

Hegseth injects combative Christianity into America's military

by Ellen Mitchell - 03/29/26

During his briefing on the Iran war last week, Defense Secretary [Pete Hegseth](#) suggested that Americans take a knee and pray to Jesus for the success of [U.S. forces in the Middle East](#). A few days later, he read out a sermon praying that “wicked souls” be “delivered to the eternal damnation” in the fight against Iran.

The Defense secretary has increasingly used his bully pulpit to promote his combative, controversial brand of Christianity. While the Pentagon says Hegseth is embracing America's proud history as a Christian nation, some experts and veterans worry that Hegseth's move to inject the military with more explicitly religious sentiments threatens to divide America's forces.

“I think it's extremely concerning the way that he is operating. It's concerning to me as a Christian, and it's concerning to me as an American,” said Matthew Taylor, a visiting scholar at Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs.

“The ideological consolidation of the military is something that we have historically not wanted. We want the military to be diverse. We want the military representative of the American people,” he added.

Hegseth, who was deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan before becoming a Fox News host, has presided over prayer services in the building led by controversial Christian pastors and revamped the military's Chaplain Corps, and official Defense Department social media posts often amplify ultraconservative Christian views.

During press briefings on the ongoing U.S.-Israeli war in Iran, Hegseth has frequently invoked his faith in referencing the conflict. On March 10, one day after attending a dignified transfer at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, he referenced Psalm 144 from the Bible.

“Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle. He is my loving God and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield in whom I take refuge,” he said.

More recently, he has revamped the U.S. military's Chaplain Corps, announcing Tuesday that the officers will no longer wear their rank insignia, instead displaying insignia that reflects their religious affiliation — part of two major changes to the group.

Service members' spiritual health “is equally important” as their physical and mental health, Hegseth said in a video message, complaining that previous administrations injected the Chaplain Corps with “political correctness and secular humanism,” changing and watering down the role's core functions “until they were viewed by many as nothing more than therapists.”

Prior to being tapped as Pentagon chief, Hegseth derided military efforts to promote diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, labeling them as discriminatory ideologies that “turn off the young, patriotic, Christian men who have traditionally filled our ranks.”

Of the military’s 1.3 million active-duty troops, roughly 70 percent are Christian, according to 2019 Defense Department data.

In his first year at the Pentagon, Hegseth enacted a policy that bans transgender troops, scrubbed diversity from the ranks, began a review on whether women should serve in combat roles and even reevaluated the Defense Department’s more than 100-year partnership with Scouting America over its inclusion of female scouts.

At a highly unusual gathering of generals and admirals in September in Quantico, Va., he spoke of prayer, Jesus and “all precious souls made in the image and likeness of God” alongside plans for new fitness standards and a return to a “warrior ethos.”

This past spring, he began a monthly prayer service at the Pentagon, inviting such controversial figures as Doug Wilson — a self-described Christian nationalist pastor who has argued that women should be denied the right to vote — [to deliver a sermon](#) in the building’s auditorium.

The visit prompted complaints and outcry.

“Hegseth is using his official position to make his religion the official one of the Department of Defense using official facilities, communications channels and personnel,” Fred Wellman, an Army veteran running for Congress in Missouri, [wrote on the social platform X](#) at the time. “This must end and must be investigated.”

Nancy Lacore, a retired Navy rear admiral running for Congress in South Carolina’s 1st District, said inviting Wilson “sends a clear and troubling message to our troops: not all of you belong. That is wrong, and it is not the military I served in—where diversity was our strength and unity was how we got the job done.”

Defense officials, however, have defended Wilson’s presence and other efforts by Hegseth to inject religion into the armed forces.

“Secretary Hegseth, along with millions of Americans, is a proud Christian and was glad to welcome Pastor Wilson to the Pentagon,” said Pentagon press secretary Kingsley Wilson.

“The Christian faith is woven deeply into the fabric of our nation,” she added. “Despite the Left’s efforts to remove our Christian heritage from our great nation, Secretary Hegseth is among those who embrace it.”

So far, the Pentagon chief has held at least 10 such attendance-optional prayer services, with other invitees including Brooks Pottenger, the pastor of Hegseth’s church in Tennessee; Edward Graham, an evangelist who is the grandson of Billy Graham; and Chris Durkin, who leads a

Southern Baptist congregation in New Jersey. Hegseth has previously credited Durkin for his religious transformation.

Hegseth — now a congregant at one of the churches affiliated with Wilson’s Congregation of Reformed Evangelical Churches — on his personal account reposted a CNN segment about the pastor with the quote “All of Christ for All of Life,” a slogan for embracing Christianity in every area of society, including government, culture, work and family.

Last month, he was the headline speaker for the National Religious Broadcasters 2026 International Christian Media Convention, held last month in Nashville. The Pentagon’s “[Rapid Response](#)” account on X posted 10 video clips of his talk, which plugged his monthly Christian prayer service, pushed anti-transgender views and argued that the fabric of the country is “woven in the threads of Biblical principles.”

“Gone is godless and divisive DEI, gone is gender-bending equity and quotas, gone is climate change worship to a false God,” he declared in the Feb. 19 speech. “We are one military, one fighting force, one nation under God. We are not in woke we trust, we are in God we trust.”

The same messaging is also seen frequently on official Pentagon social media accounts.

In one video [posted to X](#) in August, text from the Bible’s Book of Psalms is stamped over scenes of fighter jets, rocket launches and combat troops: “I pursued my enemies and overtook them. I did not turn back till they were destroyed.”

In another [from September](#), a phrase from the Bible’s Book of Joshua plays atop video of military personnel completing outdoor training: “Be strong and of good courage. Do not be afraid, nor dismayed. For the Lord your God is with you, wherever you go.”

Hegseth quite literally wears his Christian faith on his sleeve, with a tattoo on his arm of the words “Deus Vult,” or “God wills it” — a motto from the Crusades — as well as a tattoo on his chest depicting a Jerusalem cross. Both are associated with extremists and the Christian right.

Steven Bucci, a visiting fellow at the Heritage Foundation think tank, said he believes there’s much less concern about Hegseth’s fervent religiosity than commentators seem to think.

“In the military they start every event with a chaplain opening in prayer, [they] in particular try and be sensitive to people, they’re not trying to evangelize somebody to their particular denomination or even to any faith,” said Bucci, who previously served as an Army Special Forces officer and Pentagon official.

“I think the idea of invoking the name of Jesus when [Hegseth] says, ‘pray for our troops,’ that’s the way he prays, he’s not dictating that anybody else pray like that. He’s not trying to denigrate anybody else’s faith or absence of faith, but that’s the way he feels about his troops,” he added.