

Trump's new DEA chief Derek Maltz a longtime proponent of declaring war on drug cartels

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WASHINGTON – In a significant move to combat the [ongoing fentanyl crisis](#) and Mexican drug cartels, [the Trump administration](#) has tapped storied [former counternarcotics agent Derek Maltz](#) as acting administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration.

The DEA confirmed Maltz's appointment in a [news release Tuesday afternoon](#). He replaces Biden administration DEA Administrator Anne Milgram, who left the agency last week, the DEA said.

"I promise to lead the men and women of DEA with integrity and grit," Maltz said. "DEA will continue to be relentless in our pursuit of the cartels who threaten this great nation."

Maltz, a 28-year veteran of the DEA, said the agency is positioned to lead the nation's drug enforcement and intelligence efforts by working closely with federal, state and local partners "to bring the world's most ruthless narco-terrorists to justice; and save American lives by creating a vast network of community partners to help spread critical awareness."

Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas, praised Maltz as "an outstanding choice" who served at the DEA for nearly 30 years. "At a time when so many of our people have been killed by fentanyl and other drugs, he's exactly what we need," said Roy, who [introduced a bill last year](#) to designate four top Mexican drug cartels as terrorist organizations.

[President Donald Trump's](#) first pick to lead the DEA, Chad Chronister, the sheriff in Hillsborough County, Florida, withdrew just two days after his selection was announced in early December, [citing the "gravity"](#) of the job.

The DEA, [a federal law enforcement agency](#) within the Justice Department with more than 80 foreign offices, is the linchpin in the U.S. effort to battle the organized crime and drug trafficking syndicates behind the synthetic opioid epidemic.

Fentanyl and related laboratory-made opioid compounds coming across the U.S. border from Mexico – often in the form of black-market prescription painkiller pills – have killed hundreds of thousands of Americans in the past few years alone, making it the deadliest drug crisis in U.S. history.

Maltz retired from the DEA in 2014 after serving as special agent in charge of its Special Operations Division (SOD), a multi-agency nerve center in Chantilly, Virginia that coordinates U.S. international drug- and crime-fighting efforts.

Even before leaving DEA, and in the decade since, Maltz has been one of the most vocal proponents of going after the transnational criminal groups flooding the U.S. with fentanyl, especially [Mexico's Sinaloa](#) and [Jalisco New Generation cartels](#) by designating them as Foreign Terrorist Organizations.

On Monday night, hours after his inauguration, President Donald [Trump issued an executive order](#) doing just that.

"The Cartels have engaged in a campaign of violence and terror throughout the Western Hemisphere that has not only destabilized countries with significant importance for our national interests but also flooded the United States with deadly drugs, violent criminals, and vicious gangs," Trump's order said.

Maltz is expected to help lead that effort as head of DEA and through his relationships with leaders of other law enforcement and intelligence agents here and abroad.

"Derek Maltz has been talking this since 2011 when he went before a Senate subcommittee saying these organizations need to be designated as narco-terrorist groups," said Michael Brown, a former senior DEA special agent who worked with Maltz.

"They're not operating like drug traffickers of the 1970s anymore," said Brown, who is now global director of counter-narcotics technology at Rigaku Analytical Devices. "They've elevated, through narco-chemistry and violence, to become transnational organized crime groups that are literally killing thousands of Americans with

fentanyl."

"This designation now gives law enforcement and prosecutor's offices the big hammer they need to really go after not just the cartels," Brown said, "but the domestic groups helping them as well."

A 7-year-old 'undercover' agent

Maltz became a legend at the DEA in part because he went on his first undercover drug surveillance mission as a 7-year-old – tagging along with his father, who was an agent on a New York City drug trafficking task force at the time – he told USA TODAY in an interview last year. The younger Maltz later headed the New York Drug Enforcement Task Force, the oldest and largest drug task force in America.

Maltz also helped develop and implement an effort by the departments of Justice and Homeland Security to coordinate their crime- and drug-fighting efforts around the world. And he formally established the multi-agency Counter Narco-Terrorism Operations Center (CNTOC) in January 2007.

As head of SOD, Maltz led high-profile efforts to take down leaders of transnational criminal organizations, including Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman of the Sinaloa Cartel and [global weapons trafficker Viktor Bout](#), known more commonly as the "Merchant of Death."

In recent years, Maltz worked for Pen-Link Ltd as its executive director for government relations. He has also been a fixture on Fox News and other conservative media, where he has attacked the Biden administration for not doing more to target the drug cartels and Chinese precursor chemical makers responsible for fentanyl influx into the U.S.

"Anybody that watches a video on the border right now today can see it's a catastrophic disaster. I'm sorry, a humanitarian crisis, a public health crisis and a national security crisis all at once unfolding," [Maltz said in a May 2023 podcast](#) by the conservative Heritage Foundation.

In [his Nov. 17, 2011 testimony](#) as head of SOD, Maltz warned of the need to more aggressively go after drug cartels with terrorism statutes.

"Due to the immediate and dire consequences of international narcoterrorism crimes, DEA does not have the luxury of adopting a reactive response to this existing criminal threat," Maltz told lawmakers on the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on terrorism.

"Rather, in the case of international narcoterrorism crimes," he testified, "only a proactive investigative response can protect the lives and property of innocent victims while simultaneously addressing the threat posed to national security."

Maltz has also worked closely with the families of young victims of fentanyl overdoses to publicize their stories as a warning to others about the dangers of the drug. Fentanyl is often more than 50 times more powerful than heroin, and even a tiny amount of the concentrated powder the size of a grain of rice is enough to kill.

A priority for Trump

On the campaign trail last year, Trump often spoke of the need to do more to go after the cartels and the fentanyl trade.

In his executive order Monday night, Trump didn't single out any particular cartel, crime group or drug trafficker.

Technically, the order designates cartels and crime organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists.

That designation, Brown said, allows the U.S. government to more aggressively go after cartel traffickers, including potentially using the military or intelligence agencies to kill them with drone strikes.

Brown said the designation also could allow prosecutors to charge their U.S.-based accomplices with supporting terrorist organizations, which could bring them dramatically longer prison sentences.

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