brought with them a draft of a proposed Presidential order requiring the acting Defense Secretary—Christopher Miller—to “seize, collect, retain and analyze” voting machines and provide a final assessment of any findings in sixty days, well after the Inauguration was to take place. Later that night, Trump sent out a tweet beckoning his followers to descend on the capital to help him hold on to office. “Big protest in D.C. on January 6th,” he wrote at 1:42 A.M. “Be there, will be wild!”

Milley’s fears of a coup no longer seemed far-fetched.

While Trump was being lobbied by “the crazies” to order troops to intervene at home, Milley and his fellow-generals were concerned that he would authorize a strike against Iran. For much of his Presidency, Trump’s foreign-policy hawks had agitated for a showdown with Iran; they accelerated their efforts when they realized that Trump might lose the election. In early 2020, when Mike Pence advocated taking tough measures, Milley asked why. “Because they are evil,” Pence said. Milley recalled replying, “Mr. Vice-President, there’s a lot of evil in the world, but we don’t go to war against all of it.” Milley grew even more nervous before the election, when he heard a senior official tell Trump that if he lost he should strike Iran’s nuclear program. At the time, Milley told his staff that it was a “What the fuck are these guys talking about?” moment. Now it seemed frighteningly possible.



“Yep, a rare gray-suited office worker.”



Cartoon by Julia Suits

Robert O’Brien, the national-security adviser, had been another frequent cheerleader for tough measures: “Mr. President, we should hit ’em hard, hit ’em hard with everything we have.” Esper, in his memoir, called “hit them hard” O’Brien’s “tedious signature phrase.” (O’Brien disputed this, saying, “The quote attributed to me is not accurate.”)

In the week of Esper’s firing, Milley was called to the White House to present various military options for attacking Iran and encountered a disturbing performance by Miller, the new acting Defense Secretary. Miller later told Jonathan Karl, of ABC, that he had intentionally acted like a “fucking madman” at the meeting, just three days into his tenure, pushing various escalatory scenarios for responding to Iran’s breakout nuclear capacities.

Miller's behavior did not look intentional so much as unhelpful to Milley, as Trump kept asking for alternatives, including an attack inside Iran on its ballistic-weapons sites. Milley explained that this would be an illegal preëmptive act: "If you attack the mainland of Iran, you will be starting a war." During another clash with Trump's more militant advisers, when Trump was not present, Milley was even more explicit. "If we do what you're saying," he said, "we are all going to be tried as war criminals in The Hague."

Trump often seemed more bluster than bite, and the Pentagon brass still believed that he did not want an all-out war, yet he continued pushing for a missile strike on Iran even after that November meeting. If Trump said it once, Milley told his staff, he said it a thousand times. "The thing he was most worried about was Iran," a senior Biden adviser who spoke with Milley recalled. "Milley had had the experience more than once of having to walk the President off the ledge when it came to retaliating."

The biggest fear was that Iran would provoke Trump, and, using an array of diplomatic and military channels, American officials warned the Iranians not to exploit the volatile domestic situation in the U.S. "There was a distinct concern that Iran would take advantage of this to strike at us in some way," Adam Smith, the House Armed Services chairman, recalled.

Among those pushing the President to hit Iran before Biden's Inauguration, Milley believed, was the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. On December 18th, the same day that Trump met with Flynn to discuss instituting martial law, Milley met with Netanyahu at his home in Jerusalem to personally urge him to back off with Trump. "If you do this, you're gonna have a fucking war," Milley told him.

Two days later, on December 20th, Iranian-backed militias in Iraq fired nearly two dozen rockets at the American Embassy in Baghdad. Trump responded by publicly blaming Iran and threatening major retaliation if so much as a single American was killed. It was the largest attack on the Green Zone in more than a decade, and exactly the sort of provocation Milley had been dreading.

During the holidays, tensions with Iran escalated even more as the first anniversary of the American killing of Suleimani approached. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned that "those who ordered the murder of General Soleimani" would "be punished." Late on the afternoon of Sunday, January 3rd, Trump met with Milley, Miller, and his other national-

security advisers on Iran. Pompeo and Milley discussed a worrisome new report from the International Atomic Energy Agency. But, by the end, even Pompeo and O'Brien, the Iran hawks, opposed a military strike at this late hour in Trump's Presidency. "He realized the clock ran out," Milley told his staff. Trump, consumed with his election fight, backed off.

At the end of the meeting with his security chiefs, the President pulled Miller aside and asked him if he was ready for the upcoming January 6th protest. "It's going to be a big deal," Milley heard Trump tell Miller. "You've got enough people to make sure it's safe for my people, right?" Miller assured him he did. This was the last time that Milley would ever see Trump.

On January 6th, Milley was in his office at the Pentagon meeting with Christine Wormuth, the lead Biden transition official for the Defense Department. In the weeks since the election, Milley had started displaying four networks at once on a large monitor across from the round table where he and Wormuth sat: CNN and Fox News, as well as the small pro-Trump outlets Newsmax and One America News Network, which had been airing election disinformation that even Fox would not broadcast. "You've got to know what the enemy is up to," Milley had joked when Wormuth noticed his viewing habits at one of their meetings.

Milley and Wormuth that day were supposed to discuss the Pentagon's plans to draw down U.S. troops in Afghanistan, as well as the Biden team's hopes to mobilize large-scale COVID vaccination sites around the country. But, as they realized in horror what was transpiring on the screen in front of them, Milley was summoned to an urgent meeting with Miller and Ryan McCarthy, the Secretary of the Army. They had not landed the plane, after all. The plane was crashing.

Milley entered the Defense Secretary's office at 2:30 p.m., and they discussed deploying the D.C. National Guard and mobilizing National Guard units from nearby states and federal agents under the umbrella of the Justice Department. Miller issued an order at 3:04 p.m. to send in the D.C. Guard.

But it was too late to prevent the humiliation: Congress had been overwhelmed by a mob of election deniers, white-supremacist militia members, conspiracy theorists, and Trump

loyalists. Milley worried that this truly was Trump's "Reichstag moment," the crisis that would allow the President to invoke martial law and maintain his grip on power.

From the secure facility at Fort McNair, where they had been brought by their protective details, congressional leaders called on the Pentagon to send forces to the Capitol immediately. Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer were suspicious of Miller: Whose side was this unknown Trump appointee on? Milley tried to reassure the Democratic leadership that the uniformed military was on the case, and not there to do Trump's bidding. The Guard, he told them, was coming.

It was already after three-thirty by then, however, and the congressional leaders were furious that it was taking so long. They also spoke with Mike Pence, who offered to call the Pentagon as well. He reached Miller around 4 p.m., with Milley still in his office listening in. "Clear the Capitol," Pence ordered.

Although it was the Vice-President who was seeking to defend the Capitol, Meadows wanted to pretend that Trump was the one taking action. He called Milley, telling him, "We have to kill the narrative that the Vice-President is making all the decisions. We need to establish the narrative that the President is still in charge." Milley later dismissed Meadows, whose spokesperson denied Milley's account, as playing "politics, politics, politics."

The Guard finally arrived at the Capitol by 5:40 p.m., "sprint speed" for the military, as Milley would put it, but not nearly fast enough for some members of Congress, who would spend months investigating why it took so long. By 7 p.m., a perimeter had been set up outside the Capitol, and F.B.I. and A.T.F. agents were going door to door in the Capitol's many hideaways and narrow corridors, searching for any remaining rioters.

That night, waiting for Congress to return and formally ratify Trump's electoral defeat, Milley called one of his contacts on the Biden team. He explained that he had spoken with Meadows and Pat Cipollone at the White House, and that he had been on the phone with Pence and the congressional leaders as well. But Milley never heard from the Commander-in-Chief, on a day when the Capitol was overrun by a hostile force for the first time since the War of 1812. Trump, he said, was both "shameful" and "complicit."

Later, Milley would often think back to that awful day. “It was a very close-run thing,” the historically minded chairman would say, invoking the famous line of the Duke of Wellington after he had only narrowly defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. Trump and his men had failed in their execution of the plot, failed in part by failing to understand that Milley and the others had never been Trump’s generals and never would be. But their attack on the election had exposed a system with glaring weaknesses. “They shook the very Republic to the core,” Milley would eventually reflect. “Can you imagine what a group of people who are much more capable could have done?” ♦

This is drawn from “The Divider: Trump in the White House, 2017-2021.”

An earlier version of this article mistakenly attributed a quote to Mark Esper’s book.

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