



Mark Milley and the Rogue Military Brass: Dress Rehearsal for a Coup?

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Leaks to the news media from a new book, *Peril*, by Bob Woodward and Robert Costa on the last weeks of the Trump administration are generating a firestorm of controversy, especially regarding the conduct of Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. One issue, Milley's apparently secret communications with Gen. Li Zuocheng (the head of the People's Liberation Army) to assure Beijing that U.S. military leaders would not let the president do anything rash, has received the most attention and adverse comment. Another revelation – that Milley obtained an agreement from other top military commanders affirming that they would not execute orders from the White House unless Milley explicitly confirmed those orders – has not received the attention it deserves. Both actions have major, troubling implications for civilian control of the military, but the latter allegation actually may be the more worrisome of the two.

A common feature of both reports is Milley's utter certainty, bordering on paranoia, that Trump was not merely an unworthy but a truly dangerous president. That belief, in turn, supposedly justified a refusal by Milley and like-minded members of the military hierarchy to respect Trump's constitutional role as commander-in-chief.

Woodward and Costa describe the main action Milley took in response to that belief. He "called a secret meeting in his Pentagon office on January 8 to review the process for military action, including launching nuclear weapons. Speaking to senior military officials in charge of the National Military Command Center, the Pentagon's war room, Milley instructed them not to take orders from anyone unless he was involved. 'No matter what you are told, you do the procedure. You do the process. And I'm part of that procedure.'" The JCS chairman then "went around the room, looked each officer in the eye, and asked them to verbally confirm they understood. 'Got it?' Milley asked. 'Yes, sir,'" was the unanimous response, which Milley then regarded as a binding oath. Weeks earlier, he and CIA director Gina Haspel commiserated about Trump's behavior and discussed plans to keep US policy "steady as a rock." Reports of such collaboration are not likely to alleviate concerns that military and intelligence officials increasingly act as though they are in charge of "deep state" shadow government.

If the Woodward and Costa account is accurate, the January 8 meeting and its outcome should alarm every American who understands and values the importance of civilian control of the

military. America's founders recognized how crucial such control was, and that is why they put an explicit provision in the Constitution making the elected president, not some puffed-up field marshal or general, the head of the military. Indeed, the founders were wary of the new republic even having a standing army. They had seen far too many historical examples of military figures who forcibly usurped power to be complacent about that danger. Examples ranged from top generals repeatedly defying the authority of the Senate during the final decades of the Roman republic to Oliver Cromwell's imposition of military rule in 17th century England. Affirming civilian control of the military was deemed an essential safeguard, especially if the country had to have a standing army.

The decision by Milley and his military colleagues to bypass the elected president sets a tremendously unhealthy precedent. Worse, they had no concrete evidence – merely suspicions on their part – that Trump planned to do anything rash, much less start a nuclear war. Indeed, one of the items that upset Milley suggests that his antipathy was motivated at least in part by a policy disagreement and a bruised ego. "Right after Trump lost the election, Milley discovered the President had signed a military order to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan by January 15, 2021, before he left the White House." Supposedly, "no one on the national security team" knew about the decision. At the January conclave, "Milley could not forget that Trump had done an end run around his top military advisers." In other words, Trump's great offense in Milley's view was daring to bypass the national security bureaucracy and the members of the blob that controlled it. That's not evidence of insanity; it even may have been evidence of (tragically belated) clear thinking.

American Conservative columnist Rod Dreher makes a pertinent point. "If things were as bad as Milley believed they were, he should have publicly threatened to resign, and then gone to Congress to spill the beans." Going around the civilian commander-in-chief and organizing a covert campaign of obstruction and insubordination is not an appropriate option.

We cannot have generals collectively plotting about what orders from their civilian superiors they will or will not obey. Such behavior amounts to a dress rehearsal for a military coup. It is habit forming, and with this precedent the odds have greatly increased that another episode of covert defiance will take place in a future administration. The danger is especially acute if Milley (and perhaps others) are not punished, but instead excused or (worse) praised. Giving generals a taste of illicit power is akin to giving a pride of lions a taste of human flesh. They no longer will confine themselves to hunting traditional prey. We must not make a mistake with the military brass that could prove fatal to the American republic.

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