

## *Trump Stacks the Pentagon and Intel Agencies With Loyalists. To What End?*

So far, there is no evidence the appointees harbor a secret agenda or arrived with an action plan. But their sudden appearance amounts to a purge of the Pentagon's top civilian hierarchy without recent precedent.



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WASHINGTON — President Trump's abrupt installation of a group of hard-line loyalists into senior jobs at the Pentagon has elevated officials who have pushed for more aggressive actions against Iran and for an imminent withdrawal of all American forces from Afghanistan over the objections of the military.

Mr. Trump made the appointments of four top Pentagon officials, including a new acting defense secretary, this week, leaving civilian and military officials to interpret whether this indicated a change in approach in the final two months of his presidency.

At the same time, Mr. Trump named Michael Ellis as a general counsel at the National Security Agency over the objections of the director, Gen. Paul M. Nakasone.

There is no evidence so far that these new appointees harbor a secret agenda on Iran or have taken up their posts with an action plan in hand. But their sudden appearance has been a purge of the Pentagon's top civilian hierarchy without recent precedent.

Administration officials said the appointments were partly about Afghanistan, where the president has been frustrated by what he sees as a military moving too slowly to fulfill his promise that all American troops will be home by Christmas. The Pentagon announced on Wednesday that Douglas Macgregor, a retired Army colonel and fierce proponent of ending American involvement in Afghanistan, would serve as a senior adviser.

The hires come as Mr. Trump and some of his aides have been pressing to declassify documents that would describe sources of information inside the Kremlin. The president's advocates have long argued that these could prove that four years of allegations about the 2016 actions by President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia in support of Mr. Trump's candidacy were a hoax, despite the fact that Mr. Trump's Justice Department has indicted Russian military intelligence officers.

Administration officials said that Gina Haspel, the director of the C.I.A., could be next on Mr. Trump's list of dismissals because of her long-running effort to keep classified a series of documents on the agency's information inside the Kremlin. Among her biggest recent critics is Donald Trump Jr.

Most of the officials and former officials interviewed over the past day agreed that there was a large element of score-settling and attention-grabbing by Mr. Trump and his aides as they have defied calls to concede to President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr.

Kashyap Patel, Anthony J. Tata and Ezra Cohen-Watnick — three aides whose promotions were announced in a Pentagon statement on Tuesday — are viewed as highly ideological Trump foot soldiers. Mr. Patel has a long history of trying to discredit the investigations into Russian interference, Mr. Tata's nomination was withdrawn over the summer in part because he had called President Barack Obama a "terrorist leader," and Mr. Cohen-Watnick was quietly eased out of the National Security Council in 2017 after clashes with Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, then the national security adviser.

The three are not believed to have the stature to bully Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie, the head of the military's Central Command, into initiating operations, whether overt or secret, against Iran or other adversaries during the final days of Mr. Trump's presidency.

And a senior official close to Christopher C. Miller, the new acting defense secretary appointed on Monday, said that it was clear from Mr. Miller's meetings with Mr. Trump that the president has deep reluctance in launching offensive military operations as his time in office nears an end. That is not what his political base seeks, and it runs counter to Mr. Trump's calls to get troops out of so-called forever wars in places like Afghanistan and Iraq.

During a meeting at the White House, Mr. Trump's message to Mr. Miller, the official said, was to do nothing new or provocative.

When jobs open in the last days of an administration, they are usually filled by deputies, whose only charge is to keep the wheels of government turning at least until Inauguration Day.

It was a sign of the changed atmosphere that when James H. Anderson, an expert on military strategy and missile defense, left the Pentagon after being fired from the No. 3 position — acting under secretary for policy — he was “clapped out,” or applauded by officials lining the halls. A report on Twitter by William Kristol, the conservative commentator who has opposed Mr. Trump, said the White House sought the “names of any political appointees who joined in so they could be fired.”

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It is possible, some officials say, that what is happening is no more than résumé padding, allowing some of Mr. Trump’s loyalists to claim they held top posts, albeit briefly, or to cement some policy changes before Mr. Biden can take office and seek to reverse them.

Several current and former Pentagon and administration officials expressed concern that the shake-up could usher in a period of instability and possibly even overseas adventurism. But others offered a more prosaic interpretation of some of the events this week.

“I’m only 2-on-a-scale-of-10 concerned,” said Kori Schake, who directs foreign and military policy studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute and served in the Pentagon under President George W. Bush. “It looks like the last gasp of vengefulness and cronyism from an administration that has always preferred unctuousness to qualifications.”

In his final weeks as president, Mr. Trump faces a series of decisions that could shape his legacy in national security. He must decide whether to leave Iran with far more nuclear material than it possessed when he entered office, a direct result of his decision to pull out of the 2015 nuclear deal that Mr. Biden has said he would seek to rejoin. Similarly, Mr. Trump confronts the likelihood that he will leave his successor with a North Korea armed with more nuclear weapons than it had before multiple summit meetings with the country’s leader, Kim Jong-un, and a China that is more expansionist, and more dismissive of legal constraints, than ever before.

Iran could also test the departing president. But if there are provocations, Mr. Miller, the new acting defense secretary, best knows one response: counterterrorism strikes. Mr. Miller, a career Army Special Forces officer who held counterterrorism staff jobs on the National Security Council and at the Pentagon this year before Mr. Trump tapped him to lead the National Counterterrorism Center in August, is facing a daunting challenge in assuming the helm of the Pentagon for which he has little training or experience at such a tumultuous moment.



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Friends and colleagues say Mr. Miller is not an ideologue, but rather a career soldier and creative, unconventional thinker who impressed Mr. Trump and top White House officials with his deft handling of a portfolio at the National Security Council that centered on counterterrorism and hostage issues. On Mr. Miller's watch at the council, a U.S. commando raid in October 2019 in northwestern Syria killed the leader of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

### Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

After a brief afternoon at the Pentagon following his appointment on Monday, Mr. Miller spent Tuesday in meetings, including a weekly coronavirus update teleconference with the military's combatant commanders around the globe. He also met with service secretaries and received several briefings. On Wednesday, Veterans Day, Mr. Miller gave his first speech as acting secretary at the opening of a new Army museum.

Pentagon officials point to one source of continuity, saying that, for now, General Milley's job as chairman seems secure, despite his public apology after joining Mr. Trump in walking across Lafayette Square in June during the protests in Washington.

Aides have told Mr. Trump that he would face stiff resistance from both Republicans and Democrats in Congress to firing General Milley, who is in the middle of a four-year term as the military's top officer. After the dismissal of Mark T. Esper as defense secretary on Monday, General Milley convened the Joint Chiefs and gave them a steady-as-she goes message. He did the same on a conference call later with the combatant commanders.

It is not impossible that the shake-up of Pentagon personnel could presage some volatile and dangerous period, to include even overt or covert operations against adversaries like Iran. But the push for any attack against Iran, for instance, would seem to need the heft of much more seasoned cabinet officers, such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

It is possible, however, that Israel could see the next 70 days as a window to conduct significant attacks to set back Iran's nuclear program. It is widely believed to have been responsible for an explosion in July at an advanced centrifuge facility.

Any more significant strikes would presumably require a provocation, though the news that Iran now has enough material to produce about two weapons might be enough.

Rocket attacks by Iranian-backed militias in Iraq against bases where U.S. troops are situated have quieted in recent weeks, partly as Iraqi officials crack down in response to Mr. Pompeo's threat to close the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, and partly because some power brokers in Iran want to give negotiations with the new Biden administration a chance.

"I'd be astonished if the D.O.D. firings were laying the predicate for military action, because there just isn't time remaining in his term to get U.S. personnel out of theater," Ms. Schake said. "And there's the formidable bulwark of the American military, which would have concerns and surely consult the other civilian control, the Congress."

John Gans, a former chief Pentagon speechwriter and author of "White House Warriors," a history of the National Security Council, said Mr. Patel, Mr. Cohen-Watnick and Mr. Ellis were all veterans of what he called the Trump's administration's "war on government."

The Pentagon, more than other departments, has resisted Mr. Trump's directives, slowing the withdrawal of troops from Syria and Afghanistan, a breach that led to the resignation of Jim Mattis as defense secretary.

"The three men have risen, in good measure because they were successful at pushing back against the bureaucracy" Mr. Gans said. "These are the people who go in and do whatever they think is required to achieve his agenda," he said. "They are true soldiers in the war on government, the war on what Trump calls the deep state."

Reporting was contributed by Maggie Haberman from New York, and Michael Crowley, Lara Jakes, Julian E. Barnes, Jennifer Steinhauer and Helene Cooper from Washington.