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A President's Derangement, a General's Duty

How Mark Milley worked to avert catastrophe

By [Tom Nichols](#)

In *The Atlantic's* next cover story, editor in chief Jeffrey Goldberg [profiled General Mark Milley](#), who served as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the last 16 months of Donald Trump's presidency. What Milley saw as the nation's highest-ranking officer is a graphic warning of the existential danger America will be in should Trump return to office.

[The American face of authoritarian propaganda](#)

A Patriot and His Duty

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is the highest-ranking military position in the United States, [designated by law](#) as the principal military adviser to the president, the secretary of defense, and the National Security Council. It is a post of vital national importance, but most Americans probably have no idea who serves in it at any given time.

And yet, for almost two years, the safety of the United States and the sanctity of its Constitution may well have depended more than any American could have known on Mark Milley, a career Army officer who became the 20th chairman in late 2019. Milley's experiences in the waning days of the Trump administration should appall and alarm every sensible American.

Milley served as chairman of the Joint Chiefs during the most fraught period of civil-military dysfunction in U.S. history. As *The Atlantic's* editor in chief, Jeffrey Goldberg, writes in our [next cover story](#), Milley faced an unprecedented situation in which the president—a man, Jeff notes, horrendously addled by “cognitive unfitness and moral derangement”—was himself the greatest threat to the Constitution.

If that sounds dramatic, consider what Milley's senior colleagues—career military men who served in the Trump White House—told Jeff about the nightmare facing the chairman. “Mark Milley had to contain the impulses of people who wanted to use the United States military in very dangerous ways,” according to retired Marine General John Kelly, who served as Trump's second chief of staff. (Milley, for his part, was worried that Trump would try to overcome his electoral loss by creating a “Reichstag moment,” perhaps by sparking a foreign war or by using the military against civilians.)

Army Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster, who served as one of Trump's many hired-and-fired national security advisers, commented on the immensity of the challenge facing Milley by posing a terrifying hypothetical to Jeff: “As chairman, you swear to support and defend the Constitution of the United States, but what if the commander in chief is undermining the Constitution?” (We

might add to this an even more unsettling question: What if millions of Americans [don't seem to care?](#))

Even those who may think they've fully grasped Trump's depravity will be shocked by some of the events that Jeff reports.

For example, at the ceremony welcoming him as the new chairman, Milley invited Captain Luis Avila to sing "God Bless America." Avila had completed five combat tours, lost a leg in an IED attack in Afghanistan, and suffered two heart attacks, two strokes, and brain damage as a result of his injuries. Jeff writes:

After Avila's performance, Trump walked over to congratulate him, but then said to Milley, within earshot of several witnesses, "Why do you bring people like that here? No one wants to see that, the wounded."

Never let Avila appear in public again, Trump told Milley.

"Milley's family," Jeff continues, "venerated the military, and Trump's attitude toward the uniformed services seemed superficial, callous, and, at the deepest human level, repugnant."

But Trump *did* respect some military personnel, especially Eddie Gallagher, the Navy SEAL who was court-martialed on multiple charges and whose own comrades testified to his bloodthirsty and reckless behavior. (Gallagher was acquitted of all charges except for posing with a slain enemy's corpse.) Trump intervened in the question of whether Gallagher, despite his acquittals, should keep his SEAL pin—a decision traditionally made by fellow SEALs.

Milley tried to stop Trump from interfering with this important tradition. Trump, according to Jeff, "called Gallagher a hero and said he didn't understand why he was being punished."

"Because he slit the throat of a wounded prisoner," Milley said.

"The guy was going to die anyway," Trump said.

It's a war crime, Milley protested, to no avail. Trump refused to see what the "big deal" was all about. "You guys"—and here he meant combat soldiers—"are all just killers. What's the difference?"

Gallagher got to keep his pin.

If Trump's ideal military is one in which Eddie Gallagher is celebrated as a hero and Luis Avila is warehoused out of sight, what does that suggest about who might lead the military if Trump returns to office? Who would have the fortitude to turn back the unlawful orders of a vicious and cowardly commander in chief to kill prisoners, to act as a praetorian guard around the White House, or even to use nuclear arms?

When Trump lost the election, and especially after the January 6 insurrection, Milley was apparently growing concerned about Trump's emotional stability. The chairman called all of America's top nuclear officers to a meeting, in which he said, "If anything weird or crazy happens, just make sure we all know." He then asked each officer to affirm that he understood the proper procedures for the release of nuclear weapons. He also called his Chinese counterpart to assure him that America was not in the kind of chaos that could lead to war.

Milley's critics raged that the chairman was undermining the president's authority, and, as Jeff notes, they wanted to see the general in leg-irons—or worse. These charges were partisan nonsense. What should be more concerning to every citizen of the United States is that Mark Milley, and many others around him, felt it was important to reassure the Chinese, and to keep the lines of communication around America's nuclear command structure clear and open. In normal times, no one would think to do such things, but, as Jeff notes, Milley's months serving under Trump "were not normal, because Trump was exceptionally unfit to serve."

Reading Jeff's article, I kept thinking of the 1965 novel *Night of Camp David*, by Fletcher Knebel (who also co-wrote *Seven Days in May*, about a military coup in the United States). It's not a great book, but the premise is scary enough: A young American senator, after a long evening alone with the president at his famous retreat, realizes that the commander in chief has descended into madness and is brewing grandiose plans for conquest that will ignite World War III. In the light of day, the president seems like a reasonable man, so no one but the senator knows that he's gone completely bonkers.

Milley faced the opposite and more difficult problem: *Everyone* knew Trump was unhinged. It wasn't even remotely a secret. General James Mattis even told friends and colleagues that Trump was "more dangerous than anyone could imagine." But again, nobody had to imagine it; anyone who was ever in the same room as Trump knew it. And yet, few acted to stop him. (Mike Pence's one day of courage on January 6 is an honorable and important exception.) Many others did not do their duty—including the Republican members of the United States Congress, whose lives Trump endangered.

Milley, unlike so many in Washington, continued to honor his oath to the Constitution. The next time, we will not be so lucky. The next time, Trump will not make the same mistake twice: He will ensure that no one like Mark Milley will be in the National Security Council, or at the Pentagon—or guarding America's nuclear forces at Strategic Command. The next time, when Trump's narcissism and cruelty tell him that he must exact revenge on the country, perhaps even on the world, no one will be there to stop him.