

# Trump's Public-Relations Army

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The image of [Donald Trump](#) leading his advisers to St. John's Church may prove to be a defining one of his Presidency: Trump, passing through streets that had been cleared of protesters by tear gas, to [pose with a Bible](#) while [fires burned](#) all over the country. For many members of the military, the image contained an especially discordant note. Amid the political aides in blue suits was a barrel-chested Army officer wearing combat fatigues: General Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and America's highest-ranking soldier. A former senior defense official described to me his disgust with that moment and the de-facto endorsement that it represented. "Walking the streets of D.C. in your combat fatigues—are you kidding me?" he said.

Milley's appearance breached the long-standing Washington norm that senior officers don't visit the White House dressed for combat. More important, it violated one of the oldest traditions of the American constitutional order: soldiers stay out of politics.

With relatively few exceptions—including the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, the Civil War, and Reconstruction—the armed forces have hewed to the rule that they should never be deployed against American citizens. This helps to explain why the military is among the few national institutions that still enjoy broad public confidence. But Trump has shown himself willing to trash any institution—the press, the F.B.I., the State Department—that he can't bend to his will. This week, Milley and Mark Esper, the Secretary of Defense, allowed the armed forces to be drawn into Trump's protest response—and allowed themselves to be used for Trump's political gain.

Some officials who know Milley were not surprised. "We all saw this coming," the former senior defense official told me. When Milley got the job, in 2019, it was the culmination of an unusually forthright campaign. His primary backers were what a former senior military official described as the "West Point cabal": Esper; Secretary of State [Mike Pompeo](#); and David Urban, a businessman and a Republican fund-raiser close to Trump. All of them were classmates at West Point, graduating in 1986.

The former senior defense official suggested that Milley was too ambitious to resist flawed ideas from a superior. "Milley doesn't push back," he said. "He doesn't know where his ethical line is." Others with knowledge of the situation say that Milley drew at least one line, not long before the walk to the church. In a meeting in the Oval Office, Trump expressed a desire to quell the protests by sending forces—not the National Guard but regular military—into American cities. Milley resisted. "They got into a shouting match," the senior

military official told me. Trump finally backed down. (Mark Meadows, the White House chief of staff, disputed this account, saying, “There was no shouting match, in terms of any directions or any operational decision that was made.”) An official who works on military issues confirmed the confrontation, and told me that Milley said, “I’m not doing that. That’s for law enforcement.” The official described Milley as brash and pushy—traits that could be useful in the current Administration: “We have a bully in the White House, and a bully needs a bully.”

Nevertheless, Milley consented to accompany Trump to St. John’s. Esper did the same. The next day, the steps of the Lincoln Memorial were covered with National Guard soldiers. The Administration’s handling of the protests has initiated an extraordinary public fight between retired officers and those who are still on the inside. Trump, Milley, and Esper have been sharply chastised, notably by the retired admiral Mike Mullen and the former general [John Kelly](#), who was Trump’s White House chief of staff. Esper defended his walk to St. John’s, telling NBC, “I thought I was going to do two things: to see some damage and to talk to the troops.” The former Air Force four-star general Michael Hayden tweeted in response, “He’s an asshole. It’s hard to get help, isn’t it.”

A former senior military officer said that Esper, as a civilian appointee to Trump’s Cabinet, was expected to be somewhat political. But, according to the official who works on military issues, Esper has also allowed himself to be dominated by Milley, who has a much stronger personality. In a call with Trump and governors, Esper recommended that state authorities “dominate the battle space.” The bellicose language “made me cringe,” the former officer said. Esper, after being widely criticized for the phrase, said that he regretted it, and on Wednesday he appeared to break with Trump over whether active-duty military should be used to contain protests. “The question is whether Esper has found a spine,” the former senior military official said.

One of the sharpest rebukes came from Trump’s former Secretary of Defense [James Mattis](#). In a statement released on Wednesday night, Mattis saluted the peaceful protesters and denounced Trump’s stunt with Esper and Milley. “When I joined the military, some 50 years ago, I swore an oath to support and defend the Constitution,” he wrote. “Never did I dream that troops taking the same oath would be ordered under any circumstances to violate the Constitutional rights of their fellow citizens—much less to provide a bizarre photo op for the elected commander-in-chief, with military leadership standing alongside.”

Mattis has been criticized for waiting until he was a year out of office to announce concerns that he surely had while he was in the Administration. But, in the early phase of Trump’s Presidency, civilians and soldiers in the Department of Defense often quietly pushed back against the White House. This happened especially often in 2017 and 2018, when Mattis was the Secretary of Defense and Kelly the chief of staff; Mattis sometimes refined or simply ignored the President’s directives, considering them insufficiently

thought through [or even dangerous](#). “Senior defense officials need to act as a shock absorber between the White House and the Pentagon,” the former defense official said. “You can be damn sure that’s not happening now. That’s all broken down.”

The officials I spoke to raised a disturbing question: As the [November elections](#) approach, will Milley and Esper allow Trump to use the military for political advantage? With [Joe Biden](#), the Democratic nominee, leading in polls, Trump may try to draw the armed forces into his reelection campaign. Military personnel are forbidden to appear in uniform at political events. But, the senior military officer asked, “What if the President lifted the restriction on wearing uniforms to a Trump rally? There has never been a candidate for President who didn’t try to make it appear as though he was favored by the military. But Trump is different.”

The retired officers I spoke to were concerned partly with the prestige of the institution. “There is a perception now that the military has become politicized,” a second former senior officer told me. Their greater worry was that, as the election draws closer, Trump will order military action to appeal to his base, by reaffirming his promise to cut American commitments abroad. This week, he ordered the U.S. military presence in Germany to be reduced by almost a third. In the coming months, he might pull the remaining U.S. troops from Afghanistan, or Japan, or South Korea, leaving allies in the lurch and emboldening rivals. “If it was a legal order, the military would have to carry it out,” the second officer told me. “But Trump doesn’t always appreciate the second- and third-order effects of his decisions.”

The ultimate test of the military’s adherence to principle may come in November. A growing number of commentators suggest that the country should prepare for the possibility that Trump, if he loses, will refuse to leave the White House. Most of the former senior officers told me that the military would never try to influence or overturn an election, even one in which the result is uncertain. “If there’s a disputed election, it will be decided by the Supreme Court, and once that happens it’s over,” the second former officer said. “A hundred per cent of the machine will turn to the new legally elected President.”

But the former senior military official presented a scenario that he found particularly alarming: if the election is disputed, Trump could conceivably ask a friendly governor to deploy the National Guard to Washington, D.C., to support him. The official told me that the Guard, with separate leadership in each state, does not necessarily adhere to the same rigid standards as the regular U.S. military. “Some of the leaders are blatantly political,” he said. “The fear is that President Trump refuses to leave, and National Guard troops surround the White House.”