

# Fired aircraft carrier commander has COVID-19

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The aircraft carrier commander who urged the evacuation of his ship because of widespread COVID-19 infection has himself tested positive for coronavirus, it was reported Sunday afternoon.

Captain Brett Crozier was fired, at the insistence of President Trump, after his letter to the Navy high command, warning that sailors would die unless urgent action was taken, was made public in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Crozier's own illness is a further demonstration of the deep inroads that the coronavirus has made within the military. At latest count, testing has been completed for nearly 1,600 of the sailors on the USS Theodore Roosevelt, and 155, or 10 percent, were found to be positive for COVID-19. At that level of contagion, and given the close quarters for working, eating and sleeping, it would have been only a matter of days before virtually everyone on the ship was infected.

Trump angrily defended the firing of Crozier at the White House coronavirus press briefing Saturday. "He wrote a letter. A five-page letter from a captain," Trump fumed. "And the letter was all over the place. That's not appropriate, I don't think that's appropriate."

Making clear that his main concern was the political embarrassment for the White House, not the fate of the sailors, Trump continued, "It looked terrible what he did. To write a letter. I mean this isn't a class on literature. This is the captain of a massive ship ... he shouldn't be talking that way in a letter." The "commander-in-chief" expressed no concern that Navy seamen might suffer permanent impairment or death from the coronavirus.

Trump also suggested that Crozier was responsible for allowing sailors to be infected, because he was in command during a port call at Da Nang in Vietnam in early March where several sailors apparently contracted the disease. Such a visit would not be the commander's decision, however, but part of the high-level Pentagon strategy, coordinated with the White House National Security Council, in which US warships "show the flag" at ports of Asian countries Washington is seeking to align with its preparations for war

against China.

Besides the political repercussions—which have escalated considerably after Crozier's removal—there were concerns that the evident disabling of the Theodore Roosevelt by coronavirus would weaken the US force posture in the western Pacific. The aircraft carrier was one of four deployed in the Pacific region to threaten China with nuclear annihilation in the event of an open military clash.

Subsequent press reports indicate a deep split in the Pentagon between uniformed officers, who largely sided with Crozier, and civilian appointees of Trump, who sought to carry out the president's wishes without regard to such traditional procedures as military investigations.

The sequence of events is worth reviewing, as it suggests that there are deeper crosscurrents in the political infighting within the military and the Trump administration.

Crozier had voiced his concerns about the growing coronavirus infection aboard his ship through a series of messages up the chain of command that ultimately reached Thomas Modly, the acting secretary of the navy. Modly responded by sending Crozier his personal cellphone number—as he revealed in a radio interview Friday—an action that amounted to inviting the captain to bypass the chain of command and go directly to the top civilian authority.

When Crozier sent his five-page letter, dated Monday, March 30, he copied it to 10 or 20 correspondents within the Navy hierarchy, but not to his immediate superior, Rear Admiral Stuart Baker, commander of the carrier battle group that included the Theodore Roosevelt. One press account indicates that the officers on board the Roosevelt had discussed the matter among themselves and decided on this unusual procedure in order to force action by making the issue public. Within a few hours, the *Chronicle* had a copy of the letter and published it.

There was consternation in both the White House and the Pentagon after the plight of the sailors became public. Crozier's stark message—"We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die"—was a direct slap in the face.

According to a column published in the April 5 issue of

the *Washington Post*, written by David Ignatius, the top uniformed officers—Admiral Michael Gilday, the Chief of Naval Operations, and General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—favored beginning a formal investigation of the crisis on the Theodore Roosevelt, but opposed any immediate disciplinary action against Crozier. Gilday actually told the press, “We’re not looking to shoot the messenger here.”

They were overruled by Modly, who told one colleague, “Breaking news: Trump wants him fired.” Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, who had initially sided with Milley and Gilday, then acceded to Trump’s demand. Significantly, as one defense publication pointed out, Crozier was fired three days after his letter became public, while ship commanders whose negligence led to collisions in which 17 sailors died—on the USS Fitzgerald and the USS John S. McCain—were not fired until 24 and 41 days had passed, respectively, and then only after preliminary investigations had been conducted.

Ignatius, the son of a secretary of the navy and a fixture in the US foreign policy establishment, has a wide range of contacts within the military-intelligence apparatus, and is frequently a conduit for the views of the high command. His column reveals mounting conflicts between the top brass and the White House, already seen in the reported uproar in the Pentagon over Trump’s abrupt decision to send a flotilla of warships large and small in the direction of Venezuela, at a time when naval operations are already under great strain because of the coronavirus.

Former Navy commanders denounced the firing of Crozier in interviews with Ignatius, including retired Admiral Mike Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who said, “I think the firing was a really bad decision, because it undermines the authority of the military commanders who are trying to take care of their troops, and significantly negatively impacts the willingness of commanders to speak truth to power.”

Sean O’Keefe, Navy secretary for George H.W. Bush., said Crozier “was running up an SOS,” adding, “It’s a judgment call, but you have to support the action of a deployed commander.”

Richard Danzig, who served as Navy secretary during the Clinton administration, told Ignatius: “If Capt. Crozier carelessly or intentionally jumped abruptly outside of military channels, then the Navy had good cause for removing him. But I doubt it was good judgment to rush to do it at this time.”

Prominent Democrats and former military officers aligned with them have denounced the firing of Crozier. Former NATO commander Admiral James Stavridis wrote in a column published Wednesday—the day before the firing—“He

made the right choice and the Navy will back him up.”

The Democratic leaders of the House Armed Services Committee issued a statement that condemned Crozier’s removal, but was critical of his conduct. “Captain Crozier was justifiably concerned about the health and safety of his crew, but he did not handle the immense pressure appropriately,” they wrote. “However, relieving him of his command is an overreaction.”

Former Vice President Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic nominee to oppose Trump in the November election, told ABC News the firing of Crozier was “close to criminal... I think the guy, he should have a commendation rather than be fired.”

Navy Secretary Modly, formerly a highly paid consultant at PriceWaterhouseCoopers, became acting secretary in November when Trump fired Richard Spencer after he tried to demote Navy Seal Eddie Gallagher, accused of war crimes by members of his own unit but celebrated by Trump. Modly was recently passed over for the permanent appointment, but he may have regarded firing Crozier as a means to regain favor at the White House.

In a subsequent interview, Modly emphasized that there were broader national security considerations in the decision, saying that other US warships in the Pacific “are now perhaps on higher standard of alert because our adversaries in the region think that one of our warships might be crippled, which it’s not.”

Another columnist with close ties to the military, onetime Iraq War cheerleader Max Boot, wrote a scathing denunciation of the firing of Crozier from the standpoint of aggrieved military officers.

“The damage that was done to the military by Trump’s decision to pardon suspected war criminals will be compounded by Thursday’s decision to fire the skipper of the Theodore Roosevelt,” he wrote. “The message that the administration is sending to the armed forces is that committing war crimes is acceptable but telling the truth and protecting the personnel under your command is not.”



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