**Sacred Trust vs Donald Trump**

[Harlan Ullman](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/harlan-ullman/" \o "More Articles by Harlan Ullman)

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Rarely have serving Secretaries of State called their president a “f…ng moron.” Rex Tillerson did. Mark Esper, the 27th Secretary of Defense did not go quite that far in his memoir, Sacred Oath. However, Esper’s description of Donald Trump and his White House during fifteen months of service as Secretary of Defense could hardly have been more profane, not in language but in a stunning indictment of a president who Esper ultimately believed was unfit for office.

As defence secretary, Esper would become torn between his alma mater West Point’s mottoes of “duty, honor and country” and “cadets do not lie, cheat or steal or tolerate those that do” with a boss he described as incapable of discerning reality, truth and fact from his own opinions and instincts. As harsh as that condemnation was, other senior members of that administration told me that it was impossible to understate how chaotic, undisciplined and flawed the Trump White House was.

All White Houses fall victim to leaks, internal dissent, bad press and scandal in part because the demands of the presidency exceed the capacity of any individual or administration to control and because, in Washington, politics are a blood sport. Presidents and their administrations are routinely savaged in the press and by the out of power party. Infighting and palace intrigue abound in all administrations as well as colossal errors in judgment whether the Watergate break-in during the Nixon administration and Bill Clinton’s affair with an intern leading to impeachment or George W. Bush’s disastrous policies that led to losing two wars.

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Yet, in telling his story, Esper cites many instances of why Donald Trump was such a dangerous president and why Esper believed it was his duty to remain in office to restrain the White House from committing destructive acts. Esper had clear defence and national security credentials.

A 1986 West Point graduate, he was awarded the Douglas MacArthur prize for leadership as a senior. In the first Gulf War, he won a bronze star. After leaving the Army, Esper served in staff positions in both Houses of Congress; earned a PhD; and was a deputy assistant secretary of defence. Before joining the Trump administration, his last job in the private sector was Raytheon Corporation’s chief lobbyist.

In November 2017 Esper was sworn in as Army Secretary. The Army Chief was General Mark Milley who would be chosen as Trump’s second Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Esper and Milley developed an unusually close relationship. On July 23, 2019, after serving for two months as acting Secretary of Defense and being confirmed 90-8 by the Senate, Esper formally assumed the post. It was here that Esper and Trump collided.

The book’s most riveting run-ins have been well reported by the press. Among them were Trump’s threats to recall two retired generals to active duty to court-martial them for disloyalty and launching missile strikes against Mexican drug cartels and then denying responsibility. According to Esper, Trump neither understood nor had any use for posse comitatus, the law barring the military from conducting law enforcement duties.

That led Trump to consider invoking the Insurrection Act to use the military to put down the riots and violence following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. It was Esper’s vocal opposition to using the military in that capacity that would finally end his tenure after the November election. As Esper wrote, for the next five months, he was awaiting a dismissal call every day.

Esper records how he attempted to redirect what he considered Trump’s most ill-conceived orders such as directing substantial force reductions in Germany and Afghanistan. However, the authority of a subordinate to override a presidential directive would have seemed best resolved by resignation or a private meeting in the Oval Office. Neither occurred.

Overlooked by the press and book reviews was the unique interaction between Esper, nicknamed Yesper by Trump, and Milley. Self-described as “battle buddies” in the book, Milley was as much a father and father confessor to Esper as he was a principal military advisor.

The strength of the book is not its revelations about a president. Rather, it is an unintended case study about the moral dilemma of dealing with a president whose actions contradicted the values and principles of a key subordinate. In an impossible situation, rather than resign, Esper stayed hoping to keep the president from going off the rails or appointing a yes man successor- a questionably noble effort that ultimately led to Esper’s firing and, more importantly, failed.

*The writer is a senior advisor at Washington, DC’s Atlantic Council and a published author.*