

Trump Fires Defense Secretary Mark Esper



By [Daniel Wilson](#)

Law360 (November 9, 2020, 1:23 PM EST) -- President Donald Trump announced on [Twitter](#) on Monday that he had fired U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, without offering further explanation.

Trump said that Esper had been terminated and would be replaced immediately by National Counterterrorism Center Director Christopher Miller in an acting secretary role.

"Chris will do a GREAT job!" the president tweeted. "Mark Esper has been terminated. I would like to thank him for his service."

It was not immediately clear why Trump chose Miller, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense, over Deputy Defense Secretary David Norquist, who would typically take over as acting secretary.



Mark Esper, who had led the Pentagon since July 2019, has been terminated from his position, President Donald Trump said Monday. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon, File)

A representative for the [U.S. Department of Defense](#) declined to comment on Esper's firing on Monday, referring questions to the White House. A representative for the White House did not immediately respond to a request for further details on the termination.

House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith, D-Wash., slammed the decision, saying Monday that it was a "childish" and "reckless" move that had been done "out of spite" and would destabilize the DOD at a time when it needs stable leadership.

"In the national security community, it is well known that periods of presidential transition leave our country exposed to unique threats," Smith said in a statement.

Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Okla., chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, did not comment specifically on Esper's firing on Monday.

"I want to thank Secretary [Esper] for his service – for prioritizing implementation of the National Defense Strategy, for thinking critically about how the Pentagon operates, and for always putting our service members first," Inhofe said in a tweet.

Esper, a former [Army lieutenant colonel](#), senior lobbyist for defense contracting giant [Raytheon Co.](#) – now Raytheon Technologies Corp. – and Army secretary, had been in charge of the Pentagon since July 2019.

He was Trump's second defense secretary after former Marine Corps Gen. Jim Mattis, who resigned in [December 2018](#) after disagreeing with the president's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria.

Esper's termination came after Pentagon chief spokesman Jonathan Hoffman had hit back at reports on Thursday that Esper had either planned to resign or been asked to resign following the presidential election, calling them "inaccurate and misleading in many ways." Speculation about Cabinet officials resigning was a "well-worn, D.C.-insider, post-election parlor game," Hoffman had said in a statement.

"He continues to serve the nation as the Secretary of Defense at the pleasure of the President and is working on the irreversible implementation of the National Defense Strategy," Hoffman added in a tweet at the time.

Esper leaving the DOD had been foreshadowed since at least August, when Trump implied at a press conference that he had considered firing the defense secretary after they had clashed over the potential deployment of active-duty troops to quell protests over the death of George Floyd and other police killings of Black people.

Active-duty military personnel are typically barred from acting as domestic law enforcement, but under the 19th-century Insurrection Act, the president can deploy the military within the U.S. to help quell "civil unrest, insurrection and rebellion." Esper had said in June that he did not support invoking the law at the time.

"The option to use active-duty forces in a law enforcement role should only be used as a matter of last resort, and only in the most urgent and dire situations," Esper had said in a press conference at the Pentagon. "We are not in one of those situations now."

Esper had also been at odds with Trump over efforts to rename military bases currently named after Confederate generals, and had issued a related policy in July that had implicitly banned the display of Confederate flags – along with other flags perceived as political, including Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ+ rainbow flags – on military bases.

Trump has repeatedly railed against renaming those bases, threatening to veto the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act over related clauses from lawmakers, despite bipartisan support.

In a series of June tweets, Trump said that "The United States of America trained and deployed our HEROES on these Hallowed Grounds, and won two World Wars. Therefore, my Administration will not even consider the renaming of these Magnificent and Fabled Military Installations."

--Editing by Alyssa Miller.

Update: This story has been updated with details about Esper's time as secretary and with comments from the parties.

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