

Modly Resigns After Backlash Over Insults Directed at Carrier's Ousted Captain



Acting Navy Secretary Thomas B. Modly, who had his temperature checked March 31 during a COVID-19 screening before boarding the hospital ship Mercy in Los Angeles, resigned April 7 after a backlash over his comments toward the former captain of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt. He later apologized for those remarks. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Natalie M. Byers

ARLINGTON, Va. – Thomas B. Modly resigned as acting Navy secretary on April 7, a day after calling the ousted captain of the coronavirus-infected USS Theodore Roosevelt “stupid” in a profanity-laced speech to the aircraft carrier’s crew.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper accepted Modly's resignation, noting in a statement that Modly "resigned on his own accord, putting the Navy and the Sailors above self."

Esper said he was appointing current Army Undersecretary James McPherson, a retired Navy admiral, as acting Navy secretary until a permanent secretary can be confirmed. McPherson himself was confirmed by the Senate for the Army post only 14 days ago.

In his statement, Esper said he had "the deepest respect for anyone who serves our country, and who places the greater good above all else. Secretary Modly did that today, and I wish him all the best."

Esper noted that the investigation which Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday had launched into the Roosevelt affair was continuing and any further action regarding its fired commander, Capt. Brett Crozier, "will wait until that investigation is completed."

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Modly's resignation came after a tumultuous series of events that saw him relieve Crozier from command on April 2, fly to Guam, where the ship is docked, and defend his actions in a April 6 address to the ship's crew that was sprinkled with profanity. In that speech, Modly called Crozier "too naive or too stupid to be the commanding officer of a ship like this," according transcripts of recordings of Modly's remarks made by several of the carrier's crew.

Modly later said, "I stand by every word I said," even the profanity. However, less than 24 hours after the speech, Modly issued an apology to Crozier, to the Theodore Roosevelt's crew and the Navy.

“Let me be clear,” Modly said in his statement of apology, “I do not think Capt. Brett Crozier is naive or stupid. I think and have always believed him to be the opposite. I believe, precisely because he is not naive and stupid, that he sent his alarming e-mail with the intention of getting into the public domain in an effort to draw public attention to the situation on his ship.”

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Defense Secretary Mark Esper

Crozier’s March 30 letter to dozens of Navy brass and fellow naval aviators sparked the initial controversy that ultimately led to Modly’s resignation a week later.

After three Sailors on the Roosevelt tested positive for COVID-19 – and still more were found to be infected after the carrier made a scheduled port visit at Guam – Crozier believed the carrier had inadequate space to isolate or quarantine Sailors. “The spread of the disease is ongoing and accelerating,” Crozier wrote. He called for disembarking all but a token force of about 10% of the crew until all could be tested for infection, isolated for the required 14 days and the ship sanitized.

The letter was leaked to the San Francisco Chronicle, which published it on March 31, gaining worldwide media attention and highlighting Crozier’s plea: “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.”

The next day, at a Pentagon press briefing, Modly said he was “disappointed” to hear those remarks but added, “We need a lot of transparency in this situation, and we need that information to flow up through the chain of command.”

On April 3, Modly ordered Crozier relieved of his command, saying he had "lost confidence in his ability to lead" during the virus outbreak. Before the letter was published, Navy leadership had already been in touch with Crozier, Modly said. The captain said he wanted his crew evacuated from the ship faster but did not relay "the various levels of alarm that I, along with the rest of the world, learned from his letter when it was published two days later," Modly said.