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Editorial: Just how far will Trump's Pentagon purge go?

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President Donald Trump, in a tweet, said he terminated Secretary of Defense Mark Esper. The former secretary will be replaced by Christopher C. Miller, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center.

Photo: Win McNamee, Staff / Getty Images

Early in his tenure, ousted Pentagon chief Mark Esper may have been “Yesper,” to borrow President Donald Trump’s demeaning label, but he apparently wasn’t obsequious enough to save his job. After 16 months, the West Point grad, former defense-industry lobbyist and former Army secretary was unceremoniously tweeted out of office last week by a petulant president waddling on lame-duck legs toward the end of his administration.

We suppose Esper needed to be “YESSSSS!!!-PER!!!” to please the president, but Trump’s fourth secretary of defense proved unwilling to shred his personal and professional reputation, or relinquish his patriotic ideals, particularly in recent months, to keep his job. He reportedly had his letter of resignation ready. Trump beat him to it with a “terminated” tweet.

In addition to Trump’s appointment of acting defense secretary Christopher Miller

as Esper's successor, several top Pentagon officials resigned last week, and three Trump loyalists got promoted. One of the three, Anthony Tata, is so manifestly unequipped with the necessary judgment and temperament that the Senate Committee on Armed Services canceled a hearing last July on his nomination to the job he will now assume. Tata, a retired brigadier general who once called President Barack Obama a "terrorist leader," and suggested on Twitter that former CIA director John Brennan choose between various forms of execution, prison rape or sucking "on a pistol," will assume the duties of the Pentagon's No. 3 position for the next couple of months.

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The president's late-inning Pentagon shenanigans raise the question: Are we watching typical Trumpian tantrum manifesting itself yet again, chaos be damned, or is a more nefarious plot unfolding? A plot that signals danger for the nation.

Jeremi Suri, a University of Texas at Austin professor of history and public affairs, and the author of a recent book on the American presidency, suggests that both theories could be true — and both concern him. They concern us, too.

Trump, Suri says, is likely settling scores and exacting revenge in a 21st-century replay of 19th-century patronage politics, but he's also trying at this late date to set in motion policy initiatives that have eluded him, notably making good on his oft-repeated but as of yet unkept promises to bring America's troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Should his new appointees rush forward on those or other stalled initiatives, the nation's military chiefs would have no choice but to go along with any legal order — even if the costly and disruptive processes are all but certain to be reversed once Joe Biden is sworn in as president. "It would tie us up in knots," Suri told the editorial board this week.

Trump's Pentagon purge is not the only national-security mischief unfolding as this administration heads toward the red-lettered EXIT sign. Trump has been trashing FBI Director Christopher Wray for weeks, and Fox News and other outlets have reported that CIA Director Gina Haspel's job is hanging by a thread.

Trumpian chaos as the administration comes to a close can be dangerous. Trump may be more of a threat as a loser than he ever was as a winner. Russia, Iran, North Korea or other adversaries can take advantage of any leadership vacuum to achieve their own nefarious ends. Even our friends might take advantage of our messy presidential transition to reach for what Suri calls "low-hanging fruit," such as

initiating actions in their regions that America would normally oppose.

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It's about time that even Trump's allies in Congress push back on reckless behavior that could endanger our national security.

Trump, of course, is commander in chief for another 10 weeks, but Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and his GOP cohorts no longer need to indulge his every whim. They must speak up. (Are you listening Sens. John Cornyn and Ted Cruz?) Ideally, McConnell and colleagues would reach out to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Biden in a gesture conveying to the rest of the world that we may have policy differences, but we are no longer captive to incoherence and instability.

SMU political scientist Cal Jillson puts it this way: "Trump expects personal loyalty and has absolutely no tolerance for loyalty to abstractions like the truth, the rule of law, the Constitution, let alone to the institutional norms of the Department of Defense."

However disorderly his exit, Trump will soon be gone. Those abstractions — abstractions that define a nation — must remain. The sooner the president's allies remember that, the better off America will be.

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