

Trump struggles with role as commander

WASHINGTON

Military officials doubt he grasps responsibilities and deride political tinge

BY HELENE COOPER, PETER BAKER, ERIC SCHMITT AND MITCHELL FERMAN

He canceled a trip to a cemetery in France where American soldiers from World War I are buried. He did not go to the observance at Arlington National Cemetery on Veterans Day. He has not visited American troops in Iraq or Afghanistan.

And shortly after becoming commander in chief, President Trump asked so few questions in a briefing at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Fla., that top military commanders cut the number of prepared PowerPoint slides to three — they had initially planned 18 — said two officials with knowledge of the visit.

The commanders had slotted two hours for the meeting, but it lasted less than one.

Rhetorically, Mr. Trump has embraced the United States' 1.3 million active-duty troops as "my military" and "my generals" and has posted on Twitter that under his leadership, the American armed forces will be "the finest that our Country has ever had." But top Defense Department officials say that Mr. Trump has not fully grasped the role of the troops he commands, nor the responsibility that he has to lead them and protect them from politics.

"There was the belief that over time, he would better understand, but I don't know that that's the case," said Col. David Lapan, a retired Marine who served in the Trump administration in 2017 as a spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security. "I don't think that he understands the proper use and role of the military and what we can, and can't, do."

On Friday, Mr. Trump conceded that he had been wrong not to go to Arlington last week, saying he had figured he had covered it by going to another American cemetery in Paris after skipping the first one.

"In retrospect, I should have, and I did last year, and I will virtually every year," he told Chris Wallace of "Fox News Sunday" in an interview. "But we had come

in very late at night, and I had just left, literally, the American cemetery in Paris, and I really probably assumed that was fine, and I was extremely busy because of affairs of state — doing other things."

In fact, he did not go to Arlington on Veterans Day last year — he was in Asia at the time — but he has gone to the military cemetery for Memorial Day twice. And last Thursday, he made a pre-Thanksgiving visit to the Marine Barracks in Washington, the home of the Marine commandant and units assigned to ceremonial and security missions in the capital.

He spent less than an hour, then returned to the White House to address a group of veterans.

"I think the vets, maybe more than anybody else, appreciate what we are doing for them," Mr. Trump said.

On Wednesday, it was Defense Secretary Jim Mattis who visited American troops on the border with Mexico in the latest military deployment on Mr. Trump's watch. Mr. Mattis traveled to Base Camp Donna in Texas, where he met with troops who have been webbing concertina wire to keep out an approaching caravan of migrants the president has likened to an "invasion."

Pentagon officials have privately derided the deployment of nearly 6,000 active-duty troops as a morale killer and an expensive waste of time and resources, put in motion by a commander in chief determined to get his supporters to the polls. The troops, who are providing only logistical support, will be there until Dec. 15.

"It's always better to come down and see it for real," Mr. Mattis said in talking with troops.

Like two recent former presidents, Barack Obama and Bill Clinton, Mr. Trump came to office without having served in the military. Former President George W. Bush served in the Air National Guard during the Vietnam War but never left the country, and questions were raised about how often he had reported for duty. All three had complicated relationships with the armed forces.

Mr. Clinton, a Vietnam War protester who avoided the draft, was initially uncomfortable with the generals. Mr. Bush trusted the military leadership in Iraq for years before finally overruling what he considered their losing strategy. Mr. Obama was convinced from the beginning that the military was trying to box



President Trump at the Marine Barracks in Washington. Afterward, he returned to the White House to address a group of veterans.

him into sending more troops to Afghanistan.

Mr. Trump, who received a deferment from Vietnam because of bone spurs in his heel, came to office with a reverence for the military. He followed through by appointing generals as defense secretary, White House chief of staff and twice as national security adviser.

But unlike past Republican presidents, Mr. Trump has seen little value in the long American deployments to Afghanistan, Iraq and other conflicts. He considers them a waste of money and lives and has told advisers that the people in the countries where troops are stationed are not really friends of the United States.

One reason he has not visited troops in war zones, according to his aides, is that he does not really want American troops there in the first place. To visit, they said, would validate missions he does not truly believe in.

Mr. Bush went four times to Iraq and

Mr. Obama went once, three months after his inauguration. Both presidents made four trips each to visit troops in Afghanistan.

Mr. Trump has also not made special trips to seek out troops deployed elsewhere, as his predecessors did. Presi-

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dent George Bush was a lame-duck president, three weeks away from Mr. Clinton's inauguration, when he traveled on New Year's Day 1993 to shake hands with troops deployed to Somalia.

Mr. Trump has also appeared to avoid responsibility as commander in chief when a Navy SEAL, William Ryan Owens, a chief warfare special operator, was killed last year in Yemen. The presi-

dent seemed to blame his generals for the death, in a mission that he had authorized, when he told Fox News that military commanders "came to see me and they explained what they wanted to do, the generals, who are very respected."

The president continued: "And they lost Ryan."

Mr. Trump's aides said that he was so distraught knowing that the SEAL had died under his command that he flew to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware for the return of the body — something presidents generally have not done for a single death.

His decision days before the midterm elections to send troops to respond to what he has insisted was a crisis at the southwestern border remains of deep concern to Defense Department officials.

He has taken an unusually keen interest in the issue — so much so, military officials said, that Mr. Trump has repeat-

edly called Gen. Terrence J. O'Shaughnessy, the head of the Pentagon's Northern Command who oversees operations on the nation's borders, for updates over the past few weeks.

"If a president routinely and cynically leverages our nation's armed forces for short-term political advantage, the professional ethos" of the officers corps will be degraded, said Karl W. Eikenberry, a retired three-star Army general and a former commander of American forces in Afghanistan.

"This, in turn, would threaten one of the foundational principles of our republic — that our military must remain outside of politics."

At one point during Mr. Mattis's visit to the border last Wednesday, a soldier asked him the goals of the mission. "Short term, get the obstacles in," the defense secretary replied. "Long term, it is somewhat to be determined."

Yet Mr. Trump loves much of the spectacle of commander in chief: cheering troops in a hangar, the tanks and ships and planes, a military parade he proposed for Veterans Day in Washington.

Military officers feel torn between Mr. Trump's efforts to win them the money they felt deprived of during the Obama years and being used as political props for speeches that sound more like rallies.

"They like having robust funding for the last year; they like that," said Michèle A. Flournoy, a former under secretary of defense who turned down a chance at the No. 2 job at the department under Mr. Trump. "But I think a lot of military people are deeply disturbed by the degree of partisanship and division."

Military leaders resist criticizing a commander in chief publicly, but the silence of some of them has spoken volumes.

"My father was a career Army officer," said James R. Clapper, a retired Air Force general who was the director of national intelligence during the Obama administration and is now a prominent critic of Mr. Trump. "It is part of my being to want to respect and support the president as commander in chief."

He added, "This one makes that very hard for me."

Helene Cooper, Peter Baker and Eric Schmitt reported from Washington, and Mitchell Ferman from Base Camp Donna, Tex. Michael Tackett contributed reporting from Washington.

'UNTIL IS ABOUT THE URGENCY I FEEL AS AN ARTIST, AS AN AFRICAN AMERICAN, AS A CITIZEN OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, AND AS A RESIDENT OF CHICAGO, ILLINOIS. ALL TOO OFTEN, WE ARE FACED WITH A HISTORY THAT KEEPS REPEATING, ONE IN WHICH GUN VIOLENCE PERVADES OUR STREETS IN THE HANDS OF BOTH CIVILIANS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT. THIS ABUSE OF POWER — AND OF GUN CONTROL LAWS — LEADS TO FAR TOO MANY EULOGIES OF AFRICAN AMERICANS ON THE NEWS AND IN OUR HEARTS. BUT UNTIL IS ALSO ABOUT HOW, IN THESE MOMENTS OF MOURNING, IT IS UP TO THE COMMUNITY TO COME TOGETHER AND TO SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER, TO TRY TO OVERCOME, TO OFFER SOLUTIONS.'

NICK CAVE: UNTIL, CARRIAGEWORKS, SYDNEY, 23 NOV 2018 - 3 MAR 2019