

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 342 | Trump's Last Defense Secretary on Cutting the Pentagon Budget, Base Closures, Forever War Accountability, and New Threats with Christopher C. Miller

Marshall here. Welcome back to the Re-Element.

Today's episode is with Christopher C. Miller, who served as President Trump's final Secretary of Defense. His new book is *Soldier Secretary, Warnings from the Battlefield and Pentagon about America's Most Dangerous Enemies*. We hit a lot of different topics in the episode. We discussed a quick take on the spy balloon controversy. We also discussed his call to cut the Pentagon's budget, 40-50%, transition our overseas bases, who's responsible for the failures of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and more. We obviously are going to agree on everything,

but I really appreciated how open he was to having an honest conversation.

Before we get into the episode, quick shout out to the links you could find in our show notes.

One, you can go to [re-alignment.supercast.com](https://re-alignment.supercast.com) and get access to the exclusive Q&A episode that Sogret and I are going to release tomorrow. Two, there's also a link to the re-alignment subject newsletter that goes out every week. Last but not least, you can find all of our guests and this book at our bookshop where we get 10% on anything to purchase at the [bookshop.org](https://bookshop.org) link also included in the show notes. Hope you all enjoyed this conversation and a huge thank you to Lincoln Network for supporting our work.

Christopher Miller, welcome to the re-alignment.

Marshall, finally I get on a podcast that just motivates me beyond belief. Thanks for having me on. I've seen your list of people you've had on here. You had the other Chris Miller Chip Wars. That's a great book and I love to get confused with him because people are like, hey, I read your book. I'm like, Chip War? Yeah. Oh, that's not mine. That's the good book. That's a great book. And, you know, he was in DC as a reporter for quite a while. I think he's moved away, but I know you had him on there. And then to be, come on, man, you've got like everybody on this show, Steve Case, Richard Haas. I would have, I got to listen to the Philip Bump one about the baby boomers because, you know, that's kind of one of the things about my book is I kind of try to highlight the generational changes that we're going through. And I know that's one of the key things of your podcast, but are we going to do any hot takes in the Super Bowl or anything? I mean, this, that was the perfect confluence of like, you know, the entertainment, society, culture, politics. I thought we were going to do hot takes like Rihanna. We're not going to. I've got to match it up. No, this is good because I actually kind of have a question. I want to kind of reverse later on. I'll ask this kind of out of order a bit later, but basically I'm curious about your thoughts on American society because let's think of the title of the book, *Soldier Secretary*. There's a lot of discourse about how if we're looking at our military and folks like you who fought in the forever wars, there's such a separation like we don't understand you. I guess my first question is, do you understand us? But that's exactly the point of the book, Marshall. You nailed it. Thank you. You're the first person that actually has like made that connection because, you know, what I'm trying to do with the book, you just hit it. My concern has been, and it started a long time ago. And it was those that protect us, our armed services are becoming balkanized. I talk about living in gated communities and they don't understand the people that they protect. So that's exactly the point of the book. I'm glad you picked that up. It's not all about, oh, you know, the 93% of Americans that haven't served don't appreciate

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 342 | Trump's Last Defense Secretary on Cutting the Pentagon Budget, Base Closures, Forever War Accountability, and New Threats with Christopher C. Miller

or respect the armed forces. That's not the point at all. The point is we need to do a better job of talking to each other. You hit it. That was the theme in my book that no one has picked up on, frankly, because I'm two up twos, obviously. Well, no, I mean, we were just talking about this, but the actual secret is it's really funny. I've had this experience with a couple authors who are like, you're the only one who got it. And the actual reality there is, I'm probably the only one who actually read the book of the people interviewing you. Like, that's the actual truth, because the publisher sends doesn't include that. I remember at Frank Dicketer on Chinese, like you understood. And I'm trying to feel like a genius, but like, no, it's just that I actually read the book before. Marshall, that is so funny, because you know, I've done a lot of media, you got to do media to get your get your book out there, right? And you can I could tell with them like 20 seconds, like, oh, they just read the fact sheet. And then that takes then I take a whole different spin. And I have to talk about balloons and stuff. And I know you read it. And it but in all seriousness, that's a sign of professionalism. And I knew you would. And that's why I was excited to be on here. It wasn't just going to be some kind of, you know, kind of blow off type thing where we're going to have a conversation. And that's why I love just doing podcasts as opposed to man, I do those I do those hot takes on like the shows, you know, where you've got you got 90 seconds, and they're like, just do your three things and just say them again and again. And I'm like, oh, man, I have become the person that I used to make fun of. But you hey, you got to laugh at my backdrop too, because I always make fun of people that are on podcasts that look like they're in a hostage video, which I am because I'm not in a hostage video. But I'm literally in Denver, Colorado, working, you know, and thankfully, you guys were willing to pat me on. I was like, I'll drop everything. So I apologize for my backdrop. But what do you think I got the book up there? You know, I'm trying to learn, dude. I'm trying to know your your publishers will be very happy with you. So I have really bad news for you. Given what you just said, I do have to open with a balloon question. Then we'll move on. Well, because I think I think I think it matters. I will make sure to ask you the balloon question more time and something deeper. But just what is your initial take on the balloon? Once again, like you were an acting Secretary of Defense. This is kind of brought up border discourse in an interesting way. What's your take on the balloon? Right. And it's classic. When you're it's classic probing of our defenses 101. I mean, this doesn't take George Patton or Clausewitz or anybody. It's pretty pretty typical. Really interested in what the Chinese Communist Party calculus is right now, whether this is just how long this has been going on. I think what we're going to find out when we finally, you know, another part of my book is accountability. And I don't think Congress has been very effective in in doing their accountability of the armed forces. I just bet you, Marshall, we're going to find out this has been going on for a long, long time. I suspect I don't know this for a fact. I never got briefed. I forgot what they call them. Now the UFO files, you know, they call them autonomous something or I can't remember what they call them. But I think probably what happened was these things have been going on for a while, and they just pitched them into this secret file, secret compartment about anomalous incidents, aerial incidents or whatever they call it. And that's my sense. So I think, you know, I'm a bipartisan in support in America.

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 342 | Trump's Last Defense Secretary on Cutting the Pentagon Budget, Base Closures, Forever War Accountability, and New Threats with Christopher C. Miller

Little shout out to America, you know, but I think what we're going to find is that this has been going on a long time. And part one of the themes, one of the recommendations in my book is there needs to be more political, political appointees in the intelligence community. And this is kind of going, I think this is going to highlight what I'm trying to say, which everybody, frankly, not everyone, but a lot of people have been really upset with that recommendation. Why would we ever

put political appointees in the intelligence community? Your listeners, a lot of them understand this. But, you know, as each administration changes, a huge number of people come in as political appointees. But, you know, the idea is that they advanced whoever the president is that agenda. The intelligence community does not have political appointees. They have like two or three at the agency in a handful in the Department of Defense. And that's kind of one of my points is things you need to have civilian political appointees in there to kind of make smooth things out. Because I think these files are all probably there. I never had any access to them. I should have asked. That's one of the biggest regrets I have from my time as acting secretary of defense. I should have probably asked about this, but other other things were going on as you're well aware. Yeah. I mean, this is good because you could answer a couple of questions about that title. So, A, like, why were you for listeners who weren't following or a bunch of things happening in late 2020? So a couple of questions that you could answer kind of down the line. A, like, what is the difference between an acting secretary of defense and a secretary of defense? And then B, I think when you describe that process of the UFOs and not really knowing about it when you're in the position, you're saying things like, they, could you really explain how the position works? Because you were referring to the act of duty military, but you're a civilian head of the agency. Can you really just clear up like what these terms mean? Because I think for folks, they're going to say, like, wait, like, aren't you in charge of the military? What do you mean? Like, they weren't showing you things. So just explain all this together. Okay. Yeah. That's, that's really important too. And it's kind of confusing, I know, but it comes back to the Constitution. And our armed forces are under civilian control. Civilian control is executed through the secretary of defense. The secretary of defense is appointed by the president, but he has to be confirmed by the Senate. You know, it's all, it goes back to like, remember those, those boring high school classes and civics that you kind of was like, wow, I got to tell you, I didn't put it in the book, but I ended up, maybe I did, I ended up getting assigned to the Pentagon. I was in the military. I'm an army officer. I did not know that there are two sides of the Pentagon. One is the armed forces that's under the joint staff, the joint chiefs of staff, like that's all the army, navy, air force, marine space force. Then there's a whole other side of the Pentagon that is the civilian side, which is the office of the secretary of defense and civilians with some military people like in supporting functions. I didn't know any of this. I literally, when I got assigned there in 2010, I had to literally pull out like the Constitution and start reading through this and doing all that. But the difference, so the difference between a permanent secretary of defense and an acting, the permanent secretary of defense at the time was Mark Esper. And he had been nominated by the president confirmed by the Senate. And he was like, that was his job. That's what the Senate confirmed him for. That's what he got recruited for, et cetera, et cetera. When he was let go, when he was fired by President Trump, they have to have someone come in and

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 342 | Trump's Last Defense Secretary on Cutting the Pentagon Budget, Base Closures, Forever War Accountability, and New Threats with Christopher C. Miller

fill

in. To do that, you have to have been through the nominating process and you have to have gone to this Capitol Hill. You know where you see these, you see these hearings where Congress people and senators, senators are yelling at the poor person at the desk. That's the confirmation hearing where they determine that they're qualified. They're not, you know, crazy, all this stuff. So that, so to be an acting secretary of defense, let's be clear, your department of defense is one of the largest bureaucracies in the world. One million people in uniform, active duty. There are one million people at a reservist National Guard, which worked one day a month. And then you have, it depends on some days you have 700, 800,000 civilians, contractors, civilian employees that aren't in uniform. So it's the largest bureaucracy in the world. The act, so I was, had been confirmed by the Senate as the director of the National Counterterrorism Center. I was responsible for intel collection on all terrorist threats. We could talk about that more. I know I'm talking too much. When, when the sec, when President Trump decided to get rid of Secretary Esper, there are only a handful of us that have already been through the Senate confirmation process, which was necessary to hold the acting position. It's a legal thing. It's a policy thing. It sounds silly, but this way you just can't have some, some person, some rando off the street like, hey, you're the acting secretary of defense now, you have to have gone through the vetting process and the Senate has had to confirm you in some other position. Was that even more confusing than we started out with? No, I think, I think it's important. So I want to, I want to just jump around a lot of places. Like I said, I read the book and I have just a lot of questions. So apologies if this isn't particularly in order, but it helps to keep it conversation versus me reading off paper. So number one, I'm really interested at the end of the book when you're talking through your recommendations, you're talking about how generals haven't been held accountable for the inability to quote unquote, like win wars, especially since we're basically looking at the 50s in Korea. And you give the very valid point that on our military right now, if you're a private and you lose something, you'll be severely punished. But if you're a general and you lose something, you're not punished. And oftentimes you could actually get a nice job at a think tank and then serve on some boards, get the TV contracts, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. But I guess my initial pushback to that idea is if we're looking at the nature of the wars we fought since basically the Korean war, the defeats quote unquote, we're at the broad civilian level in the sense that, okay, if is the Iraq war a defeat, I don't know, like the surge worked really well, to the point of like tamping down violence, then the Obama administration decides to leave in 2011. That's a civilian led decision. So I guess what I'm kind of just curious about is like, what does responsibility and defeat look like in the case of a general, given if we're to really get to the core of what our critiques of US foreign policy decisions have been since basically the end of the Cold War, they're civilian led decisions. They are, okay, let's extend the mission in Afghanistan beyond the counter terror one that you participated in to a nation building decision. That wasn't the decision of a general, it was the decision of the Department of Defense and civilian leadership in the Bush administration. The decision of is Iraq merely about removing Saddam Hussein, or is it about actually building up the nation? That's also a civilian decision. So talk about how you think of generals in relation to civilians, because I just don't like the idea of making generals hold the bag, even if they made poor

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 342 | Trump's Last Defense Secretary on Cutting the Pentagon Budget, Base Closures, Forever War Accountability, and New Threats with Christopher C. Miller

tactical decisions for civilian decisions that made an outcome inevitable.

Right. And, you know, it's, it's, it's a great point. And I'm glad we're able to talk about this at length. And so the way, you know, we spend a trillion dollars a year on defense, the American people do, we, you know, that's, that's over 50% of the discretionary spending, the money that's available for government to spend on non like Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, those are set aside. We've got another pile of money that is used for discretionary stuff like building roads, national parks, all that stuff. And so we spend a lot of money on defense. And we spend an enormous amount of money on sending our senior leaders to advance, get advanced degrees and to master the art and science of war. And the issue is, you're right, these are civilian decisions. But each time a civilian decision is made by a civilian official, the secretary of defense, there's, I think there's like 17, 1700 civilian appointees of the Pentagon, because it is the largest, largest bureaucracy in the world. The issue I have is we're doing something wrong, because the strategic advice that the generals are giving, because there's something called best military advice, every civilian decision, the uniform, their uniform counterpart is obligated to give them what's called best military advice regarding the recommendation or the strategic choice or the policy choice that the civilian, ultimately the president, not always the president, but for these large decisions, obviously the president, you know, makes. And these, these decisions have been strategically unmoored, which have resulted in a failure to accomplish our strategic objectives. So the, there's this core, so every year when you're a military officer, you have to receive a block of instruction that reminds you about your role as a uniformed officer in the Republic and how you interact with civilians. It's really amazing. It's really very motivating for me that that's, we do that every year. And one of the issues that always comes up is when do you resign or when do you leave office? Because you do not believe that the decision that the civilian is going to make is in America's best interest. We, the strategic decisions that were made in Iraq during the pullout in Afghanistan over 20 years, you talked about the nature of the combat and the wars we were doing. You said they were counterinsurgency. Exactly. So the strategic decisions that were made by the civilians were in many ways feckless and incorrect. So where was the senior military officers that agreed to those decisions? Where is it? How come they don't get held accountable for these failures? The civilians do the decisions, elections matter, right, Marshall? I mean, so there is a recourse for that, but I don't see the recourse for holding the military officers accountable for their advice and their decisions. There's a whole school of thought about when you should resign as an officer. That's like, oh my gosh, really interesting subject, but pretty broad. So this is interesting because I want to, like I said, I enjoy the story. And I think what I'd love to do with this interview is kind of take the timeline you're operating under, right? Because your career is incredibly interesting, right? Like you're joining the army after the Vietnam War kind of during that like real five, six years of uncertainty. You're in the tail end of the Cold War, Desert Storm, 1990s, the Balkans, one of the first people in Afghanistan, like always great things. And I want to just take people and incidents and put into them. So for example, let's talk about the military and strategic advice. 2002, 2003, General Eric Shinseki. I can't remember if he was Army Chief of Staff, but he was some like high up military. Yeah, he was Army Chief of Staff. And he tells

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 342 | Trump's Last Defense Secretary on Cutting the Pentagon Budget, Base Closures, Forever War Accountability, and New Threats with Christopher C. Miller

President Bush and testifies to Congress that there were not enough troops for the Iraq invasion, given his belief that conflict, like post-conflict and stability operations, what the term was basically referred to, were going to be necessary.

Donald Rumsfeld, who we'll get into later, had his own ideas about as Secretary of Defense, had his own ideas about the size of the military and the mission and what would happen in Iraq, bloody, bloody, bloody, bloody. When his strategic recommendation about the number of US troops, which I think in retrospect, we can say was correct, was not followed, do you think he should have resigned? He got fired. So it doesn't matter. You know, Eric Shinseki, General Shinseki is kind of when we talk about our training episodes that we have to have each year about ethics and moral courage. And he's the one that is held up oftentimes, because I think his line was don't fight a 12th Division war with 10 divisions, which basically said, you're getting into. Now, that's great. That's best military advice. He was ignored and he was forced out of office. And he was asked, they didn't fire him. They just changed his retirement date. They pushed it up. But yeah, that's the example. I think that's the case study. And what we're talking about is he spoke truth to power. He was held accountable for his decisions. Rumsfeld didn't go with it because, frankly, he didn't have a good feel for the nature of war, if you ask me. And took bad lessons from Afghanistan and tried to apply them to Iraq. So yeah, Shinseki's the case study in this. So I guess the other question then too is, because I'm really fascinated by this firing resignation overall dynamic, because I'm trying it once again, I'm a civilian who's deeply interested in the military. So I want to come into this from this perspective. It seems to me that there is a difference between, I understand the idea of a general getting fired over, let's say like military decisions they're making, or so for example, let's say it's 2006 in Iraq, I understand firing the commander of the American forces and replacing of David Petraeus because there's actually like a

critical disagreement. He wasn't fired. He was kicked up. He was sort of kicked upstairs, but like there was a disagreement between President Bush about the surge. It was David McKiernan. David McKiernan and President Bush. No, McKiernan got fired in Afghanistan. Who am I confusing? Who was

in charge of Iraq in 2000? George Casey. General Casey. Yeah, sorry. I meant General Casey.

So I get the idea of General Casey. We just like part ways here we go there. But at what point is it the job of a military officer just to salute and say my job then, even if we strategically disagree, is to implement the military political strategy that administration has taken about?

That's the absolute crux of the discussion. And only the officer can decide that. And my point is what I've seen in my thesis is we've gone too far to the side of going with political expediency and supporting civilian leaders that are not taking good military advice.

And I'll give you a couple of examples of that. There's a difference between being a field commander, meaning General Casey and General McKiernan. General McKiernan actually is I'm so glad you brought him up. So few people know about him correctly. I'm not to add it back. So it was such a mistake. No, no, no, I'm glad you brought that up because General McKiernan is to me the role model for how a professional senior officer is supposed to respond. He was fired. He was right about Afghanistan. He asked when he took over for additional troops, but that wasn't politically palatable at the time. And he was let go and he was kind of run out with spurious

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 342 | Trump's Last Defense Secretary on Cutting the Pentagon Budget, Base Closures, Forever War Accountability, and New Threats with Christopher C. Miller

comments about he was an armored tank guy. He doesn't know counterinsurgency. And, you know, I have never heard him speak out about his firing. I have never heard him speak out against any of the policies. He is to me the consummate example of what a senior officer should do as opposed to this. And that's the point of my book where I say, you know, I say, fire the generals at the end. Come on, you got to be a little provocative, right? I mean, nobody's going to reach a damn book if it's like, oh, you know, that's my thing, Marshall, is the book is supposed to be accessible to people that aren't well steeped in all the arcane military stuff. I want it to be I want it to be so that people can read it from both sides. I want military people to get a laugh about it and how sometimes they are really hypocritical. I also want civilians to read it and try to understand like how all this happens is ultimately these are the most important decisions our nation makes. And we just kind of like move beyond and, you know, I was kind of laughing about, you know, the Super Bowl. But, you know, we have to talk about like, oh, my gosh, Rihanna, that she was a great show. And it was a great show. I love it. You know, I thought you need the takes here. Thank you for offering that. Yeah, but, you know, but, you know, it's like, these are kind of some of these situations about these warranties and how we spend our money that I'm trying to get to. When I talk about firing the generals, if you want, hey, I'm totally good. If you want to go into politics, you want to go be a pundit, turn in your turn in your retirement salary. That's fine. You can do whatever you want. So that's a long answer. And you just triggered a lot of emotions in that. And so I don't think I really answered your question to tell you the truth. I think I just tap dance my way through a la la land. But you brought up General McCarron. And he's a classic example. And General Miller was the last commandee general in Afghanistan. And he's done the same thing. He's gone off into the sunset and hasn't, you know, voiced his disagreement with the decisions that were made because he was basically forced out of the military too. Okay, so here's you raise another question, right? I have a lot of qualms with how certain former generals have used their military experience to serve as pundits and kind of engage in a political system that I'm a little skeptical of their underlying understanding of in terms of how their actions could cause different reactions. All that said, why should they have to give up their retirement if they want to go on MSNBC? Their retirement? They never have been in that given that opportunity to be an MSNBC or Fox or anything else, if they hadn't certain those positions. So I believe they're being awarded for what the American people paid them to their salaries for oftentimes 35, 40 years. So I'm good if you want to become a political actor, it's free country, you can do that. But I don't think you should benefit from your prior service in the armed forces. So I think another question that comes to mind, let's go back to your point about how we need more political appointees in the intelligence community. I think if you take what you said there, and once again, we've been talking about the military, but I'm just kind of curious here, if we go through this history of 20 years of wars that you're very, you are very critical of in the course of the books, in the course of the book, especially if we're talking about that early war on terror, so many of the bad decisions were made by civilian or political appointees. I think if we're looking at the intelligence picture about weapons of mass destruction, obviously, you know, you have professional members of the CIA who are providing intelligence, but doing one of those things. But in terms of we actually look at the process of what went wrong there with the confirmation bias, and carve and political incentives,

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 342 | Trump's Last Defense Secretary on Cutting the Pentagon Budget, Base Closures, Forever War Accountability, and New Threats with Christopher C. Miller

a lot of that were civilians. So can you just like, and once again, like take it wherever you want, wherever you want to go, it's a conversation. But I just struggle to see looking at the looking at the forever wars, taking away like, man, I just wish there were more politically incentive. And by the way, I don't mean politically incentivizing the sense that people are like, corrupt or acting badly. But it seems like we tell a story of politicization, being a bad thing and bad incentives. So why do you think that more politically appointed officials would be a good thing in the intelligence community? Right now, there's only a handful. Well, first off, this is about the Republic. And this is about our system of government and federated government. And, you know, it's designed not to move rapidly. That's actually what we want so that tyranny can't prevail. And so the issue I have with having no very few political appointees in the intelligence community, they've done a very good job with their narrative and with their justification that by putting political appointees in the intelligence community, we politicize intelligence. And I look at the decisions you brought it up in Iraq and elsewhere and I'm like, but the intelligence is politicized all the time. The issue is you have people in the intelligence community that oftentimes stay in the same position. Like, let's look at James Jesus Angleton classic example. He's kind of the J. Edgar Hoover figure of the of the CIA, who served in the same position in counterintelligence for like, oh, I don't know, 20, 25 years. If that was a civilian figure, they would move every four to eight years. So you flush the system. So you talked about confirmation bias, you talk about politicization within the intelligence community that is actually happening because we've created a system where individuals can it's unaccountable individuals that are not under, you know, civilian oversight slash congressional oversight can amass great power, great influence and drive agendas. And I think that's what we that's my observations from what I saw from some of these debacles and others that are going on. And I said, I think that's what we're going to find out when we look at these Chinese spy balloons, we're going to we're going to find out that's a bureaucrat. I love your I love bureaucrats.

I'm not I'm not one of these guys like I hate all bureaucrats. No, it's bureaucrats are incredibly important to the functioning of the government to keep everything on a steady steady state. But I think we're going to find out someone amassed a huge amount of power and made a decision that those reports and that intelligence did not need to go up the chain of command to civilian decision makers. I think that's what we're going to find. And that's why you need more civilian people, civilian political appointees who would go, well, actually, you're wrong. This really needs to go up the flagpole and doesn't need to get put in this bucket of, you know, some secret compartment that only, you know, 10 people can see.

I think you're speaking of hot but serious takes very important to say it that way.

40 to 50 percent cut of the Pentagon budget, something you advocate for in the book. I'd love to ask about that a couple of different ways. So number one, you make the point in the book that you think that and you're confident that a 40 to 50 percent cut would force the military to be, quote, nimble. And when I said I literally finished the book, I was I was that I remember the word is a nimbler efficient military that would provide a incentive to do that. I'm curious how you look at how the defense sequestration cuts from 2012 onwards impacted the military. Because once again, like you're especially because you don't come from



## [Transcript] The Realignment / 342 | Trump's Last Defense Secretary on Cutting the Pentagon Budget, Base Closures, Forever War Accountability, and New Threats with Christopher C. Miller

the political system, like I'm not trying to claim that you're a 2014, 2015 Republican, you don't think of these like you're not a conventional like thinker on these issues. But the generic talking point that I was told as an intern was the sequestered mandatory cuts made the military inefficient. And key thing, they as an institution were not up to we're not able to become more efficient. So maybe like the amounts were helpful, but it didn't result in a more productive military. That was like the generic Republican talking point in 2016. So could you respond to first the sequestration point and then we'll get to the broader cuts you're advocating for. You you're giving the classic example of what I'm talking about in my book is we've allowed the military to have this almost deified on a pedestal position, where what they say goes as the gospel truth. And that sequestration thing, you would have thought that if if secret sequestration destroyed, you know, the readiness and the capability of the American military, which is just nonsense. But however, because you actually explain what's that, I didn't do a good nunchok. You just get texturized for people froze, froze spending at because they couldn't pass a budget that they froze spending at the previous year's level and didn't account for inflation, which at the time was miniscule, as we recall. So this idea that you have to increase your budget by 5% your military budget by 5% every year has become like the gospel truth, which is just ridiculous. But let's let me let me point out, the only way you get attention in Washington DC, as you know, Marshall, is you have to hold the purse strings. And with you have when you have unbridled military spending, which there's no come on, there's absolutely the generals and the civilian officials go in there and they can ask for whatever they want. And they get it right now. And my point that I'm trying to make is you do not what we're doing. All we're doing is refighting the Cold War right now. We're getting these wicked expensive weapons systems, gold plated platinum weapons systems, tanks. But let's be clear, you know, jet fighters, dog on. Do you know what I put it in there? Let's quiz you know, I'm not going to quiz you, man. Don't worry. I try it. Yeah. We're, you know, aircraft carries \$14 billion a piece, \$14 billion piece at 35 fighter program that goes for \$1.5 billion. No, \$1.5 trillion over the life of the program. Marshall, somebody came to me and said, they said, this is the most expensive weapons procurement in the history of the world. I said, now you got to be wrong. You got to be wrong. I said, go back and assess the Roman road network. If adjusted for dollars, I'm sure the Roman road network costs a lot more. They came back and they went back and they fussed around and came back and they said, nope, we ran the numbers adjusted for inflation and all that stuff. And actually, the F-35 fighter program is more expensive than the Roman road network. And I of course, flippantly said, well, geez, we still ride on the Roman road network in Britain, you know, and I don't think we're going to be, you know, flying F-35s in 1200 years, 800, 1200 years. That's not a criticism of the F-35. I want to be clear. I used to really get angry with the defense contractors. They're just doing exactly what the system has incentivized them to do. F-35s are a great plane. People that fly it are like, hey, sir, this thing really works well. The point I'm trying to make is so we can only build a couple hundred of them. What's going on on Ukraine right now? We have gone back to an era of mass, cheap mass versus high tech expensive quality. The Cold War was one. We beat the Soviet Union because we outspent them. They could not

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 342 | Trump's Last Defense Secretary on Cutting the Pentagon Budget, Base Closures, Forever War Accountability, and New Threats with Christopher C. Miller

keep up with this technologically and they went bankrupt because our technology and our weapon systems were so exquisite, right? There's a cycle in the nature of warfare, not in the nature of warfare, but there's always a cycle between offense and defense. There's always a cycle between mass, quantity versus quality. We're going back to an era of quantity over quality. I'm talking drones. I'm talking hyper enabled, you know, unmanned systems. I'm talking about cyber. I'm talking about information operations. I'm not talking about these huge programs. So the point that I'm trying to make with cutting the defense budget is you do not have to be creative when you can do everything. And I'm concerned that the Chinese were playing right into the Chinese game of doing to us what we did to the Soviet Union, bankrupting us. We're building these doggone expensive weapon systems that are not going to survive 72 hours in a major conflict. Think about this. Am I talking too much? I'll be quiet. No, no, no, please. This is great. Think about this. You can put up, let's say you're on the southern coast of China and South China Sea and you can see a five ship flight of that 35 is coming in. You know, you're like, I got 16 missiles here. I can handle this. That's so five ships, \$500 million, we'll just call \$500 million coming at you. You've got what you're with 16 missiles, you got like \$20 million right there. So the exchange ratio is pretty good, right? But let's say all of a sudden you see 25,000 unmanned systems just appear. You are now on the horns of dilemma. What do you do as the Chinese air defense officer that all of a sudden has now got this many targets? Because correct me if I'm wrong, never do public math. I should not do this. \$500 million. Those Iranian drones that they're using, is it the TB12? Those drones that are just attacking Ukraine that the Russians are using? I'm seeing they go for about \$20,000 a piece. So I won't do the math, but just think about the cost offset and the capability that comes with putting 25,000 drones at a target versus five that are all very observable. So that's what I'm trying to say with the book, that we need to rethink how we're fighting. That's what I'm trying to say. Let's rethink it now as opposed to when we get in a jam and we have to do this on the fly. So here's another question then. Let's say President Trump was re-elected. You are confirmed your secretary of defense. Assume a lot of the events that happen still kind of happen in the sense of special attentions of China. If I were President Trump I said, okay, Chris, I need you to come up with a plan or a set of priorities when it comes to defending our position in the Asia Pacific, especially relating to Taiwan. What would you say? What should our policy towards the island look like? With Taiwan, I don't think it's that complicated. The issue right now is we've kind of got confused messages coming out. I think that I understand why the Chinese are confused. That one in Taiwan, there needs to be the red line here and simple. Like, hey, the United States, if that's the decision made by the American people, but there's this whole, what's our policy right now? It's kind of muddled. And you have President Biden say, no, we're going to defend Taiwan and then you have the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense say the policy hasn't changed. Ambiguous policy, isn't that what they call it? So with President Trump, I think he was definitely edging towards, he didn't understand this ambiguous policy. Just make it red line, black and white, whatever you want to call it, whatever analogy you want to have. Here's my thing. The Taiwanese are in a situation where they need to pick up their ability to defend themselves. We can't want it more than they do. That's my point. And there's a lot of issues. Here's one of the things though. The Chinese Communist Party is marvelous at information operations. I mean, and they have

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 342 | Trump's Last Defense Secretary on Cutting the Pentagon Budget, Base Closures, Forever War Accountability, and New Threats with Christopher C. Miller

done a very, very effective job in using mass media and social media and current communications technology to advance their ideas and their agenda. So having said that, that's my point, is we should be competing against China, not with aircraft carriers, but with information, with what they call the regular warfare. Regular warfare, the line I use is the most important weapon system is the six inches between the ears of the members of our armed forces. There's information operations. There's cyber. I knew you had Josh Steinman on here a while ago. Dude, we're on like, this episode's like 342, 343. I can't believe how many people you've had. So that's called a regular warfare. Really, let me just summarize it. It's like, don't do what your enemy expects you to do, right? The Chinese expect us to fight a certain way and prepare a certain way. So let's not do that. And I know as a special operations guy, and our thing is like, hey, you know, if you can go get behind somebody and take them down, why fight them face to face, you know, like be smarter. And that's my issue. That's what I'm trying to say with the book. And that's why I think cutting the budget is the only way we're going to get some creative thinking going. Creative thinking is there, Marshall. Creative thinking is there in the trenches and in the bowels of the Pentagon, but there are young people that aren't being heard because, you know, the incentive structure is designed to continue to support, you know, cold war thinking. So here's a question then. What happens? Once again, let's assume, let's not make you acting or secretary of defense in this scenario. Let's pretend there's just an alternate universe where, let's say like in 2014, you're you're working in the Pentagon as a professional military officer and the Obama administration and John Boehner, they make a great compact to cut the budget 40 to 50%. What would you recommend be done? Because we get to because to your point, we've already spent the money on the F-35, the Ford Couser airfare has been ordered. What would you cut? I tell it in the book, it's not that doggone hard. And everybody will be like, this is facile, and this is not well thought out. Okay, fine. Like, let's get the conversation started. There's a great guy, General Dupuis, who talked about the 70s. He was the guy who basically revolutionized the United States military and prepared us, which was called Air Land Battle Doctrine, that became what was used in Desert Storm. So here's what I'm trying to get at is like, let's go back, like, we need to know what's going on overseas. So this isn't some, you know, I believe we need to pull back our large troop concentrations overseas to reset and get ready for the next, the next phase of this journey we're on in American and international affairs, pull back our large military concentrations, but overseas, you special operators, intelligence, take Korea, Japan, Europe, etc. and pull back the large, large formations, keep forward, intelligence officers and special operators to sense their global scouts. They're there. They're in every embassy in the world. They're keeping track of what's going on. And when they determine there's a protrusion in the atmosphere that something's happening, they can then pull capabilities forward from the United States. Maybe it's information operations. Maybe it's a battalion of strikers. Maybe it's an Air Force Squadron or something like that. They pull it forward so that you can then impact things before they become a major crisis. Here's what I want to do. Move the vast majority of our active duty forces into the National Guard. Citizen soldiers, right? That's the essence of America. So right now we have as many people serving on active duty as we probably had. Well, we did at the end of the Cold War. We downsized, but we're no longer actively involved in the wars

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 342 | Trump's Last Defense Secretary on Cutting the Pentagon Budget, Base Closures, Forever War Accountability, and New Threats with Christopher C. Miller

in Afghanistan and Iraq. And instead, we still have these large troop concentrations. Move those people back to their communities. And I point out in the book, when we started this conversation, remember Marshall about, hey, Chris, you know, I think the problem is the military doesn't understand

the civilians. And I say, you're right. That's why you know how many bases we have in America? They're all in the South. They're these huge bases, they're gated communities. The people that serve, they're very rarely interact. They have their own schools, their own shopping centers, their own recreation, everything. Like we need to return our military back to the American people by having them be citizen soldiers and have them throughout America. So that helps bridge the gap between the two. And then, you know, you increase readiness, obviously, with the National Guard. So you just have tiered readiness, like, okay, you have forces that are ready to go in 72 hours, you have forces ready to go in a week, a month, et cetera, et cetera. We've done it before, we can do it again. And that will save a huge amount of money. But more importantly, it will return the armed forces to the American people. That was a good sound bite. I just came up with that myself. I'm going to have to use that one again. That was good. Return the armed forces to the American people, but I'm serious, man. That's really what concerns me about what's going on. And I just want to be part of the conversation that forces, you know, these discussions. Yeah, I guess my, so here's my concern. My concern is timing and the like, if and when question. So for me, everything you just said is a very compelling post-desert storm policy plan.

Are you just scared of, you're just scared about China or something?

Well, no, no, it's not that, it's not that what I'm worried about is the awkward dynamic.

And this happens in politics. It happens at a military strategy perspective of something that makes sense in the long term, doesn't make sense in the short term. So for example, it would make sense, it would not make sense to do this in the long term. If in the short term, the Chinese interpret a pullback from Okinawa and South Korea as an invitation to take risks. That's, have you heard, have you heard of Hal Brands and Michael Beck? We have this. Had them on the show. Like their whole point is like these next 10 years are super effing dangerous. Like that's 10. That's the point. My basic response to you is that sounds really compelling. Let's explore that in 2033. That's basically my reaction.

Yeah. And so let's just keep doing what we're doing. And the problem is when, if, if, if we, so autocrats and totalitarians want one thing they need, well, they have two requirements. One is to maintain control of their population. And the way they do that is by always having an enemy. So that's my issue with why I want to go a regular warfare. I want to go indirect approach is right now the things that we are doing are reinforcing the Chinese Communist Party narrative that the Chinese people must support them. So let's not do exactly. I personally think that we're in a strategic reset phase. I get all these, like, oh my God, war tonight, this thing could happen, you know, within the next 10 years. I think it will happen more likely if we continue doing what we're doing, as opposed to very clearly messaging, you know, that we need to do a strategic

reset to get ready for the next era of conflict. And I put in my book, everybody's like, dude, I can't believe you like nuclear weapons. I'm like, I hate nuclear weapons. I wish they would all go away. It's, I mean, I really am a, I'm a plowsheres guy, you know, like, like a lot of those folks

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 342 | Trump's Last Defense Secretary on Cutting the Pentagon Budget, Base Closures, Forever War Accountability, and New Threats with Christopher C. Miller

did coming out of the Cold War. But my point is we do have a strategic backstop with our, with some pretty exquisite weapons systems that can buy down our risk during the next period, where we reset our military and our doctrine and our warfighting concepts to be better able to, oh, geez, I just hit my thing. Sorry about that, be able to more effectively advance our and protect America, advance our interests. So that's where I am. I disagree with this whole narrative that the Chinese are, you know, on the verge and let's be clear, if they, if they made a crack at Taiwan right now, they might get assured that it's going to be a hell of a slog for them. And I just don't think, I know for a fact that we're ready, the United States military is still in a position where we can, we can effectively deter Chinese invasion of Taiwan. So that's a great leading back to the proposal to basically bring the military back to the American people via upping the National Guard. What's the timeline there, right? So for, because the reason why I'm asking this is you have, and I mean, seriously, you have a lot of like very bold proposals here. And I think that's great. Like that's the purpose of the conversation. Nothing's worse than like a, you know, you give, you tell your story, and then you end with some takes that, you know, CNAS could have published in 2015. So I'm interested in two things you've proposed on this podcast. So one is red line with Taiwan, and then the drawdown. So you're good, you ask me what am I afraid of? That's a great question. What I'm afraid of is a world where we implement a red line explicit with Taiwan, but then also drawdown. So we literally wave a red flag in front of she, which is what making that explicit policy would be. But then we also signal ambiguity about our commitment to the Asia Pacific, because of a drawdown. Now, if that's on a five, six, seven, even three or four year period, that's different. But like when you say drawdown, like, what does that mean in terms of withdrawals and stepping down the position? How long did it take us to drawdown from what do we have in Europe at the end of the Cold War? 200,000. We're down to 25 right now. It took, it took quite a few years. Military doesn't move fast. Everything's a five year plan. Everything's extremely well planned. And that, that's kind of also where you get the, you get to assess your risk calculus. Here's my thing though, with your conjecture that somehow we're responsible for defending Taiwan. I think the, the red line is if you invade Taiwan, we will reinforce and support the Taiwanese. I don't think we should be fighting the Taiwanese war. I think we should be providing them like we are in the Ukraine. And I know there's a schism in the Republican party and I'll get hate mail on this and my Twitter will blow up and I'm saying something wrong, but there is a schism within the Republican party. I'm kind of a Ronald Reagan type, which believes if there's a population that's willing to fight for their freedom, like we're seeing in Ukraine, give them what they need to do that. It's kind of the same thing with Taiwan. So this idea that somehow, and I think that's a lesson we should have learned from Iraq and Afghanistan that, hey, if you're out there and you're, and, and you're Afghan or Iraqi and there's an American fighting person or an allied fighting person that's willing to do the fighting for you, heck, I'm with them. They're like, go ahead, have your way. And so I think the lesson we should have drawn from those wars is, and that comes back to my regular warfare construct, you know, don't make it your problem, provide them the support they need to fight their own war. I think in Afghanistan in 2003,

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 342 | Trump's Last Defense Secretary on Cutting the Pentagon Budget, Base Closures, Forever War Accountability, and New Threats with Christopher C. Miller

we had that thing wrapped up, I'm telling you, and they're back towards civilians. How, where, where were the military officers saying, well, I was there, so I know what happened. But it's like, that was the time where we could have cut it. We should have started negotiations because the Taliban were completely on their back foot. They were about to collapse and we took our foot off the gas that winter and allowed them to rearm, reequip and reset and rest. And so that's my point is with Taiwan, we can't want it more than they do. I think we should provide them anything they ask for to help help them training equipment, etc. But we also need to message this Chinese Communist Party that invasion of Taiwan against, you know, will be seen as active aggression, a la Russia going into Ukraine. So I like you taking it back. We've got, you know, our last 10 minutes here, because I think this is like a helpful pivot out. So if you're talking about a record, I want to make this clear, especially younger listeners who were barely conscious, conscious in 2003, if we're looking at a lot of those really bad decisions in 2003, I think two of the worst decisions, this is pretty conventional wisdom were Al Paul Bremer, the third, basically the American Vice Roy in Iraq saying we're going to disband the Iraqi military. And then we're also going to engage in deep amplification, banning members of Saddam's bath party, beyond the level of war criminals and actual criminals, just going all the way down to the garbage man who was a member of the party, because that's what you need to do to succeed. I'm going to tell this story from the perspective of looking at civilians who've screwed up, because that's my background, right? Your background is going to focus on generalship and military officers who screwed up. What would be your advice for the Al Paul Bremer's of the world? Because I'm just looking at this history, my reaction is like, man, I'm still a lot more pissed off at civilian leaders than I am at any general, barring like personal scandal and corruption. What would your advice be for the civilians who are listening are going to find themselves in these positions and be faced with these different choices? Cultural context matters. And one size does not fit all. And that's exactly what I'm talking about, the nature of our military industrial complexes. We have a certain way of looking at operations. We have a certain way of looking at strategy. And we have a certain way of looking at war fighting. And I was a special operations guy. I was a Green Beret. Green Berets go behind enemy lines of small 12 person units and get with a local population and bring them together to fight against oppression. That's the mission. And what the key thing there is you need to have language proficiency. And we spend, I'm not in the business anymore, they spend an inordinate amount of time like digging into the history, the culture, what makes people tick. Instead of, you know, they're really good with guns and explosives and all that stuff too. But they're really, really good about how to communicate with people and how to understand their motivations and what the incentive structure is and how the network effect works in foreign societies. And I think all the information was right there for us. But you brought up Rumsfeld. Rumsfeld had his idea that was going on. Whoever allowed that to happen, it was such a short thinking. We knew we could be militarily successful. Come on, we went in there. So I was, I was helped plan that thing. And there were these two majors, just great guys. They're called Jedi Knights. They went to the

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 342 | Trump's Last Defense Secretary on Cutting the Pentagon Budget, Base Closures, Forever War Accountability, and New Threats with Christopher C. Miller

school of advanced military studies. These guys are like the best trained and educated planners in the world. And I went to them one day when we were planning the war in Iraq. And I said, hey, man, why don't we put a special forces A team at this road intersection and they can call back what they'll go out before the invasion starts. And then they can tell you if like the Iraqis move large forces. And these two patted me on the shoulder. They're like Chris, we're moving 150 M1A1 Abrams main battle tanks up that road will be just fine. I knew we could defeat them militarily. But then we got there and just absolute chaos. There's a good good one in the story about when we took over the palace complex of a dog on Saddam Hussein and literally the last guy out of the compound, no kidding. I thought it was so emblematic had the kitchen sink. They stole everything. They looted everything because and that was when it was also a civilian decision at a broad level to accept. I mean, Donald Robster had the quote where he said, this is what happens like that was it was an affirmative policy choice. I realize your specific circumstances were unique, but the broad policy of we're going to tolerate the chaos. Talk about a broken window. But there was but there were General Tommy Franks was the four star commander in charge of the whole

operation. He didn't think he didn't give advice. He gave advice. We're going to accept as much risk getting out as we did getting in. Like what kind of nonsense that that's really, really poor military advice. But beyond that, back to your point about civilian control, he somehow he went along with this crazy idea Rumsfeld had. So yeah, you're I really like the fact that you highlighted the point. You're looking this is really cool. You're looking at it from the civilian perspective. And I'm just like continuing the town and the military leaders. But that's our that is our experience base. And that you know, well said. Yeah, no, it's just it's just so interesting. Because once again, you're telling this story gets more political as you get older by definition. But you're you're enlisting, you're then, you know, joining the infantry, but going to Korea instead of Germany, because you didn't want to be mechanized infantry. But as you get higher and higher, gets more political. So as I'm thinking of your story, and I think listeners, this will be helpful, I'm thinking, how am I on my own path, thinking about these different issues and different perspectives? Because I think what's interesting about our system of government is that we need both military folks, and we need civilian folks. And you want to have a way to kind of merge these two. And I think another way of kind of reconciling our contrasting critiques of the past 20 years is that the broad amalgamation didn't work. Military mistakes, civilian mistakes, both sides have strength and weaknesses, they weren't balanced by their directions. And how do we get out of that? So last, last quick question. What's next for you? Because I want to be honest with you, I know, I know people don't like, I'm wondering if you're planning on running for office. That's kind of like my big bike takeaway. You know what I'm saying? Marshall, I came back in 03 from Iraq after that. And I tell it in the book, where I was heartbroken, man, fortunately, my parent or my family was gone on vacation. And I had three days to sit there in stew. And I thought I would go back to Iowa, and I would run against Jim Leach, who I'd always voted for this beautiful Republican centrist. I mean, he to me is the example of what we want in our political leadership and everybody. And no, I'm absolutely not running for office. There's absolutely no way what I want to do, though, I want to highlight the nobility of public service. And that's what my father did. And that's what I did. And the political assassin,

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 342 | Trump's Last Defense Secretary on Cutting the Pentagon Budget, Base Closures, Forever War Accountability, and New Threats with Christopher C. Miller

not that's really bad word, but the wire brushing that happens when you take on those positions, I think is really harming our society and our republic. And that's what I just want. Like one kid that's down there in the Midwest, I don't think they read much anymore. He can do, he or she can do the audible book. Or a Marshall better yet, man, maybe you could get some TikTok stuff. No, that's Chinese platform. I don't use TikTok. Yeah, no, don't use it. But, you know, I just hope that somebody, somebody reads it and listen or listens to it goes, yeah, I want to give it a shot. I want to go ahead and serve my country in some capacity. It doesn't have to be the military. It could be green energy. I don't care. Work in the National Park Service, but there's no building. There is no building. We need good people, Marshall. And that's why I know it sounds sounds like a song, the sound bite, but that's why what you guys are doing is so important to highlight these issues and take them, take them a little more complex than just the sound bites that you get when you watch the shows. Yeah, well said. Chris, this has been really great for folks listening at home. The book is Soldier Secretary. I finished it right before this interview. I really enjoyed it and I think raises plenty of, I think it brings the personal into a lot of like the big heady topics the show has been really engaging with. So that's a good way of thinking about it. Thank you for joining me on the realignment. Thanks for what you guys are doing. It's really, I got great feedback when I told him that I was going to be on the realignment. People are like, wow, that's great. And you guys are driving the conversation. That's kind of one of the goals of what I was trying to do books. So thanks for having me on. I really appreciate it. Thanks. Hope you enjoyed this episode. You learned something like this sort of mission or want to access our subscriber exclusive Q&A bonus episodes and more go to [realignment.supercast.com](http://realignment.supercast.com) and subscribe to our \$5 a month \$50 a year or \$500 for a lifetime membership rates. See you all next time.