

Trump purges key military leaders in another ‘Friday Night Massacre’

-Steve Benen, Feb 24, 2025

As one Senate Democrat summarized, after the president fired several U.S. military leaders, “Donald Trump’s quest for power is endangering our military.”

To a degree without precedent, Donald Trump spent much of the 2024 campaign [condemning his own country’s military leaders](#). Indeed, a month before Election Day, the Republican [said during an interview](#), “The military is bad. We have generals that do such a bad job.”

In the same interview, Trump went on to complain that U.S. military leaders “never get fired.”

Evidently, he meant it.

On the first day of the president’s second term, for example, he [fired Adm. Linda Fagan](#), the commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, evicting her from her home [with three hours of notice](#). The fact that Fagan was a four-star admiral and the first woman to lead a branch of the military apparently meant very little to the Republican who ousted her.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. CQ Brown Jr. clearly hoped to avoid the same fate. He attended Trump’s inauguration ceremony in the Capitol rotunda as an apparent sign of support, and after the ceremony, the general [told reporters](#) that he planned to remain at his post.

The White House had a very different kind of plan in mind. [NBC News reported](#):

President Donald Trump on Friday terminated Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman CQ Brown Jr., the country’s highest-ranking military officer, from his position. ... Brown has held the post since October 2023, after he was nominated by then-President Joe Biden. Brown, a fighter pilot, was the second Black person to serve as Joint Chiefs chairman after Army Gen. Colin Powell held the role from 1989 to 1993.

Brown wasn’t alone. As part of a broader purge, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said he was also firing Adm. Lisa Franchetti, chief of naval operations, and Gen. James Slife, Air Force vice chief of staff. The top lawyers for the Army, Navy and Air Force were also ousted.

It’s worth emphasizing for context that while Trump and his team appear to revel in chest-thumping bravado, and seem to express indifference to political or public backlashes, the president has repeatedly made some of his most outrageous personnel decisions on Friday nights — a time generally reserved for news that presidents hope Americans won’t notice.

Indeed, Trump’s second term has, to date, spanned just five Fridays, and [two of them](#) included scandalous firings that drew “Friday Night Massacre” labels.

As for the new chairman of the joint chiefs, the president announced plans to nominate Air Force Lt. Gen. Dan “Razin” Caine to replace Brown, despite the apparent fact that he lacks the requisite qualifications. [The New York Times explained](#):

General Caine retired with three stars, as a lieutenant general. By statute, anyone picked to be the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is supposed to have served as a combatant commander, as the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff or as the top uniformed officer of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps or Space Force. It was unclear whether General Caine would need a congressional waiver; a congressional aide said the president had some latitude to choose whom he wanted and that exceptions could be made for national security reasons.

To put it mildly, congressional Democrats were not pleased with the developments. House Armed Services Committee Ranking Member Rep. Adam Smith said in a statement, “President Trump’s latest Friday Night massacre has unleashed even more chaos with the firing of Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Charles Q. Brown, Jr. and other top U.S. military leaders via social media, further weakening our national security and national defense and disrespecting those individuals and all who wear the uniform of the United States of America.”

The Washington Democrat added, “C.Q. Brown is a true patriot. He is intelligent, accomplished, and well respected on both sides of the aisle and made history with his decades of exceptional service to our country. That wasn’t good enough for the president, who has chosen — yet again — fealty over proven ability to do the job and loyalty to the Constitution. All of this continues to play into the hands of Vladimir Putin and others working to exploit the weakness Trump continues to broadcast and undermine the military, our government, our national security interests, and democracy worldwide.”

In [an op-ed for The Washington Post](#), Sen. Jack Reed, the ranking member on the Senate Armed Services Committee and a former Army paratrooper, argued, “Donald Trump’s quest for power is endangering our military.”

The Rhode Island Democrat added, “The implications for our national security cannot be overstated. A clear message is being sent to military leaders: Failure to demonstrate personal and political loyalty to Trump could result in retribution, even after decades of honorable service.”

The editorial board of The New York Times [made a related case](#), noting that the president’s approach “destabilizes the very foundation of the institutions that have long safeguarded America’s democracy.”

Trump is uprooting the pillars that serve as the foundation of our civic lives. It is difficult to say with confidence when, or if, the United States will again be the United States.