

Trump Faces Uproar Over Reported Remarks Disparaging Fallen Soldiers

A report in The Atlantic said the president called troops killed in combat “losers” and “suckers.” He strenuously denied it, but some close to him said it was in keeping with other private comments he has made disparaging soldiers.



By Peter Baker and Maggie Haberman

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WASHINGTON — President Trump confronted a political crisis on Friday that could undercut badly needed support in the military community for his re-election campaign as he sought to dispute a report that he privately referred to American soldiers killed in combat as “losers” and “suckers.”

Mr. Trump, who has long portrayed himself as a champion of the armed forces and has boasted of rebuilding a military depleted after years of overseas wars, came under intense fire from Democrats and other opponents who said a report in The Atlantic demonstrated his actual contempt for those who serve their country in uniform.

The president’s foes organized conference calls, blasted out statements, flocked to television studios and quickly posted advertising online calling attention to the reported comments. At a news conference, former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr., the Democratic presidential nominee, grew emotional as he said that his son Beau Biden, who died of brain cancer in 2015, “wasn’t a sucker” for serving in the Army in Iraq.

“How would you feel if you had a kid in Afghanistan right now?” Mr. Biden said. “How would you feel if you lost a son, daughter, husband, wife? How would you feel, for real?”

Mr. Biden called the reported comments “disgusting,” “sick,” “deplorable,” “un-American” and “absolutely damnable,” adding that he was closer to losing his temper than at any point during the campaign. “I’ve just never been as disappointed in my whole career with a leader that I’ve worked with, president or otherwise.”

Mr. Trump denied that he made the remarks repeatedly over the course of the day and rallied current and former aides who backed him up on the record. “It’s a fake story and it’s a disgrace that they’re allowed to do it,” he told reporters in the Oval Office, insisting that he respected the troops. “To me, they’re heroes,” he said. “It’s even hard to believe how they could do it. And I say that, the level of bravery, and to me, they’re absolute heroes.”

But he railed against one former military officer, John F. Kelly, a retired four-star Marine general who served as his White House chief of staff at the time of the reported episode and whom he seemed to blame for the article. “Didn’t do a good job, had no temperament and ultimately he was petered out,” Mr. Trump said when asked about Mr. Kelly on Friday evening. “He was exhausted. This man was totally exhausted. He wasn’t even able to function in the last number of months.”

The furor came at a time of rising tension between the commander in chief and the military leadership over his use of troops against protesters on American streets, his refusal to rename bases named for Confederate generals and his clemency for accused and convicted war criminals. A new poll by The Military Times showed Mr. Biden leading Mr. Trump with 41 percent to 37 percent among active-duty troops, a stark departure from the military’s longstanding support for Republicans and a danger sign for the president.

Recognizing that, the president sought to smooth over friction with some in the military by abruptly reversing course on Friday afternoon and announcing that his administration would not be closing Stars and Stripes, the venerable military newspaper, by the end of the month after all. “It will continue to be a wonderful source of information to our Great Military!” he wrote on Twitter.

While current and former officials contacted on Friday could not confirm some of the specifics in The Atlantic’s account, they did verify that Mr. Trump resisted supporting an official funeral and lowering flags after the death of Senator John McCain of Arizona, a Vietnam War hero whose military service he had disparaged. And Mr. Trump’s assertion on Friday that “I never called John a loser” was belied by video and Twitter recording him doing just that in 2015.

Moreover, people familiar with Mr. Trump’s private conversations say he has long scorned those who served in Vietnam as being too dumb to have gotten out of it, as he did through a medical diagnosis of bone spurs in his heels. At other times, according to those familiar with the remarks, Mr. Trump has expressed bewilderment that people choose military service over making money.

Some also recalled him asking why the United States should be so interested in finding captured soldiers, a comment made in the context of Mr. McCain, who was a prisoner of war in Vietnam. Another former official said Mr. Trump often expressed discomfort around people who had been injured, although he has held events with wounded veterans.

John R. Bolton, the president's former national security adviser who has broken with him and called him unfit for office, said he was on the trip in question and never heard Mr. Trump make those remarks. "I didn't hear that," Mr. Bolton said in an interview. "I'm not saying he didn't say them later in the day or another time, but I was there for that discussion."

The president privately raged about The Atlantic's article on Friday morning, and advisers were panicked about how to counter it. They feared it was the beginning of a constant drip of negative stories from disenchanted former officials that could sway voters. While Mr. Trump demanded that allies knock down the article, aides recognized that few senior military officers were willing to openly defend the president.

The potential for damage was clear by 9:04 a.m., barely 15 hours after the article was published, when VoteVets, a liberal veterans organization that has long been critical of Mr. Trump, released an online ad featuring the parents of troops slain in Iraq and Afghanistan, each one declaring that their son or stepson was not a "loser" or "sucker."

The report by The Atlantic's editor in chief, Jeffrey Goldberg, said that Mr. Trump decided against visiting a cemetery for American soldiers killed in World War I during a 2018 visit to France because the rain would have mussed his hair and because he did not deem it important to honor the war dead.

The article cited "four people with firsthand knowledge of the discussion that day," but did not name them. During a conversation with senior officials that day, according to the magazine, Mr. Trump said: "Why should I go to that cemetery? It's filled with losers." On the same trip, the article said, he referred to American Marines slain in combat at Belleau Wood as "suckers" for getting killed.

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The article also said that Mr. Trump resisted honoring Mr. McCain after the senator's death in August 2018. "We're not going to support that loser's funeral," the article quotes Mr. Trump telling his staff. He became furious at seeing flags lowered to half-staff. "What the fuck are we doing that for? Guy was a fucking loser," the president told aides, according to the article.



A Veterans Day parade last year in New York. President Trump is counting on strong support among the military for his re-election bid. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Mr. Trump's trip to France in November 2018 came at a fraught moment. Republicans had just lost the House in midterm elections when he flew to Paris to attend a ceremony marking the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I, and he was vexed at President Emmanuel Macron of France over a security disagreement.

But it was Mr. Trump's failure to go through with a planned visit to the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery at the foot of the hill where the Battle of Belleau Wood was fought that drew the most attention. Aides at the time cited the rain in canceling a helicopter flight, but his absence went over badly in Europe and in the United States. The president did pay respects to the war dead the next day at the Suresnes American Cemetery outside Paris.



John F. Kelly, left, the White House chief of staff at the time, and Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time, attending a ceremony at the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery in France in November 2018, after Mr. Trump declined to appear. Francois Mori/Associated Press

At the time of the visit to France, advisers were blunt in confiding that Mr. Trump was in a foul mood and quizzing aides about whether he should replace Mr. Kelly.

Several White House officials at the time said the decision not to take Marine One to the Belleau Wood cemetery was made by Zachary Fuentes, a close aide to Mr. Kelly, without consulting the president's military aide. Others argued that a trip by road would have taken too long, at roughly two hours.

Administration officials said then that Mr. Fuentes had assured Mr. Trump it was fine to miss the visit. Mr. Kelly traveled to the cemetery himself in the president's place along with Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Mr. Kelly did not respond to messages on Friday.

Speaking with reporters next to Air Force One on Thursday night after returning from a campaign rally, Mr. Trump insisted that weather, not disrespect, forced the flight to be scrapped and that a motorcade would have had to wind its way through congested areas of Paris. "The Secret Service told me, 'You can't do it,'" he said. "I said, 'I have to do it. I want to be there.' They said, 'You can't do it.'"

More than a half-dozen current and former aides to Mr. Trump backed him up with Twitter messages and statements disputing that part of the Atlantic article. "I was actually there and one of the people part of the discussion — this never happened," wrote Sarah Huckabee Sanders, who was then the White House press secretary. "This is not even close to being factually accurate," added Jordan Karem, the president's personal aide at the time.

For the White House, it was a full-court defense. "I've never heard the president use the language that assertively is said in that article about him calling military suckers and losers," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told Fox News. Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper released a statement saying that Mr. Trump "has the highest respect and admiration for our nation's military members, veterans and families." Even Melania Trump weighed in, asserting that the "story is not true."

Mr. Bolton said he was in the room at the ambassador's residence when Mr. Trump arrived and Mr. Kelly told him that the helicopter trip had to be canceled. A two-hour motorcade would have put him too far away from Air Force One and the most capable communications array a president needs in case of an emergency, per usual protocol, Mr. Bolton said. "It was a straight weather call," he said.

While Mr. Bolton said he did not hear the president disparage troops, he added that Mr. Trump did not protest the decision, as he now says he did. “He didn’t say, ‘This is terrible, I have to go out to the veterans,’” Mr. Bolton said. “He accepted it, and that was pretty much the end of it.”

Mr. Bolton added that the reported comments were not out of character for the president. “I haven’t heard anybody yet react to say, ‘That’s not the Donald Trump I know,’” he said.

The president’s reported remarks about Mr. McCain, in fact, were consistent with his public comments. In 2015, Mr. Trump famously mocked the senator’s military service and five and a half years in captivity in Vietnam. “He’s not a war hero,” Mr. Trump said. “He was a war hero because he was captured. I like people who weren’t captured.” Mr. Trump first mocked Mr. McCain for getting captured during an interview in 1999.

Mr. McCain remained a thorn in Mr. Trump’s side after he won the presidency, blocking an effort to overturn President Barack Obama’s health care program, a vote Mr. Trump never forgave. When Mr. McCain died, aides said at the time that the president had to be shamed into lowering the flags and he was not invited to the funeral.

Mr. Trump insisted on Thursday night and on Friday that he respected Mr. McCain even though they disagreed. “I was never a fan. I will admit that openly,” he said. But “we lowered the flags,” sent a military jet to Arizona to pick up the casket and approved a “first-class, triple-A funeral,” he added.

“All of that had to be approved by the president,” the president said. “I approved it without hesitation, without complaint.”

A former senior administration official on Friday disputed Mr. Trump’s assertion that he lowered the flags for Mr. McCain without complaint. Miles Taylor, who was chief of staff at the Department of Homeland Security at the time, said he got calls from the White House unhappy that the department had ordered flags lowered. “The president is upset, this has gone out too soon and he doesn’t want it to happen,” he quoted a White House aide telling him.

“I was then asked, ‘Would you guys be able to rescind the directive?’” Mr. Taylor said in an interview. He said he resisted, and ultimately White House aides pushed Mr. Trump to keep the flags lowered. But it was made clear that the president “won’t want them down, and he’s angry.” Mr. Taylor, who recently endorsed Mr. Biden, said that he found the episode “pretty astounding and disgusting.”

The president’s animosity with Mr. McCain had its roots in a dispute over a development project in 1996, when the senator opposed a federal loan guarantee that Mr. Trump sought for a West Side project in Manhattan. But he is not the only military figure to come under Mr. Trump’s critical gaze. During his first presidential campaign, he publicly dismissed the commanders fighting the Islamic State, saying, “I know more about ISIS than the generals do.”

During a meeting at the Pentagon in 2017, he berated top generals. “I wouldn’t go to war with you people,” Mr. Trump told them, according to “A Very Stable Genius” by Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig. “You’re a bunch of dopes and babies.”

Peter Baker reported from Washington, and Maggie Haberman from New York. Annie Karni, Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt contributed reporting from Washington.