

What Trump and Hegseth should have told our generals | GUEST COMMENTARY



Evan Vucci/ The Associated Press

President Donald Trump is greeted by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth before speaking to a gathering of top U.S. military commanders at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Sept. 30, 2025, in Quantico, Va. (Evan Vucci/AP)

-Tom Jurkowsky, October 15, 2025

When President Donald Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth met with 800 generals, admirals and their senior enlisted advisers [at Quantico, Virginia, last month](#), there were many messages the two leaders provided. Some of those messages included the importance of loyalty and obedience, physical standards including grooming and fitness, and a cry for revival of a “warrior ethos.”

Trump told the generals and admirals that crime in U.S. cities was a “war from within” and the military could use cities as “training grounds.”

Unfortunately, those were not the messages you would expect to be conveyed to our military’s most senior leaders. Instead, you would expect our president and secretary of defense to discuss the geopolitical threats they see our nation facing, the weapons needed to address those threats,

the state of our nation's readiness, and the budgetary challenges our country faces to fund the weapons and systems we need to meet the threats.

None of those items was addressed. With 800 generals and admirals in a room with their commander in chief and the secretary of defense, you would expect many, if not all those aforementioned items, to be discussed with our nation's military leaders. Unfortunately, they weren't.

Last year, the Commission on the National Defense Strategy, a bipartisan group of eight individuals authorized by Congress to examine the national defense strategy of the United States, [released its findings](#).

The eight members, all with experience in national defense matters, were charged with reviewing our nation's most recent national defense strategy, including the assumptions, strategic objectives, priority missions, operational concepts and strategic and military risks associated with that strategy.

The commission's findings were alarming and should serve as a wake-up call for America: "The threats the United States faces are the most serious and most challenging the nation has encountered since 1945 and include the potential for near-term major war. The United States last fought a global conflict during World War II, which ended nearly 80 years ago. The nation was last prepared for such a fight during the Cold War, which ended 35 years ago. It is not prepared today."

The commission found that the U.S. military lacks both the capabilities and capacity required to be confident it can deter and prevail in combat. The military must do a better job of incorporating new technology; field more and higher-capability platforms, software and munitions; and deploy innovative operational concepts to employ them together better.

As sobering as those words are, the nearly 100-page report has received very little attention. The report received no attention during the last presidential election. Nor was it addressed at the Quantico meeting. It should have been.

The commission said the magnitude of the threats the U.S. faces is understated and significantly worse than when the last National Defense Strategy was issued in 2022. Commission members said since the last report we've witnessed the strategic impact of the "no limits" partnership between Russia and China and their partnership with Iran and North Korea.

The commission said that in many ways, China is outpacing the United States and has largely negated the U.S. military advantage in the Western Pacific through two decades of focused military investment. Without significant change by the United States, the balance of power will continue to shift in China's favor.

The commission noted China's work in fusing military, diplomatic and industrial strength to expand its global power.

The United States cannot compete with China, Russia and their partners alone — and certainly cannot win a war that way, the commission said. Given the growing alignment of authoritarian states, the U.S. must adopt a system of deterrence and power that includes a coordinated effort to bring together diplomacy, economic investment, cybersecurity, trade, education, industrial capacity, technical innovation, civic engagement and international cooperation.

Also alarming is our industrial base. The commission found that U.S. industrial production is grossly inadequate to provide the equipment, technology and munitions needed today, let alone given the demands of great power conflict. For example, China is the world's largest shipbuilder. Last year, China's state-owned shipbuilder built more ships than the entire U.S. shipbuilding industry has since the end of World War II.

The issues outlined above by the commission are what Trump and Hegseth should have discussed with the admirals and generals.

With the intense media coverage of the Quantico event, Trump and Hegseth also missed an opportunity to speak to the American public about our defense readiness. In its report, the commissioners said the U.S. public is largely unaware of the dangers the United States faces or the costs required to adequately prepare. The public does not appreciate the strength of China and its partnerships or the ramifications to daily life if a conflict were to occur.

Quite simply, our citizens have not internalized the costs of the United States losing its position as a world superpower.

Trump and Hegseth had an outstanding opportunity to drive these points home and outline an urgently needed “call to arms” so that the United States can make the major changes and significant investments now rather than wait for the next Pearl Harbor or 9/11.

Unfortunately, Trump and Hegseth chose to stress the importance of grooming standards and physical fitness. It was an opportunity lost.

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