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Why Trump Hasn't Fired Mattis

The defense secretary seems to know how to disagree with the president and get away with it.
By **ELIANA JOHNSON**

March 23, 2018

Last July, James Mattis and Rex Tillerson arranged a tutoring session at the Pentagon for President Donald Trump in the secure, windowless meeting room known as "The Tank." The plan was to lay out why American troops are deployed in far-flung places across the globe, like Japan and South Korea. Mattis spoke first.

"The postwar, rules-based international order is the greatest gift of the greatest generation," Mattis told the president, according to two meeting attendees. The secretary of defense walked the president through the complex fabric of trade deals, military agreements and international alliances that make up the global system the victors established after World War II, touching off what one attendee described as a "food fight" and a "free for all" with the president and the rest of the group. Trump punctuated the session by loudly telling his secretaries of state and defense, at several points during the meeting, "I don't agree!" The meeting culminated with Tillerson, his now ousted secretary of state, fatefully complaining after the president left the room, that Trump was "a fucking moron."

Trump is said to divide the members of his Cabinet into first-tier "killers" and second-tier "winners." Mattis is indisputably a killer, but he's also something rarer: a sometime loser — of policy arguments, that is — who manages to disagree with the president without squandering his clout or getting under Trump's skin. He opposed Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris climate change accord, decertify the Iran deal, slap tariffs on steel and aluminum, and move the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. He opposes the president's proposed ban on transgender service members and has reportedly ignored requests from the White House to see plans for a military strike against North Korea.

Yet Mattis has been able to present the president with views he doesn't like without bearing the brunt of his frustration. The departure of H.R. McMaster, his national security adviser, was announced Thursday amid rumors that the president is poised to fire beleaguered Cabinet secretaries like David Shulkin of Veterans Affairs and Ben Carson of Housing and Urban Development, and is agonizing over whether to dismiss John Kelly, his chief of staff. Mattis' name has been conspicuously absent. One senior administration official called him "bulletproof."

Of the Cabinet selections and staff picks cheered by Trump critics, including McMaster, Kelly and former chairman of the National Economic Council Gary Cohn, Mattis is the only one who seems to still have job security. Trump remains as enthused about Mattis, one of his first Cabinet picks, as he was when he tapped him for the job in December 2016, according to several White House aides.

Even his detractors on the right are reluctant to criticize Mattis, a retired Marine general who fought in both Gulf wars and Afghanistan, on the record, either because they are looking to join the administration or because, despite their disagreements, they are happy he's there. Those critics say privately that Mattis is too cautious and conventional in his thinking, and that he doesn't sufficiently appreciate the political nature of his current job. But "they regard him as better than the likely alternatives," one such critic told me, and consider him "a restraining hand on an otherwise unpredictable and impulsive president."

People close to the president sense that on a subset of important issues, he will defer to Mattis, who represents an institution, the military, that the president venerates, and whose status as a combat veteran has earned him Trump's respect. In contrast with, say, Cohn, who had to contend with the fact that Trump considers himself a business expert, Mattis benefits from serving a president who has never claimed to understand the military or international affairs. White House aides say Trump is cowed and intimidated by Mattis, who peppers his comments with aphorisms and historical arcana gleaned from his extraordinary personal library.

John Bolton's arrival in April as the president's new national security adviser will give Mattis a more ardent and skillful adversary at the National Security Council. Mattis outranked McMaster in military terms and always considered him his junior, even though Mattis is retired. He likely won't view Bolton that way, and Bolton prizes his ability to corral the bureaucracy for his purposes.

Mattis, who was pushed out of the military by President Barack Obama because of his hawkish views on Iran, also sees eye to eye with Trump on plenty of policy matters, chief among them the importance of rebuilding the military. So the secretary of defense has, for example, stayed quiet about the president's request for a costly military parade, tentatively set for November, but has secured a 10 percent budget increase for the Pentagon. Both White House and Pentagon aides say Mattis has also been more discreet than some of his colleagues when he disagrees with the president, never undermining him publicly except in congressional testimony. "He makes his recommendations, gives his advice, and it's up to the president to decide," says Dana White, Mattis' Pentagon spokeswoman.

The president goes gaga for the sort of tough talk Mattis dished out on the battlefield. "There's nothing better than getting shot at and missed," Mattis has said. He doesn't run the Pentagon like "Mad Dog" the Marine, but White House aides say he has endeared himself to President Trump by continuing to play the part in front of him — never showing weakness and maintaining the aura of invincibility with which he entered the job.

"Mattis has figured out how to play Trump perfectly. He keeps his head down and keeps his face out of the news," says Tom Ricks, a columnist for the military news site Task & Purpose and the author of several books on military affairs. Mattis, said Ricks, is a "natural-born killer," and "Trump, just like dogs smell fear, I think somebody like Trump who has very little natural courage, just smells it."

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Mattis has told friends he doesn't like the nickname he acquired as a battlefield commander, but the fact that he rose to prominence as "Mad Dog" made him a subject of immediate fascination for a president-elect whose concept of military valor was shaped largely by the movie "Patton." (Some might say Mattis bears a passing resemblance to a younger George C. Scott, who played the hard-charging Gen. George Patton in the 1970 film, a Trump favorite.)

"The secretary of defense is not simply 'Mad Dog' Mattis the Marine; he's really a thoughtful guy," says Mark Perry, the author of "The Pentagon's Wars." Perry says Mattis possesses a chameleon-like quality that allows him to be the Platonic ideal of a warrior at one turn, and a monkish scholar at another.

Appearing on *Face the Nation* last May, Mattis played the warrior when CBS News' John Dickerson asked him, "What keeps you awake at night?"

"Nothing," Mattis told him. "I keep other people awake at night." The response delighted the president, who told several White House aides how much he liked it. In private, Mattis talks with the president the same way. "He's said similar things several times," said a former White House aide. "Trump loves it."

Mattis channeled the same sentiment when he was asked, in early February, whether he had any misgivings about the president's plans for a military parade. "I'm not paid for my feelings," he replied. "I save those for my girlfriend."

The president talks about Mattis in public and behind closed doors like he is still a battlefield commander. Trump asked top-dollar Republican donors last September, for example, what they thought of Mattis and bragged, "The guy never loses a battle, never loses. Winning record."

The irony of all of this is that, by all accounts, Mattis is deeply committed to protecting the military from politics. Some describe him as a conservative Democrat, but he has taken great care to keep his political views private and has been open about his belief that national security should be a bipartisan matter. That said, he has clashed behind the scenes not only with the president but also with some of his closest advisers, from McMaster and Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley to Jared Kushner and, before them, White House chief strategist Steve Bannon and McMaster predecessor Michael Flynn.

Mattis worked from the outset to make diplomatic overtures to presidential aides, including Bannon and Kushner, but also Cohn, Flynn and Flynn's deputy, K.T. McFarland, all of who could have thwarted his personnel preferences and policy preferences. Mattis' senior adviser, Sally Donnelly, who left the Pentagon last month, led these diplomatic efforts.

The work began immediately, on December 7, on the plane to North Carolina, when Mattis formally accepted the president's nomination as secretary of defense. On the plane ride to the event, Mattis and Donnelly joined the president-elect — along with Bannon, Kushner, and former White House press secretary Sean Spicer — and they began a discussion about how Mattis would staff the Pentagon.

Donnelly's first request was that they be allowed to retain a handful of senior Obama administration officials at the Pentagon, including Bob Work, the Defense Department's No. 2. The White House acceded. Mattis personally spoke with Bannon about his desire to bring on Michele Flournoy, who was the leading candidate to be Hillary Clinton's secretary of defense, as his deputy to replace Work — a move that raised hackles among conservatives both in and out of government. Although Flournoy ultimately withdrew herself from consideration, it was not because of White House objections to her nomination. Likewise, Mattis' pick to run the Pentagon's policy shop, retired diplomat Anne Patterson, was pulled from consideration not over White House objections, but because Republicans on Capitol Hill threatened to veto her nomination.

"On all of the appointments, they were fully open in coming to me and saying, 'Hey, these are the guys we think are the best team,' and I said, 'Fine,'" Bannon says. "And Trump told me, 'Get the general the guys he thinks are the best team.' They played totally straight with that."

Visiting Trump at his golf club in Bedminster, New Jersey, the second weekend after he was elected, Mattis and the president-elect discussed how to conduct a war against ISIS, which Mattis made clear would "not be a war of attrition, it's going to be a war of annihilation," according to a source familiar with the discussion. "Trump couldn't get enough of it," this person says.

At the same time, Mattis told Trump he disagreed with his views on torture — Trump had said he was strongly in favor of it — and, by the time the meeting ended, he seemed to have chastened the soon-to-be commander in chief.

"'He said, 'I've never found it to be useful,'" Trump recounted after the meeting. He went on to say that Mattis told him he found it more useful to build trust with terror suspects. "I was very impressed by that answer," Trump said.

The goodwill Mattis engendered with the White House has given him freedom not only to disagree with the president when he sees fit, but also to run the Pentagon without political interference from the White House — much to the chagrin, at times, of the National Security Council and others close to the president.

The Trump administration and the president himself say they are decentralizing what was, in the Obama era, a defense policy run largely out of the West Wing. The president and his advisers have worked to devolve decision-making to Mattis and the combatant commanders who report to him. They have left the American military's war against ISIS, for example, largely in his hands. After making the decision to strike Syria in April 2017, Trump delegated to Mattis how and when carry out the strikes.

When the White House does make requests, national security aides express frustration that their demands often go unanswered. According to two National Security Council officials, Mattis has ignored McMaster's requests for military options that would have allowed the U.S. to strike Eastern Gouta, in Syria, as well as requests to see plans on North Korea, and two requests for options to strike Iran—one in response to a scenario in which the country sank an American ship in the Persian Gulf, another to the possibility that Iranian-funded Houthi missiles coming out of Yemen could strike the Riyadh airport in Saudi Arabia or the Saudi Aramco oil refinery.

"Mattis and Tillerson routinely ignored NSC requests on all sorts of things," says a second former White House official.

The Pentagon denies that Mattis has slow-walked any requests for military options. "Secretary Mattis is committed to ensuring our diplomats always operate from a position of strength and options equal strength," White says.

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Whatever tough talk Mattis dispenses to the president is measured and intentional. People close to him say he spends a lot of time thinking about how to communicate effectively, that he is always aware of his audience and that he often asks aides for a pithy quote to drive home a point. Friends and former colleagues say he was well aware of the position in which he entered the administration, uniquely admired by the news media. In contrast with his close friend and White House colleague John Kelly, he has been careful not to tarnish his reputation with inaccurate or ill-advised comments to the news media. He has steered clear of high-profile interviews and avoided making the sorts of off-the-record remarks that have, in some cases, cost his colleagues their jobs.

According to a former senior White House official, the president once complained to Tillerson about his news coverage, asking him, "How come you only get bad stories?"

"Mattis only gets good stories," the former White House official says. "The progressive media loves him, and it's one of the reasons Trump loves him."

It's a skill Mattis learned partly from watching his former colleague, then-Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal, lose his job eight years ago after mocking President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden in what he thought were off-the-record remarks to a *Rolling Stone* reporter. Before that, Mattis had his own unpleasant collision with the news media when he told a group of Marines at a 2005 event that it was, at times, "a hell of a lot of fun" to shoot people. Unbeknownst to him, cameras were rolling.

"You go into Afghanistan, you got guys who slap women around for five years because they didn't wear a veil," Mattis said. "You know, guys like that ain't got no manhood left anyway. So it's a hell of a lot of fun to shoot them." The February 4, 2005, broadcast of NBC's "Today" show led with the video, with Katie Couric declaring: "Fighting words. A decorated Marine Corps general raises eyebrows with these comments."

The Marine Corps brass at the time dismissed calls for Mattis' firing, and Mattis never formally apologized for the comment. But friends say the furor his remarks occasioned was enough to prompt some private reflection. For a Marine who likes to trade barbs, he learned that civilians have different sensitivities and that the news media will play up statements that have been made in jest. He began to choose his words more carefully.

In the Trump administration, where the president judges his Cabinet officials in large part based on the coverage they generate on television,Mattis has navigated the news media more deftly. He has appeared on just one Sunday morning news show during his time in office and rarely appears behind the lectern at the Pentagon. He seems to take pains never to overshadow the president.

Those close to him dismiss the idea that Mattis has undertaken any sort of conscious strategy to enchant the president. Rather, they say, he is not a politician and simply isn't interested in publicity — something, they note, that is hard for many Washingtonians to understand. He has fended off White House requests that he appear on Fox News, and his friends say that's not out of a concern for self-preservation but because he's just not interested in being on TV.

"Secretary Mattis doesn't change who he is for anyone, but he is a battle-hardened Marine, who can talk about Thucydides and Chesty Puller in the same breath," White says.

Reporters travel with Mattis as he jets from one foreign capital to another — Tillerson generated a slew of negative headlines for abandoning this tradition at State — but he is pointed in his refusal to answer questions that he considers "out of his lane." That includes the events leading up to a potential meeting between the president and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, about which Mattis told reporters, "What I want you to understand is that right now every word is going to be nuanced and parsed apart across different cultures, at different times of the day, in different contexts, and right now I want a very straight line from those actually responsible, not from those of us in a supporting or background role."

McMaster, in contrast, said last month in Munich that the evidence of Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election was "incontrovertible," prompting Trump to slap him down on Twitter.

Running Central Command under Obama, Mattis learned that presidents are particularly sensitive to what military leaders say about them. If watching McChrystal defenestrated didn't drive that home, his own experience did when, in 2013, he was ousted by the president for what the White House perceived as his outspoken hostility to the administration's diplomatic overtures to Iran. Mattis' frank remarks cost him access and, ultimately, his job.

"He was shut out of certain discussions at certain points," a former senior military commander said of Mattis' experience in the Obama administration. "They sort of knew what they wanted to do, and they didn't want to hear what they didn't want to hear." The commander added, "They told him, 'Thank you, we've heard your views on Iran, now go sit under a tree.'"

It was useful preparation for his current role, working for a notoriously sensitive and temperamental commander in chief who has discarded advisers, including Tillerson, for disparaging him privately. Trump never forgave Tillerson for the NBC News report that the former secretary of state called him a moron.

"You won't ever hear Mattis quoted off the record saying Trump is dumb or an idiot — he's careful," said Perry, the military historian. His survival in the administration may depend on it.

https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/26/magazine/can-jim-mattis-hold-the-line-in-trumps-war-cabinet.html

Can Jim Mattis Hold the Line in Trump's 'War Cabinet'?

Dismissed as a warmonger during the Obama presidency, the defense secretary may be the only reliable voice of caution left in an administration inching closer to the brink.

By ROBERT F. WORTH MARCH 26, 2018

One morning in mid-November, while answering routine press questions about aircraft carriers off the Korean Peninsula and de-confliction zones in Syria, Jim Mattis quietly hinted at something far more important. The United States would not be withdrawing its forces from Syria after the anticipated defeat of ISIS, as President Trump had been promising since his inauguration. Instead, the defense secretary suggested that American forces not only would remain but could even expand their role. "We're going to make sure we set the conditions for a diplomatic solution," Mattis said. "You need to do something about this mess now. Not just, you know, fight the military part of it and then say, 'Good luck on the rest of it.'"

> In a quieter time, Mattis's comments might have made headlines: Here was a potential shift in America's tortured efforts to manage the Middle East, and one that was bound to ignite conflict with Turkey, a NATO member and ally. In late December, Mattis offered more details at another briefing, saying that America was moving from a purely offensive role in Syria to a "stabilizing" one. He spoke of sending more diplomats and contractors, reopening schools, bolstering public health — a plan that would grow to include deploying new border forces and promoting economic renewal, all with a view toward helping Syrians topple the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Although the number of United States boots on the ground would remain small, for now, the goals were ambitious and a little gauzy, and sounded an awful lot like the "nation building" that Trump had so often derided during his presidential campaign.

Yet the decision to stay on in Syria passed almost unnoticed between the strobe-flashes of Trump administration scandal. The president signed off on the plan just before Christmas (to the generals' great relief), during a meeting in the White House Situation Room. It would not become official until mid-January, when the man ostensibly responsible for American foreign policy, Rex Tillerson, then secretary of state, gave his endorsement in a speech in California. But it was decided months earlier under Mattis's supervision, with the help of the elite Special Operations forces who have led the battle against ISIS in Syria. Once again, Trump had reluctantly deferred to the national security establishment, just as he did on a larger scale with Afghanistan last summer.

> A year into Trump's tenure, Mattis has become a quietly central figure in an administration of near-constant purges. He may be the lone cabinet member to have survived with his status and dignity intact, and in the process his Pentagon — perhaps the one national institution that is still fully functional — has inherited an unusually powerful role in the shaping of American foreign policy. The removal of Tillerson and the national security adviser, Gen. H.R. McMaster, has further reduced the core of the group once known as the "committee to save America," underscoring Mattis's unique position and putting even more weight on his relationship with the president. Although their conversations are a tightly guarded secret, Trump is said to consult Mattis regularly about a wide range of subjects. "I think the president calls him for a gut check on all these things," I was told by an executive who knows Trump well. "He doesn't do whatever Mattis says, but he does defer to him." Mattis seems to possess a unique ability to steer Trump without drawing his wrath. He has deftly deflected some of Trump's rulings (on transgender soldiers in the military, for instance). Sometimes he issues veiled criticisms; at other times, it's his silence that sends a message, as when he refused to join cabinet members defending Trump's decision to abandon the Paris agreement in June or when he refused to join the chorus of sycophantic tributes by other cabinet members shortly afterward. ("We thank you for the opportunity and the blessing to serve your agenda" was the offering of the former chief of staff, Reince Priebus.)

Mattis's unusual standing in the administration — "He's more than a secretary of defense," one veteran diplomat told me — has put him in a paradoxical position. His boss, infatuated with raw military power, packed his administration with retired and active generals. But Mattis

himself is visibly uneasy about being thrust into a political role. Relying on the reputation of generals to win over Congress or the public "sets up military leaders as the guarantors of public support, something that should be anathema to the longstanding balance of civil-military roles in America," Mattis and a colleague wrote in an essay published in 2016.

One of his most frequent talking points, in speeches and off-the-cuff press appearances, is the need to match military strength with more soft power and diplomacy. Mattis seems acutely aware that he has inherited an office whose powers have been steadily expanding for years. The growth of the national security colossus since 9/11 has transformed America's relations with the rest of the world, overshadowing the State Department and other civilian agencies. As the Pentagon embraced counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan, the State Department withdrew behind bunkers and blast walls, ceding much of its role to men and women in uniform. In 2008, Robert Gates, the secretary of defense, began warning about the "creeping militarization of some aspects of America's foreign policy," with the State Department withering and the Pentagon steadily expanding.

> Mattis seems to have recognized that promoting diplomacy would be an uphill battle in the Trump administration. To that end, he quickly formed an unusual bond with Tillerson, whom he called "St. Rex," calling to mind a heroic martyr stippled with Trumpian arrows. The two men talked daily and made synchronized appearances, forming a united front on almost every major issue. Mattis saw in Tillerson a temperamental and ideological ally, a deliberative man whose experience at Exxon trained him to value international relationships but not the glad-handing that often accompanies diplomacy. Both men can be a little scornful of the press, and Mattis — whose hero status renders him almost invulnerable — has received little criticism for the media restrictions he has imposed across the Pentagon. (Although I spent time with him last April, he declined repeated requests for a one-on-one interview afterward.) At times, though, Mattis seemed more committed to diplomacy than Tillerson. In November, when the White House proposed cutting the State Department's budget by about 31 percent, Mattis urged Tillerson to push back, but Tillerson refused. "Mattis can be very effective in supporting a position, but not in creating one," I was told by Ryan C. Crocker, who served as the United States ambassador to six Muslim countries and has known Mattis for almost 20 years.
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> It is a measure of Washington's profoundly anxious condition that Mattis, dismissed as a warmonger during the Obama administration, has been held up in liberal circles as a potential savior. He has mostly tried to keep American policy on autopilot, and that is deeply reassuring to many people who fear Trump's instincts. In Syria, for instance, Mattis maintained the Obama administration's military alliance with Kurdish guerrillas in the fight against ISIS and has now expanded it, though without really adjusting for political realities of an emerging Kurdish state. In January, when Tillerson formalized the decision to stay on and expand the mission, he sketched out grandiose goals — pushing back against Iran and Assad and preserving friendships with the Turks — without saying how those conflicting aims could be accomplished. The policy's contradictions became apparent almost immediately. Days after Tillerson's announcement, the Turkish military launched a bombing campaign against America's Kurdish allies, and there is no sign yet of how the administration hopes to reconcile its partners. Something very similar could be said about Trump's Afghanistan policy, introduced last August: more soldiers, more promises, but no plan to manage the regional power struggles that have kept America tied down for 17 years.
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> Still, these policies have the virtue of familiarity. The next few months offer the prospect of something frighteningly new. President Trump's impromptu decision in early March to hold face-to-face talks with Kim Jong-un sets up a host of risks and an almost-impossible timeline. If the talks fail, lower-level diplomatic channels — usually held as a precursor to a leadership summit — could also collapse, raising the chances of war. The talks are now expected to take place by the end of May, the same month in which Trump has promised to abandon the Iran nuclear agreement if a deal is not reached to strengthen it. All this is happening with the State Department still desperately understaffed and in the midst of a transition. Trump, his aides say, is feeling newly liberated to ignore cautious advice, and his nominee for secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, is said to be fully in tune with his rowdier impulses. And on March 22, Trump announced that he was replacing McMaster with John Bolton, the hawkish lawyer who published an op-ed in The Wall Street Journal in February on "the legal case for striking North Korea first." If events spin out of control, Mattis could be forced to choose between his loyalty to the chain of command and the moral imperative to avert a catastrophic war.
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> "This gets to a fundamental question," I was told by a retired senior officer who knows him well. "Can Mattis win the president over in the most important debate we've had in decades, maybe centuries? I believe there is a moral hazard with this president, he will take everybody to the cliff. … If Mattis is able to prevail, that is what God put him on earth to do. It's that serious."
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> **When Trump invited** Mattis onstage before a cheering, flag-waving throng in North Carolina in December 2016, he didn't even give his first name. "Your next secretary of defense, General Mad Dog Mattis," he bellowed. Later, as Mattis left the stage, voices could be heard chanting "Mad Dog" at the retired general. (It would be some time before Mattis, always polite, made clear that he couldn't stand the nickname.) At the time, Trump had already picked Michael Flynn as national security adviser and was considering David Petraeus for secretary of state; John Kelly and McMaster would come later. The men chosen would go on to staff their bureaucracies with lower-level officers, many of them veterans of the Iraq war, giving the Trump administration a more military cast than any in recent United States history. The president-elect seemed to relish the prospect of packing his White House with warriors who would help return a Pattonesque brashness to America's government and foreign policy.
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> Trump's lifelong reverence for military men is partly about masculine affinity, the love of a self-styled warrior for the real thing. He spent his adolescent years at a military-themed boarding school, where he became infatuated with martial dress and ceremony and idolized his supervisor, a former Army colonel known to the boys as Maje. In black-and-white school photos from the early '60s, Trump can be seen in boots, sash and a plumed shako, like some Austro-Hungarian infantryman. In "Never Enough," his 2015 biography of Trump, Michael d'Antonio describes one of the future president's proudest moments: cutting past a group of Catholic schoolgirls so that he and his classmates could strut in uniform in the front row of the Columbus Day parade. Although he never learned anything about real combat, Trump somehow emerged from the New York Military Academy in 1964 with the idea that his high school salutes and marches gave him "more training militarily than a lot of guys that go into the military."
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> But some of Trump's old friends and associates speculate that he is drawn to Mattis and the other military men partly for the opposite reason: They represent the austere virtues he knows he lacks. "With the generals, the demeanor, discipline, self-sacrifice, the strict adherence to a code is something he doesn't see around him" in the business world, I was told by an executive who has known Trump for years. "The thing he probably has least personal experience of is that." In other words, men like Mattis are, in many ways, as different from Trump as it is possible to be. Think of the gaudy ubiquity of Trump's golden logo and consider this: When the Marine Corps was publishing its official history of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Mattis insisted on removing every instance of his own name and replacing it with "Commander, First Marine Division."

Even the backgrounds of these taciturn men form a stark contrast with Trump's own story of inherited privilege and tabloid roguery. Mattis grew up in a house full of books and no TV set. His father was a former merchant marine who moved the family to Richland, Wash., a town mostly built by the federal government for workers at the Hanford nuclear site. His mother had worked for Army intelligence as a cipher clerk in South Africa during World War II. Mattis would later say that he was "kind of brought up more to do the job than attract attention to

myself." At school, he was skinny and shy but athletic; classmates remember him sticking up for less popular kids. After graduating from what is now Central Washington University, he joined the Marines in 1972, following an older brother and bucking the culture's Vietnam-era disaffection from all things military. He was singled out early as a leader and took to the job with a selfless zeal that did not allow for marriage or children (an engagement early in his career was broken off). In an officer corps where marriage is the norm, he soon acquired another nickname: the Warrior Monk. His vast popularity within the military derives largely from his reputation for total, self-punishing commitment to his troops. One incident that has become canonical in the Mattis legend took place in Afghanistan in December 2001. A young Marine captain named Nathaniel Fick had ordered his troops into two-man teams to guard each position, telling the others to rest. It was about 3 a.m. and bitterly cold when Fick walked the line and saw three heads in one of the foxholes instead of two. He was about to chew the third man out for disobeying orders when he realized it was General Mattis, making the rounds. "He could have been in bed, no one would have blamed him, but he was out there doing the same thing I was doing," Fick told me.

After retiring from the Marines in 2013, Mattis took an academic post in California. Like many retiring generals, he collected large speaking fees, and he also took a lucrative board position with Theranos, a California biotech firm that was recently charged by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission with "massive fraud." (The company paid to settle the case.) He also volunteered and served on the board of a local food bank in his hometown in Washington State, where his mother still lived. He spent "enormous amounts of time," one of his officer friends told me, behind the wheel of a car, driving all over the country to visit the families of men who were killed under his command. When he was nominated by Trump, he still listed as his primary residence a simple wood-frame house built by the federal government for workers at Hanford.

Trump may also have been drawn to Mattis because of his extremely hawkish reputation. The president is said to have been thrilled when, during Mattis's first White House briefing in the Situation Room on the campaign against ISIS, he spoke of waging a "war of annihilation." Mattis has for years voiced aggressive views about Iran, and this attitude is what led the Obama administration to force his early retirement as commander of U.S. Central Command in 2013, fearing that his pugnacity might undermine its nuclear diplomacy with Iran. Mattis's reputation is inseparable from a litany of quotes that express his trademark mix of composure and lethal intent: "Be polite, be professional, but have a plan to kill everybody you meet," he told troops during the Iraq war in 2003. A few years later, also in Iraq: "I come in peace. I didn't bring artillery. But I'm pleading with you, with tears in my eyes: if you [expletive] with me, I'll kill you all."

These tough-guy mantras express something real in Mattis's character — an unflinching directness about war's essence — but they are a little misleading. What really separates him from other officers at his level is his extraordinary erudition and his profound interest in diplomacy. He built up a library of some 6,000 books that he took from post to post as he rose through the ranks, and his conversation is larded with casual references not just to the usual military histories but also to novels, memoirs and poetry. Mattis's call sign in the Marines is Chaos, and many people assume this is another allusion to battlefield mayhem, like Mad Dog. In fact, one of his friends told me, the name comes from his nerdy passion for strategy. He got it as a colonel, when he kept piping up with bright ideas during a staff meeting. The officer in charge, a little exasperated, finally said: "I've got the name for you: Colonel Has Another Outstanding Solution."

It was almost possible, listening to Mattis at the start of his tenure, to imagine him as the spokesman of an emerging Trump Doctrine not so different from what Hillary Clinton — herself something of an Iran hawk — might have staked out in her first term. Like her, Mattis was an advocate of muscular diplomacy backed by credible threats of force. He was uncomfortable with President Obama's vacillations and his failure to hold Syria and Iran to account, but (unlike Trump) he was a devout believer in working through allies and upholding agreements. There was reason to believe Mattis could guide the president down this path: Trump gushed about his favorite general, and the two men met frequently. According to a schedule made public by a watchdog group in December, Mattis interacted with Trump in small-group settings more than 30 times in his first six months on the job.

On April 19 last year, I joined Mattis on a weeklong tour of the Middle East and North Africa designed to reassure allies and pave the way for a presidential visit a month later. In Riyadh, I stood with the press pack as he emerged onto the tarmac, looking erect and stoic in a blue suit and tie, and strode down the gangway to meet a group of officers and thobe-clad Saudi officials. The Saudis welcomed Mattis like a long-lost brother, thrilled to meet an American leader who shared their feelings about Iran. Their dislike of Obama and his diplomatic rapprochement with Tehran was no secret, but it was amazing to see how openly and eagerly they were embracing the new administration. Mattis did not disappoint. "Everywhere you look in the region, if you find trouble, you find Iran," Mattis told me and a clutch of other reporters later that day. The following night, I visited a Saudi I've known for years who was briefed on Mattis's closed-door sessions with King Salman and his advisers. My friend seemed beside himself with pleasure and poured me a glass of white wine as he praised Mattis. "He said, 'As long as the mullahs are ruling Iran, there will be no stability in the Middle East,'" he said, grinning broadly and seeming to nourish hopes that this was some sort of code for a looming carpet-bombing of Tehran.

On our second day in Riyadh, Mattis welcomed reporters into a hotel room set aside for briefings next to his own suite. Up close, his face has a weary dignity, with a high forehead and deep vertical furrows that call to mind the marble bust of some venerable Roman senator. He speaks in a slow, deliberate drawl, pronouncing Mosul more like "muzzle" and Sisi (the Egyptian president) like "sissy." Mattis is 67, and his language is flecked with homespun idioms redolent of the 1950s. Describing the awkward beginnings of a joint Israeli-Egyptian military-training session, he compared it to "a sock hop, with boys and girls sticking to either side." True to his warrior-scholar reputation, he answered questions about today's Middle East by invoking Ulysses S. Grant and Herodotus, and he likened the Syrian civil war to earlier conflicts in Lebanon and Algeria.

All of this might make him sound grandfatherly and almost harmless. But when most of the other reporters left the room and I asked him about the Assad regime's poison-gas attack on a village called Kahn Sheikhoun earlier that month, Mattis leaned forward in his chair, his hands folded together on his knees, and his tone changed. His eyes became wide and focused. There was something eerily composed in his manner as he described the level of violence the United States military would be willing to bring to bear on its enemies. Our conversation was off the record. But listening to him, I found it easy to believe what I was told by a retired officer who has known Mattis for decades: "The tougher it gets, the calmer he gets. That's a pretty rare characteristic."

At the time, Mattis already seemed to be leading the new administration in a more aggressive direction, at least in the Middle East. Trump had made clear that he would be devolving far more decision-making power to the Pentagon, after years of strict supervision of drone strikes and other military operations under the Obama administration. Days after Trump's inauguration, Mattis recommended a military strike against an Al Qaeda camp in Yemen, and the resulting raid led to the death of a Navy SEAL, at least 14 members of Al Qaeda and as many as 25 civilians. Then in April, in quick succession, came the missile strikes on Syria, in retaliation for a sarin gas attack, and the detonation of the MOAB (Mother of All Bombs) in Afghanistan. The latter strike, targeting an ISIS compound, generated sensational media coverage, especially after it emerged that Mattis had not been given advance warning (the commander who made the decision had been given prior authority to use the bomb if needed). But even as Mattis echoed Trump's tough talk about Iran, he was quietly moderating the new administration's more

aggressive instincts. Last May, according to a report in The Washington Post, McMaster called Mattis to relay a request from the president for military options to strike Iranian ballistic-missile factories or the Iranian speedboats that regularly harass United States Navy vessels. Mattis refused.

During his Mideast tour in April, Mattis emphasized the need for compromise, perhaps sensing that someone had to fill in for the mostly absent State Department. He pressured the Saudis to bring their war in Yemen to an end, calling for United Nations talks to broker a diplomatic resolution. After the trip, a former Pentagon official pointed out something I hadn't noticed: At every stop, Mattis made sure his first appointment was with the local United States Embassy, where he was careful to coordinate his efforts with the local diplomats. He also reserved a spot for State Department officials at all his meetings with foreign defense ministers — at a time when those same officials were struggling to get into similar meetings with Tillerson. No other secretary of defense in recent memory has so insistently catered to his diplomatic counterparts, the former official said. Mattis gave a concise summary of his views on diplomacy in 2013, when he told a congressional hearing, "If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately."

Within a few weeks of Trump's inauguration, the worsening chaos in the West Wing made the traditional channels of decision-making almost meaningless. Typically, the National Security Council convenes meetings across the bureaucracy in an effort to channel expertise and reach consensus; this process generates recommendations that are sent to the national security adviser and onward, as needed, to the president. But in Trump's early days, veteran staff members watched in amazement as documents they had contributed to were ignored or overridden by Trump family members and loyalists like Stephen K. Bannon and Sebastian Gorka. "There were very few opportunities to get information to Trump," I was told by one former staff member who worked at both the National Security Council and the State Department before leaving late last year. "He's not reading five-to-10 page memos on national security. That magnifies the ability of some people to walk into his office and tell him what they think."

Jared Kushner embodied the strangeness of this new power structure. He had developed relationships with leading figures in Mexico, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other countries, and he seemed to be shaping foreign policy via his son-in-law status with Trump. Yet he had no relevant expertise and no formal position; his security clearance remained on hold. Not since Clark Clifford, the Washington lawyer who advised a string of Democratic presidents in the 1940s, '60s and '70s, has anyone held such influence when he didn't hold a cabinet position. But Clifford had vast experience and held positions of real authority before acquiring his clout. Kushner had only his father's real estate empire, and it was becoming clear that his inexperience made him ripe for manipulation by people at the receiving end of United States foreign policy.

This breakdown burst into view with the Qatar crisis. On June 5, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates announced an economic embargo and blockade of Qatar, their tiny neighbor. The pretext was that Qatar was funding and hosting terrorists, but the feud was much wider and went back decades. For the Pentagon, this was a rude shock — and not just because the whole premise of Mattis's effort to push back against Iran presumed unity among America's Persian Gulf allies. Qatar is host to al-Udeid Air Base, the United States military's largest command center in the Middle East and the launch point for the ongoing war against ISIS and other extremist groups in the region. The blockade threatened to complicate those operations. In the early days of the blockade, diplomats sent back reports that the Saudis and Emiratis might even be planning a military takeover of Qatar, a far more destabilizing possibility. (Emirati government officials have denied that there was ever such a plan.)

In the first week of the crisis, Mattis spoke by phone with the United States ambassador in Qatar, Dana Shell Smith, multiple times, she told me. She did not receive any calls from Tillerson. Mattis soon discovered his efforts to tamp down the crisis were facing opposition from within the White House. At an interagency meeting, a C.I.A. official opened with an assessment that made clear the Saudi-Emirati accusations against the Qataris were exaggerated. Sebastian Gorka, the controversial Trump adviser, responded angrily, I was told by another participant in the meeting. "What you need to understand is that the Qataris are evil," Gorka said. "I just can't believe this, you are totally wrong." On June 9, Tillerson issued an appeal for the conflict to be resolved, but barely an hour later Trump publicly called Qatar "a funder of terrorism at a very high level."

Trump's ardent sympathy for the Saudi perspective seemed to have been greatly enhanced by his fawning reception in Riyadh two weeks earlier, where his hosts thrilled him with sword dances, cannon salutes and a huge image of him beamed onto the side of his hotel at night. A photo-op with Trump clutching a weird glowing orb alongside the leaders of Saudi Arabia and Egypt inspired endless internet memes. The gulf leaders used the visit to whisper to Trump about Qatar's supposed terrorist sympathies, and after they began the embargo, he seemed to take credit for it in one of his tweets.

But Trump wasn't the only object of this charm offensive. For months, the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the Emirates had been befriending and cajoling Kushner, who had no background in the Arab world, through several meetings and frequent WhatsApp conversations. Kushner was soon bragging about his closeness to Arab leaders to other foreign dignitaries in Washington. He happily adopted the Saudi-Emirati perspective on the Qatar crisis, apparently believing that they would be supportive of his future efforts to broker a peace deal in Israel. "It's clear that they were able to get their hooks into him," I was told by the official who worked in the National Security Council and State Department until recently. "They were able to shape his views." By midsummer, Tillerson was complaining bitterly to aides that Kushner had undermined his efforts to resolve the Qatar embargo. Around the same time, Kushner's blend of arrogance and ignorance about the Middle East was exposed in a leaked video of his comments to a group of congressional interns. "We don't want a history lesson," Kushner told the interns. "We've read enough books."

In July, Mattis and Tillerson invited Trump and his top staff members for a meeting where they would guide him through the essentials of America's global power, with an emphasis on the importance of allies, treaties and international order. It would take place in the Tank, the historic Pentagon boardroom where the Joint Chiefs of Staff meet, a hallowed inner sanctum that was bound to appeal to Trump's taste for hidebound power rituals.

About 20 people attended the meeting on July 20, including five cabinet secretaries, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other top advisers, including Kushner, I was told by one person who attended. Mattis was clearly in charge, and as the meeting began, he stood in front of two huge screens that showed color representations of NATO, capital markets and various trade deals to which the United States is a signatory. "The greatest gift the greatest generation left us was the rules-based postwar international order," Mattis said. He went on to outline the military side of our alliance structures and was followed by Tillerson; Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin; and Gary Cohn, Trump's chief economic adviser. Trump listened in silence for a whole hour. When he finally spoke up, the attendee told me, his first words were, "This is exactly what I don't want." He went on to repeat many of the complaints that had become familiar during his campaign: the Europeans are deadbeats, our allies are taking advantage of us, we're paying for everyone else. A heated discussion broke out, with Bannon facing off against Tillerson and Mnuchin over the nuclear deal with Iran.

The meeting lasted almost three hours, and by the end, Mattis and Tillerson knew they were facing an uphill battle. There were more meetings over the course of the next month as the internal review of Afghanistan policy heated up. At least one of them turned

into a nasty sparring match between Bannon and the generals. Bannon was even more determined than Trump to force an American pullout, and he pelted McMaster with derisive taunts about the futility of throwing more money into Afghanistan's corrupt army. At one point, McMaster got so angry that Mattis patted his knee as he counseled him to keep his cool, I was told by one of the attendees. At another meeting, Tillerson grew so frustrated with Trump's complaints about the Iran deal that he seemed unable to look at the president and stared at the wall, his face flushed with emotion, as he repeated the words "it's your deal," according to one participant. It was after this meeting broke up that Tillerson described Trump as a "moron." He made the comment to Mattis, who was sitting directly across from him. (Tillerson has neither confirmed nor denied his use of the word.)

By September, Bannon's exit from the White House had brought a welcome respite for Mattis and Tillerson and especially for McMaster, who clashed repeatedly with him. The populist-nationalist wing of the administration, with its apocalyptic take on international affairs, appeared to be in retreat. Trump had relinquished his campaign vow to abandon Afghanistan, and signed onto a Pentagon-driven plan to bolster the American presence there. But the progress came at a cost. Tillerson's battles with the White House had damaged his stature, and the following weeks made that painfully clear.

In mid-September Tillerson and Mattis briefly thought they had won a breakthrough on the continuing Qatar-Gulf crisis when Trump said he would be willing to host a meeting with the leaders of all the countries involved. Tillerson called the Saudi foreign minister, Adel al-Jubeir, to issue the invitation. What happened next was a grim landmark in the State Department's eroding stature. Thirty years ago, a direct call from the United States secretary of state, offering an invitation to meet the president, would have been treated with the utmost deference. Jubeir did not respond that way. According to an Arab diplomat I spoke with, Jubeir replied, "Please don't do this because we won't show up." Tillerson, shocked and angry, said, "You would refuse to show up for a meeting with the president of the United States?" and warned of "consequences." Jubeir backpedaled a bit, but held firm. Tillerson then called the Emirati foreign minister and got a similar response, the diplomat told me. Apparently, the Saudis and Emiratis felt they had a hold on Trump — and his son-in-law — and could safely treat the secretary of state as irrelevant.

In the hand-held video, Mattis strolls out into the bright sunshine, dressed in a black suit, looking pleased but surprised to be addressing a group of young American recruits on a base in Jordan. He thanks them and then says something more unusual: "You're a great example for our country right now, it's got some problems. You know it and I know it. It's got problems that we don't have in the military. You just hold the line, my fine young soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines. Just hold the line until our country gets back to understanding and respecting each other and showing it."

After the video emerged online, in late August, some liberal columnists were quick to argue that Mattis's unscripted monologue amounted to a stinging rebuke of Trump's handling of the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Va., which had descended into riots and death just days earlier. Mattis pushed back emphatically at a news conference, saying that his words were not a critique and that he'd been echoing the president's own call for unity. But this explanation didn't quite parse. Mattis's comments on the Jordan video were not just a bland call for unity. He was clearly suggesting that America had lost its historic "power of inspiration" as a model of democracy and social tolerance, and the context — with the country's four military-service chiefs having just issued unequivocal condemnations of racial bigotry — gave his words added meaning.

The Jordan video also yielded a telling phrase — "hold the line" — that seemed to capture Mattis's own efforts to balance the chaos of the Trump administration. As always, Mattis preferred to keep his differences with the president private. He had been maintaining a low profile for months, granting no press interviews, where any stray comment could have been used to create a wedge between him and Trump. (Mattis's spokesperson declined to comment on any conversations between Mattis and the president because of their privileged and confidential nature; a White House spokesperson did not respond to a detailed request for comment.) In early October, as a crucial deadline for the Iran deal approached, members of a Senate committee pressed Mattis on whether he believed the Iran deal was in the country's national security interest. Mattis paused before delivering his verdict. "Yes, Senator, I do," he said.

The struggle over the nuclear deal in September and October exposed one of the recurring curiosities of this administration: For all the president's love of bullying, he seems unable to turn menace into strategic advantage. Trump's repeated threats to cancel the nuclear deal scared the European leaders who negotiated it with the Obama administration, and some of them expressed a willingness to approve a side agreement addressing Trump's concerns. "Everyone was looking to placate Trump," said Ilan Goldenberg, a former Pentagon official now at the Center for a New American Security. "There was a dialogue that could have been constructive." In other words, Trump bought himself some useful leverage. But no one in the administration made use of it. No side deal emerged; the deadline came and went. The same pattern has been repeated several times over the course of the past year. Last April, after the administration launched missile strikes on Syrian regime targets in retaliation for the poison-gas attack in Khan Sheikhoun, there was a welcome opportunity to pressure the Syrians and their Russian backers. This was precisely what John Kerry dreamed of during Obama's final years: a decisive show of force that would create leverage on the diplomatic front. Now Trump had achieved it. A European diplomat told me he spoke to McMaster just after the Syria strike and asked him: "Now you have leverage: What will you do?" McMaster stared back at him blankly, he told me. "For them, it was not leverage," the diplomat said. "It was just a strike."

The root of the problem is not a lack of sophistication or experience in Trump's national security team. It is more basic than that: No one, from Mattis on down, could say what terms the United States would accept in any of these negotiations. And that is because not a single person in the government can confidently say what Trump will say or do tomorrow. This unpredictability came up again and again in my conversations with foreign diplomats. Several of them said it has profoundly rattled governments that have long looked to the United States — whatever their differences with it — to abide by its commitments and thereby undergird a wider sense of global order.

Ultimately, the Iranian nuclear-deal crisis was averted when Trump reluctantly decided not to void the agreement. He said he would focus (for the moment) on other ways to push back against Iran's aggressive role in the Middle East, exactly as Mattis, Tillerson and McMaster had been suggesting. But pushing back on Iran is easier said than done, especially when half the government is consumed with reacting to the president's Twitter feed. The Iranians, meanwhile, had their own plans to extend their control over Iraq. In mid-October, Iranian-backed militia forces helped the Iraqi government recapture the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, driving out America's most loyal ally in the region, the Iraqi Kurds. The whole thing was stage-managed by Qassim Suleimani, the shadowy commander who runs external operations for Iran's Revolutionary Guards. The result was a significant coup for Iran, which once again made Iraq's government look like puppets. The United States, with its foreign service in disarray, was caught off guard. When McMaster heard about the episode, he was so angry that he asked why the United States bothered putting anyone in Iraq at all, a former State Department official told me.

On March 13, hours after learning via Twitter that he'd been fired, Tillerson gave an emotional farewell speech at the State Department. His voice trembling at times, Tillerson spoke of the close working relationship he'd had with Mattis and their shared

belief in the importance of diplomacy. “Nothing is possible without allies and partners,” he said, with what sounded like a hint of self-vindication and perhaps a warning about the future.

Tillerson’s departure will leave Mattis far more isolated, with an incoming secretary of state and a national security adviser who are said to share Trump’s “America First” instincts. The change comes at a time when several global threats are coming to a head. Russia is already attempting to interfere in the midterm elections, according to United States intelligence chiefs, and behaving more aggressively on other fronts as well. Trump has been conspicuously silent on this issue, but Mattis quietly laid out the dangers in his introduction to a new nuclear strategy, leaked in draft form in January and aimed in part at countering Russia. Putin, Mattis wrote, is adopting “military strategies and capabilities that rely on nuclear escalation for their success. These developments, coupled with Russia’s invasion of Crimea and nuclear threats against our allies, mark Moscow’s unabashed return to Great Power competition.”

A more immediate danger is North Korea. In early August, after Trump and Kim Jong-un began exchanging warlike noises, Mattis and Tillerson responded by writing a joint op-ed in The Wall Street Journal, emphasizing that “diplomatic and economic pressure” were the administration’s chief tools, not the “fire and fury” Trump had promised. It sounded reassuring. But inside the government, there was widespread alarm. A Senate staff member on the Armed Services Committee told me she called the Pentagon to ask if it was safe for her boss to travel to Seoul. A high-ranking officer told her that “our posture is the same,” she told me. But even Mattis sounded rattled when he gave a news conference on Aug. 14: “We will defend the country — hear me now — we will defend the country from any attack … at any time, from any quarter. … But it is not declaring war. It’s not that I’m over here, you know, Dr. Strangelove, you know, doing things like that, O.K.?”

Now Trump is preparing for what promises to be a surreal one-on-one encounter with North Korea’s dictator. He agreed to the meeting — proposed by a South Korean envoy in the Oval Office — despite a warning from Mattis and McMaster about the risks. There are many. Kim is unlikely to agree to the kind of “denuclearization” Trump has in mind without some parallel American concessions. Merely holding the talks is a victory for North Korea, and Trump could come out of them looking like a dupe. Timing is another problem. The next deadline for waiving sanctions against Iran as part of the nuclear deal is also in May, and Mike Pompeo has made clear many times that he sees the deal as a “disastrous” mistake that should be torn up. If that happens, Iranian officials have said they could start producing enriched uranium within days. The risk of a war between Israel, Hezbollah and Iran, which is already high, might escalate. And the repercussions in Pyongyang would be immediate. “If you’re trying to get a deal with North Korea, good luck getting it if they see you walking away from a deal you made previously with Iran,” I was told by Andrew Exum, a former Army officer who served in the Pentagon during the Obama administration.

Perhaps the greatest risk of all lies in Trump’s insistence on making everything personal. If he feels slighted by Kim, or senses that his outreach has gone unanswered, anything could happen. Most people, faced with real catastrophe, recoil from the brink. But at least one group of observers is not so sanguine about our prospects. In late January, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists moved their Doomsday Clock 30 seconds closer to midnight. The scientists believe the planet is closer to nuclear annihilation than at any time since 1953, just after the United States decided to develop the hydrogen bomb.

How Mattis would reckon with a real impending catastrophe is hard to predict. Over a long career, he has made countless tough decisions but always within a military culture where hierarchy is a given, where obedience is a paramount value. In 2014, Mattis was asked whether there was any order that should cause a four-star general to resign in protest. “Had I ever been asked to do something unethical, immoral,” he said, “of course you would owe it to yourself, you would owe it to your troops. But I think, too, you have to be very careful about doing that. … Loyalty really counts when there’s a hundred reasons not to be loyal.” The limits of Jim Mattis’s loyalty have yet to be truly tested.

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