

Acting US Navy secretary resigns amid furor over firing of aircraft carrier Captain Crozier

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Acting Secretary of the Navy Thomas Modly submitted his resignation Tuesday amid mounting calls for his firing both from within and from without the military.

Modly had become the focus of mounting tensions within the military and between sections of the uniformed officer corps on one side and President Trump and his civilian Pentagon leadership on the other. The divisions sharpened following Modly's summary firing last Thursday of Captain Brett Crozier, the commander of the nuclear aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt.

Crozier was relieved of command, on the orders of Trump, two days after the *San Francisco Chronicle* published a letter he had emailed to senior Navy officers pleading for urgent measures to protect his nearly 5,000-member crew from a spreading outbreak of COVID-19 on the ship. When Crozier sent the email on March 30, more than 90 sailors had tested positive for the virus. As of yesterday morning, the number had risen to more than 230, an increase of 57 over the previous day.

It was reported Sunday that Crozier himself had tested positive for COVID-19.

In his letter, Crozier called for the immediate removal of 90 percent of the crew and their quarantine and testing onshore in Guam, where the carrier had docked after several sailors tested positive for the virus in March, following a port call in Da Nang, Vietnam. He urged that the remaining crew members be deployed to disinfect the ship before allowing the rest of the sailors back onboard.

Calling the plan approved by his immediate superiors—Rear Adm. Stuart Baker, who was embarked on the ship as its strike group commander, and Adm. John Aquilino, the commander of the US Pacific Fleet—insufficient to “achieve virus eradication on any timeline,” he wrote: “We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die. If we do not act now, we are failing to properly take care of our most trusted asset: our sailors.”

Baker and Aquilino had rejected Crozier's pleas for more aggressive measures out of concerns for taking the carrier out of action and jeopardizing its mission in the western Pacific.

Trump, via Modly, overruled the top uniformed officers—Admiral Michael Gilday, the chief of naval operations, and General Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—who favored initiating a formal investigation before taking any action against Crozier. Modly told a colleague, “Breaking news: Trump wants him fired.”

Announcing the move last Thursday, Modly accused Crozier of

violating military discipline and going outside the chain of command. He alluded to the real motives behind the firing when he said “our adversaries need to know” that the “big stick [the nickname for the USS Theodore Roosevelt] is undaunted and unstoppable... They respect and fear the big stick and they should.”

He also alluded to the White House's political motives when he complained that Crozier's letter “created the perception that the Navy's not on the job, and the government's not doing its job.”

The next day, a video went viral on the internet showing hundreds of sailors cheering Crozier as he left the ship and chanting his name.

Trump defended Crozier's firing and angrily denounced the captain at his coronavirus press briefing on Sunday, calling his letter “terrible.” He even sought to shift blame for the infection on the carrier to Crozier, suggesting that he was derelict in allowing the port call and shore leave in Da Nang.

In fact, that decision was made much higher up in the military command and the civilian military-security apparatus. Such port calls in Asian countries are considered essential in lining up nations in the region behind Washington's preparations for war against China.

A number of top retired military officers, including the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under George W. Bush and Barack Obama, Adm. Mike Mullen, publicly denounced the firing of Crozier. But the public rebukes mushroomed into a chorus of calls by retired military officers and Democratic politicians for Modly's resignation after the acting Navy secretary made an unannounced visit to the USS Roosevelt on Monday.

In a 15-minute, profanity-laced tirade, Modly accused Crozier of carrying out “a betrayal” and chastised the crew for cheering him as he left the ship. He said the captain was either “too naïve or too stupid to be the commanding officer of a ship like this,” or he intended his letter to be leaked and published in the press, “a serious violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice.”

He also attacked the media, singled out Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden for criticism, blamed China for the coronavirus pandemic, and made warmongering references to the “big stick” knocking down “the Chinese or the North Koreans or the Russians.”

Like his boss Trump, he did not evince the slightest sympathy for the crew members who had contracted the disease or the threat of disease and death facing the rest of the crew.

He made his rant via the ship's loudspeaker without showing his

face to the crew or interacting in any way with the sailors. He ignored questions that had been submitted by crew members and left the ship 30 minutes after having arrived.

His speech was punctuated by angry shouts from the crew, including, “What the f**k” and “He [Crozier] was trying to help us.” When Modly said that the sailors had been “demoralized” by Crozier’s actions, one crew member shouted, “No, they weren’t!”

One sailor texted a family member, “All of our jaws are on the floor right now. He just made the PR situation a billion times worse.” Another wrote: “If anything, he deserves a promotion. That’s the type of leadership they lack, but the type they need. When higher-ups go against the grain, it shows they actually care about the sailors they’re in charge of.”

Modly’s speech was taped by one or more of the sailors and leaked to the press. This prompted a warning from the Navy to the ship’s officers ordering them to crack down on social media posts by sailors.

On Monday, Modly initially defended his speech, but by the end of the day he had issued a supposed “apology” to Crozier, saying he did not believe him to be naïve or stupid. He then proceeded to repeat his allegation that Crozier “sent his alarming email with the intention of getting it into the public domain...”

At the Monday evening coronavirus press briefing, Trump once again defended his criticism of Crozier, but he shifted his tone toward the fired captain, saying he had up to now had an “exemplary” record. Trump promised to “look into” his case.

In the meantime, calls for Modly’s firing had proliferated from within the military as well as from the press and Congress. Retired Army Gen. Barry McCaffrey tweeted: “ACTING SEC NAVY MUST RESIGN. This is the worse judgment by a defense official possible. Terrible signal to sailors.”

Modly’s appointment last November was itself the result of an intervention by Trump into the uniformed military that angered much of the military brass. Trump appointed Modly, a former highly paid consultant at PriceWaterhouseCoopers, after firing Navy Secretary Richard Spencer.

The latter had clashed with Trump over his reversal of the Navy’s decision to demote Navy Seals Chief Petty Officer Edward Gallagher, who had been accused by his own men of committing war crimes, including murder, in Iraq. Trump overrode an order backed by Spencer to expel Gallagher from the Navy Seals.

Joining the demand for Modly’s firing were Rep. Adam Smith, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Rep. Elaine Luria, a former Navy officer and Democratic member of the committee, Senator Richard Blumenthal and other Democrats. *Newsweek* reported Monday that over 250,000 people had signed a Change.org petition urging the US Navy to reinstate Crozier, who was removed last Thursday.

The *Wall Street Journal*, which supported the firing of Crozier, laid out the imperialist geopolitical interests that far outweigh concern for the health and lives of rank-and-file soldiers and sailors, Trump’s cynical declarations of love for “the troops” notwithstanding. It wrote on Monday:

“For a time, Navy officials discussed aborting the visit as signs pointed to an impending pandemic, said officials familiar with the discussion. But the carrier’s marquee port call had been months in

the planning, and both US officials and Vietnamese officials wanted it to take place, the officials said.

“The visit was part of broader US national security considerations. To counter growing Chinese influence in the region, officials have pointed to the importance of ties with Vietnam, particularly after the Philippines pushed earlier this year to curtail ties with the US military. Neighboring Cambodia has been tightening ties with China. The Roosevelt’s arrival in Da Nang would be a potent display of US commitment.”

The bipartisan unity of Democrats and Republicans on these overriding concerns was indicated by Senator Tammy Duckworth, Democrat from Illinois and member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who was quoted by the *Journal* as saying, “Docking in Vietnam was a strategic priority.”

In a remarkable article posted Tuesday, the *New York Times* set forth the concerns within the ruling class over the escalating tensions between the uniformed military and the Trump administration. It wrote that Modly’s speech to the Roosevelt crew “deepened the raw us-versus-them atmosphere that has already engulfed the carrier. It also exposed the schism between a commander in chief with little regard for the military’s chain of command and the uniformed Navy that is sworn to follow him.”

The article spoke of “the demoralization of young men and women who promise to protect the country,” and “a growing rift between senior uniformed commanders and their civilian bosses.”

It quoted former Joint Chiefs chairman Adm. Mike Mullen as directly and bluntly accusing Trump of seeking to undermine the authority of the uniformed military command.

“I am appalled at the content of his [Modly’s] address to the crew,” Mullen told the *Times*. He added that Modly had “become a vehicle for the president. He basically has completely undermined, throughout the TR [Theodore Roosevelt] situation, the uniformed leadership of the Navy and the military leadership in general.”

Meanwhile, the pandemic is taking an increasingly severe physical and operational toll on the military. As of Tuesday, 1,521 service members had tested positive. One had died, a 57-year-old New Jersey Army National Guardsman.

The Navy has been the hardest hit branch, with 460 diagnoses as of Tuesday. The Army has 361 cases, the Air Force 322 and the Marine Corps 78. The National Guard Bureau reports that 314 soldiers and airmen have been diagnosed.

The Army announced Monday that it is halting all shipments of recruits to basic training for two weeks.



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