

Hundreds of Generals Try to Keep a Straight Face

Story by Nancy A. Youssef

In the days before Pete Hegseth stepped onstage to address the hundreds of generals and admirals he summoned for a mysterious meeting outside Washington, D.C., officials at the Pentagon joked that the defense secretary could have saved a lot of time and money by making his remarks via email instead. As it turns out, what Hegseth delivered at Marine Corps Base Quantico could very well have been a copy of his 2024 book, *The War on Warriors*, which offers an exhaustive rebuke of the military he left in 2021 with the National Guard rank of major.

Hegseth's speech, which required yanking commanders from posts dotting the globe and whisking them to Washington at taxpayers' expense, marked a new phase in the former Fox News host's campaign to transform the military in his image and align it more closely with the MAGA agenda. All of the pathologies diagnosed in his book—diversity initiatives, facial hair, accommodations for women, systems to hold “toxic” commanders accountable—were struck down on the spot, ending what Hegseth depicted as a long journey through the wilderness for what should rightfully be known as the War Department. “Foolish and reckless political leaders set the wrong compass heading, and we lost our way. We became the ‘Woke Department,’” Hegseth told an auditorium packed with senior brass. “Not anymore.”

“No more identity months, DEI offices, dudes in dresses. No more climate-change worship. No more division, distraction, or gender delusions. No more debris. As I’ve said before and will say again, we are done with that shit,” Hegseth told the officers.

In a 45-minute speech that preceded an even longer one by President Donald Trump, Hegseth roamed the stage as though he were delivering a TED Talk. Speaking to a room full of career officers with far more experience than he had, he called out “fat generals,” decried the punishment of troops for minor mistakes, and promised to reverse what he [falsely](#) said was a lowering of unit standards to accommodate women and people of color. Vowing to rebuild a force worthy of his eldest son—he made no mention of his daughters—Hegseth said he would enact stricter fitness standards and a host of new regulations: no more exceptions, no more shaving waivers for “beardos,” no more adherence to “stupid rules of engagement.”

The Pentagon shared no information in the days leading up to the meeting about what Hegseth would do or say, fueling anxiety and speculation that he might fire generals en masse or escalate the administration's nascent war against Latin American drug gangs. Hegseth appeared to relish the suspense, taking the trouble to comment on a retired general's social-media post about a 1935 meeting in which Nazi generals were asked to swear allegiance to Hitler rather than the Weimar constitution. “Cool story, General,” Hegseth [wrote](#).

Some generals and admirals took that prospect seriously, privately considering what they would do if Trump or Hegseth asked them to take such an oath. Some told their staff that they would

resign. Others refused to discuss the meeting at all. Many thought about how to behave, mindful of the president's June visit to Fort Bragg, when lower-ranking troops cheered and booed as the president criticized protesters and former President Joe Biden.

During Trump and Hegseth's remarks, most officers showed little visible reaction, applauding lightly when the speakers concluded and fidgeting during sections of the president's speech, which rambled in typical Trump fashion. Some officers had been instructed to take their cues about when to applaud from the officers on the Joint Staff. They were silent as Trump derided "Sleepy Joe Biden" and the "corrupt press." They appeared uncomfortable when Trump talked about sending U.S. troops to Chicago and Portland to wage "the war within." There were light chuckles when the president talked about how he liked his own signature, how he hadn't asked for the latest fighter jet to be named F-47, and when he said that he loved "tariffs."

One female officer, who like other officials spoke on condition of anonymity to share her candid views, told us that she was disappointed by the contents of Hegseth's address. She said that most officers were open to altered fitness or grooming standards but expected the Pentagon's highest official to be focused more on refining American strategy and winning future wars than on the details of physical training. "It's something I would expect from a captain or a major," the officer said. "I don't want the secretary of war to be focused on baseline PT stuff."

At the Pentagon, one defense official told us that the speech made them "uncomfortable." Another told us that he believed that the message would resonate with parts of the force.

Hegseth, who is the subject of a soon-to-be-released investigation by the Pentagon's inspector general over his sharing of attack plans [on a Signal chat](#) that inadvertently included *The Atlantic's* editor in chief, Jeffrey Goldberg, said that he would reform the IG process because, as he saw it, official investigations had "been weaponized, putting complainers, ideologues, and poor performers in the driver's seat." He also announced measures to alter promotion and disciplinary processes, providing greater leeway for troops accused of wrongdoing. Immediately afterward, the Defense Department issued seven memos codifying Hegseth's remarks, including a 60-day review of training standards and a 30-day review of how the department defines bullying and hazing, which Hegseth believes has wrongly resulted in disciplinary action for troops being tough on subordinates or being politically incorrect.

After listing the proposed changes, Hegseth gave the assembled officers a warning: "If the words I'm speaking today are making your hearts sink, then you should do the honorable thing and resign." If the commanders wanted to better understand what he was saying, he jokingly told them, they could pick up a copy of his book.

Trump followed Hegseth, outlining in an hour-long speech his own vision for a revamped force, promising to employ the military to tackle "the enemy within," referring to protesters, drug traffickers, and migrants crossing the border. It was all part of his newfound commitment to using the National Guard, and even active-duty forces, for law-enforcement missions in American cities. At one point, the president suggested that "we should use some of these dangerous cities as training grounds for our military" and asserted that gang activity has made

the nation's capital a more hazardous environment than troops faced in their 20-year war against the Taliban.

Kori Schake, the director of foreign- and defense-policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute and an *Atlantic* contributing writer, told us that it was “disgraceful” for Trump and Hegseth to subject military leaders to what she described as a “blatantly partisan” event. “Worse, it’s dangerous for the civilian leadership to agitate for our military to use our cities as ‘training grounds’ for war,” she said. “And it’s flat-out ridiculous to say that Washington, D.C., is more violent than anything the American military experienced in Afghanistan.”

Hegseth’s speech reflected the importance he has placed on physical fitness, a question he has elevated to a matter of morality. Although he has backed away from the assertion he made in *The War on Warriors* that women should not be permitted to serve in combat roles under any circumstances, today he repeated previous false statements about combat-job standards being lowered to accommodate the Obama administration’s 2015 decision to open those roles to women. Since taking office, Hegseth has [repeatedly conflated occupational or job-specific standards](#), which are gender-neutral, and physical-fitness or health-related standards, which in most services are adjusted for age and gender. (The Army recently made its physical-fitness test gender-neutral but adjusted for age for combat positions.)

“It all starts with physical fitness and appearance,” Hegseth said. “I don’t want my son serving alongside troops who are out of shape or in combat units with females who can’t meet the same combat-arms physical standards as men.”

Some officers we spoke with voiced concern about how Hegseth’s message would affect recruiting and retention, metrics that have been improving over the past year. One general officer who attended the speech told us that Hegseth’s new policies on discipline, promotion, grooming, and fitness will complicate efforts by women and Black troops to advance and flourish in the ranks. “He wants to make it harder for service members to file complaints for harassment and bullying, which only paves the way to discriminate [against] the force until it looks how he wants it to,” the officer said.

The female officer we spoke with noted that Hegseth’s contention that new standards are necessary because combat doesn’t care if you’re a man or a woman doesn’t square with his decision to roll out a new test that is gender-neutral but adjusted for age. “I’m fine with one standard,” she told us. But “if you can’t distinguish between a woman and a man, then you can’t distinguish between a 20-year-old private and a 50-year-old general.”