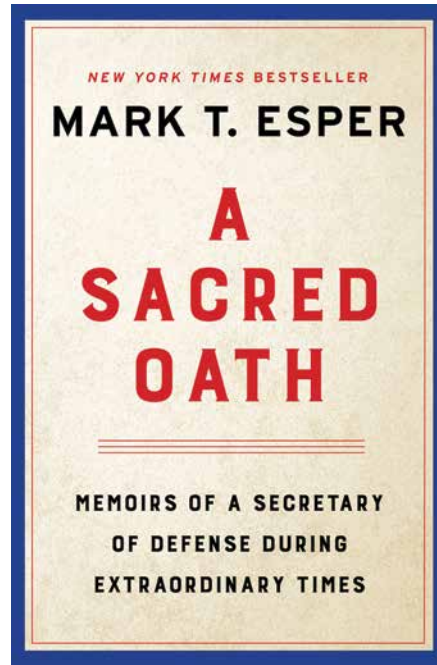


an independent British nuclear deterrent against the Soviet Union. For American readers, perhaps the most instructive portion of Pyke's book may be its treatment of Slessor's role in forging both close and enduring ties between the RAF and the USAAF—and its assessment of what that experience can teach us to this day about adapting to rapid technological change and building an institutional culture that rewards risk and innovation. In that important respect, the book offers insightful reading not just for airmen and others interested primarily in the evolution of air power, but for joint force combatants in all services across the board. JFQ

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A Sacred Oath: Memoirs of a Secretary of Defense During Extraordinary Times

By Mark T. Esper
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Reviewed by Thomas F. Lynch III

A *Sacred Oath: Memoirs of a Secretary of Defense During Extraordinary Times* is the narrative of Mark Esper, former Secretary of Defense for the Trump administration, about his tumultuous 17 months in office, which ended with his November 2020 firing by Trump. *A Sacred Oath* confronts a vital first-order question for all uniformed and civilian military professionals: How do I faithfully adhere to my sworn oath to protect and defend the U.S. Constitution from all enemies, foreign and domestic? This question is especially searing when it comes to upholding the oath as a senior civilian political appointee in the face of a domestic security threat from the White House itself. There is no perfect answer, but contextual factors help inform whether a senior Department of Defense (DOD) official should offer

resignation rather than remain and enable the threat in hopes of moderating it.

A Sacred Oath is Esper's tale of why he chose to stay on as Trump's third of four DOD secretaries despite all the red flags warning that such a choice was bad for the country and bad for Esper personally. Esper's two-part answer is that he swore an oath to the Constitution, and if he had resigned in protest over any of the multitude of dangerous defense and security ideas coming out of the Trump White House, then the next acting Secretary could have been someone truly ready and willing to carry out Trump's impetuous impulses—and that would have been seriously detrimental to the country. The burden to make this narrative stick is high, and Esper struggles to meet it. On the one hand, Esper does not address fully the important related questions about his selection or his power basis as Secretary and, on the other, when compared with the more commonly understood interpretations of holistic selflessness in honoring a sworn oath to the Constitution, Esper seems to rely on a less-demanding standard.

Among the many important questions that *A Sacred Oath* does not fully address is the one about why Esper was Secretary in the first place. He was the Trump administration's Secretary of the Army for a brief 19 months from 2017 to 2019. A West Point graduate, former Active-duty Army infantry officer, and Army Reservist, Esper also had a short stint as a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Negotiations Policy, had years on Capitol Hill as a staffer, and then was a midlevel defense industry lobbyist. So Esper seemed a good fit as Army secretary, even though he was the administration's third choice. But what about Esper's qualifications to become Secretary?

Since the position's creation in the late 1940s, congressionally confirmed secretaries have generally held one of three major personal qualifications for their positional power: prior distinguished service in very senior executive or legislative-branch security leadership positions; experience in industry, with relevant defense ideas or acumen; or

personal friendship and a trusted working relationship with the President. These qualifications give secretaries voice and gravitas in shaping a DOD agenda or managing challenging security circumstances. Esper brought none of them to the job; his past positions paled in comparison with historical Secretary power bases.

Thus, Esper's telling of his June 2019 move to become Secretary is unhelpfully spartan. He lets us know that Trump disliked retired U.S. Marine Corps General Jim Mattis as the first administration Secretary, but without clearly stating that Mattis resigned in December 2018 over glaring concerns about Trump's threat to national security—from the appalling treatment of U.S. security partners to reckless machinations on U.S. troop withdrawals from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Also absent from Esper's telling are the names Milley and Urban. Then—Army Chief of Staff General Mark Milley had been on favorable terms with the White House since Trump announced him as the next Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff back in December 2018. David Urban, Esper's 1986 West Point classmate and Pennsylvania chair of the Trump 2016 Presidential campaign, remained a famous Trump-whisperer on administration personnel matters and especially regarding his many West Point classmates in Trump's orbit. Were those two important factors in Esper's rather curious selection?

The missing details matter because Esper tells us that he had personally witnessed Trump meandering recklessly in and out of Army policy matters without regard for counsel by Secretary Mattis or National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster. Mattis and McMaster resigned in 2018 because of their oath to the Constitution, rather than remaining in a misguided attempt to honor it.

From the first chapter, Esper provides stark details about Presidential security directives ranging from the absurd to the dangerous. He recounts Trump asking to have the U.S. military shoot the legs of peaceful protesters in Washington, DC, demanding that DOD consider

firing Patriot missiles into Mexico to stem the flow of illegal refugees, agitating to activate and move National Guard units from Republican-governed states into Democratic-governed ones to “get tougher on Antifa,” and on and on. Esper establishes Trump as a clear threat to national security, seemingly to convince us that his oath meant he had to stay to ensure less terrible outcomes than might otherwise accrue. Is this true?

Here, context matters for proper analysis, and Esper provides the reader with a contextual gem in chapter 18, perhaps the most important insight of the book, in which Esper attempts to show that he pushed back to such an extent that Trump considered his dismissal: “My friends close to the White House said that while Trump was angry, he wasn't going to fire me. His own reelection still took priority over his desire for retribution.” Did Esper fully wield this knowledge to preserve and defend the Constitution? Did he leverage the insight to comprehensively prevent detrimental ideas and directives from jeopardizing the national interest? Not in his telling. Instead, Esper ruminates repetitively about the many days he wondered if he were going to be fired by the President. How is the reader to square this circle? How could Esper know of his fireproof political coating before November 2020, yet consistently fear firing, refrain from threatening resignation, and make no full-throated public pronouncement against Trump White House tweets and press statements that were dangerously overriding DOD professional counsel again and again?

The real answer seems tied to a limited interpretation of his oath to the Constitution. Esper's self-interest in remaining the Secretary and staying in the good graces of his political party go unaddressed. Undoubtedly, Esper did take helpful, if behind-the-scenes, stands against some of the most outlandish Trump national security ideas. In doing so, Esper took some personal risk, but never the full measure. More often, Esper recounts, he acquiesced to the absurd, rationalizing that his efforts inhibited far worse security outcomes. If the President and his 2019–2020 advisers were as out

of control as Esper represents, then he had a powerful option—and perhaps even a duty—to threaten resignation to arrest the madness, not merely to stick it out. Instead of using the threat of resignation to erect a concrete barrier in the face of the administration's fusillade of threats to U.S. national security during 2019 and 2020, Esper reveals that he was content to throw thumbtacks in the path of a careening, up-armored Presidential re-election bus with run-flat tires.

Esper comes to his readers in *A Sacred Oath* like Lady MacBeth, asking that we absolve him of the “damned spot” of enabling many, though not all, of the Trump administration's threats to national security. It is hard to grant him this request. Esper may have delayed or diverted some of the most dangerous White House national defense ideas and directives, but far too few to prove his constitutional fealty. The reader can feel some sorrow for the recurring humiliations Esper describes enduring as Secretary while still wondering whether it was personal ambition and party loyalty that negated Esper's more appropriate play of his resignation card. Many readers of *A Sacred Oath* will finish it justifiably unconvinced that former Secretary Esper faithfully fulfilled a truly sacred oath. JFQ

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