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THE CURRENT: Why did Trump fire Secretary of Defense Esper?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: On Monday, President Trump fired Secretary of Defense Mark Esper via Twitter, announcing that his acting replacement would be the current director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Christopher Miller.

With us to discuss what this means for the military during a transition between presidential administrations is Mike O'Hanlon, senior fellow and co-director of the Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology here at Brookings. Mike, thanks for talking to us today.

O'HANLON: Hi, Adrianna, nice to be with you.

PITA: So, before we address the firing itself, I'm wondering if you can start us off with a little background on what transition usually looks like for the military side of an administration. It's of course not unusual for staff to resign before the end of a lame-duck administration, as they move on to the next steps in their career. What's been customary for secretaries of defense? Do they typically stay at their posts up until handover?

O'HANLON: You know, I can't think of a case where there was any kind of change this late. There certainly have been people who served one year, let's say, as secretary of defense. Clark Clifford at the end of the Vietnam War, for example, and then Larry Eagleburger as secretary of state in the last year of the George H.W. Bush administration, the first President Bush. In regard to other Pentagon appointments and positions, of course Bob Gates had been George W. Bush's secretary of defense for two years when Barack Obama asked him to stay on upon taking office, so Gates was around for that. Gates was there for a couple of years, then Leon Panetta finished up the entire Obama first term. And then Chuck Hagel started the second term, so you always had fairly continuous, smooth transition. And then to Ash Carter, and then from Carter to Mattis. In other words, when we go through the modern list, you can actually see for yourself based on these examples – which are a large fraction already of the 27 people how have been secretary of defense – that no, we don't see this sort of thing happen very much.

We see people sometimes getting tired in that last year, last year and a half, and deciding it's time to go, and then there's somebody who has a decent interval, at least to work through one budget year start to finish, at least to get their feet on the ground a little bit. That's been the more common change when you don't have somebody do an entire presidential term. They usually will do two, two-and-a-half, three years of a term, and then there's a respectable amount of time for the successor without any changes this late in the day.

PITA: So what do we know about Christopher Miller, the current head of the National Counterterrorism Center?

O'HANLON: Well, I don't know that much about him, but I hear good things. I hear good things from people at Brookings who have worked with him, who might have been in government for a stretch and now are back at Brookings or are visiting with us for a year. There are a number of people who have had some dealings with him. Of course, people in the intelligence world don't always get known widely around town. In any event, I don't know Mr. Miller myself very well, but the reputation as a professional is important, because of course one concern people have had is whether Trump was doing this to somehow get ready to invoke martial law and create some kind of pretext to annul the election, or something that seems crazy, but we've seen these sorts of concepts discussed before in regards to Mr. Trump's unwillingness to abide by normal procedure and to accept the outcome of the elections. So, your mind naturally goes toward worst-case thinking like that, and my guess is, if that's what Trump wants, Miller's not his guy. Miller would seem to be professional, not a partisan protégé or mentor or associate of Trump, so I'm not overly concerned on those grounds.

PITA: Unlike some of Trump's other acting appointees who have served in other roles or at other agencies, Miller is currently a Senate-confirmed appointee at the NCTC, the National Counterterrorism Center. But is it unusual – especially since he'll be serving for such a short time frame – to not just have these responsibilities fall to the next in line, the deputy secretary of defense?

O'HANLON: Yeah, but again, nothing's usual about the Trump presidency – and I'm not sure too many of his supporters would dispute that. I think this is a guy who just acts by a different rulebook. While it is true that the deputy secretary of defense, Mr. Norquist, has a lot of experience with this administration and the Pentagon, and with the current Pentagon budget and current military operations and senior military leadership, and therefore for all these reasons he would presumably be a simpler choice as a caretaker – which is what you have to call somebody who's going to do the job for just ten weeks. For all those reasons, maybe Norquist would be the more natural pick, but there's nothing natural about what's being done here. Because Esper actually did a good job, and Trump only seems to resent him in the sense that back in the summertime, during the riots, Esper questioned the need to invoke the 1807 Insurrection Act which would have allowed the president to use the active-duty military to suppress riots around the country. I think it was the fact that that disagreement reached the public that set Trump against Esper.

And of course, Esper – very accomplished, very impressive individual who I've known for a long time – he really owed his ascent to Trump. First as secretary of the Army, then as secretary of defense, and maybe Trump felt, well, "I can giveth but I can also taketh away, and if you cross me in public, I'm going to get my personal retaliation in before it's too late." I think it's not much more complicated than that. But the illogic of that would suggest this is, again, the Trumpian world in which this administration functions where a lot of things are about personal loyalty tests, and by Trump's reckoning, Esper failed one such test, and therefore it's payback time.

I don't like that way of thinking, and it doesn't do much good for the country, but I think we also have a strong enough Department of Defense that it may not do that much harm. But that's why you don't naturally go to a deputy secretary in this sort of a situation, because it wasn't really a natural act. It wasn't caused by the normal kind of reason which causes people to resign or be fired.

PITA: Also, how important is this transition period for the civilian control over the military when you go between administrations? How important is that continuity of oversight and consistency of command?

O'HANLON: I actually think we're in pretty good shape on that. We actually have some disagreement within Brookings. Our colleague Mara Karlin has been concerned that the balance between the civilians and the military leadership at the Department of Defense has gotten out of whack and too military-heavy. I think that was partially because Mara saw Mattis as sort of both a civilian and of course a retired general, and therefore the fact that he was the secretary of defense didn't necessarily make her feel that there was super-strong civilian control. But also things that were happening even when she was there in the Obama administration showed a growing consolidation of certain kinds of decisionmaking in the hands of the so-called Joint Staff, which is the chairman of the Joint Chiefs for helping him with major decisions. But my overall sense is we've actually had pretty good mutual support and cooperation between the civilian and military parts of the Department of Defense, with the exception of the fact that, of course, in Trumpian times, everything is constantly on edge and at risk because of the president's own personality, his own proclivities, his own willingness to use positions to either reward or punish people, his own belief in frequent firings as a way of managing personnel.

I think I'm being very empirical here. I don't agree with this approach, but I'm not so much trying to critique it but to observe that this has been the pattern for this president. When he does things in that way, you're never going to have a truly solid team that's been working together very long because Trump's always disrupting the team for one reason or another, especially on the civilian side. So in that sense, Trump himself has been frequently weakening the civilian side of the Pentagon, infringing a little less on the uniformed military side. In that regard, sure, there's some degree of concern. But Esper did such a good job, in my mind; Mattis did such a good job, and the military leadership has been so professional and respectful of proper protocol and civil-military relations that I don't think we're in crisis. So, there's ten more weeks to get through in the Trump presidency with a commander-in-chief as impulsive as the one we have in the White House. I'm always a bit nervous with him having his finger on the proverbial nuclear button, but I think that the institution as such is still pretty strong, and I don't expect major repair work to be necessary by an incoming Biden team.

PITA: All right. I think that's a very heartening note for a lot of people to hear. Mike, thanks very much for talking to us this afternoon and letting us know the latest.

O'HANLON: My pleasure. Thanks for having me, Adrianna.