

Hegseth Did What Biden Called 'Impossible'

By Victor Davis Hanson

A lot of officials in the Trump Cabinet are under a lot of criticism, as we'd expect, from [the Left](#). But one has, I think, both got more criticism and more unfair criticism than any other Cabinet member. And that's Pete Hegseth, the secretary of war—the newly renamed Department of Defense.



Let's just review a little bit of his record because it does not justify the level of invective that the Left, and even some people on the Right in Congress and the Republican Party, have unfairly attacked him.

We were told during the Biden administration that the recruitment for the Air Force, the Army, the Navy, and even in one case, I think one year, the Marines, was off some 40,000 to 50,000 recruits. And the Pentagon's reaction under [Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin](#) was, as we heard this echoed by a lot of the four-star admirals and generals, well,

people are out of shape. They're in gangs. They take drugs. They are wanted by private enterprise.

We have to compete with all of the excuses other than the real cause. The real cause was, as Pete Hegseth said when he came in, that people felt that the military was not emphasizing combat, battlefield efficacy. It was turning into a social justice "program."

The subtext of Pete Hegseth's point was that there was a particular demographic, white males from rural and often southern locales. They had died at twice their numbers in the demographic in Iraq and Afghanistan, and they weren't joining.

Some of them were not joining because of the 8,500, maybe 8,000-8,500, that had natural immunity from prior COVID-19 infections. And yet, they did not want this experimental mRNA vaccine, and they were drummed out en masse. The majority of those fit this demographic.

The others felt that under the DEI obsessions with race and sexual orientation and gender, that people would be recruited, retained, promoted on criteria other than battlefield efficacy. So, they just stayed away from what they felt was a hostile environment. Didn't help when then-Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley and Lloyd Austin told the nation before Congress that they were going to invest white supremacy following the death of George Floyd.

That's over with. There is a record number of Army recruits. The military has met all of its recruiting. That is equivalent to the dramatic revolution on the southern border. Nobody thought we could close the border. We did. Nobody thought we could get recruitment back. Pete Hegseth did.

The other thing, very importantly: We have procurement that we were focused largely, not entirely, but on a few big conglomerates. These were companies that, over the years, had consolidated dozens of defense contractors, who had famous

names in World War II. But now they were Lockheed, General Dynamics, Northrop, Raytheon, etc.

And we were buying few platforms—\$14 billion carriers, \$120 million F-22s, billion-dollar frigates, etc. But our enemies were building lots of things. They were taking our approach to World War II when the United States just flooded the zone with Thunderbolt P-47 fighters, P-51 fighters, Essex carriers, escort carriers, light carriers, Sherman tanks. Good enough. But just swarm the enemy. We weren't doing that.

So, one of the things that Hegseth has tried to do is look toward a wider variety of startup, off-the-shelf companies that make cheaper products in greater quantity. A million drones they have announced. That's new.

The third thing is, yes, it was good to worry about American safety overseas, and that's why, ostensibly, after 9/11, we went into Afghanistan, Iraq, or we take out the nuclear—but if you look, since 1990, when we first had figures, there's some 900,000 people who have overdosed or killed themselves from foreign imported opiates, and particularly fentanyl, often disguised as designer drugs intended to kill Americans through Chinese agency and cartel fabrication in I guess we would call them pill factories in Mexico and parts of Latin America.

So, these drug interdictions are saving American lives. And he's saying to the nation, it doesn't do any good to spend billions of dollars and defend the borders and intervene all over the world if in your backyard you're losing more people from all the battles combined since [World War II](#). More than Vietnam, more than Korea, more than Iraq, more than the first Gulf War, more than Afghanistan—900,000 dead, 75,000 to 80,000 a year. For now, we're getting close to the 35th year of this. And he's trying to stop that.

He ended, as I said, DEI, which was amazing because what had happened—the Left had always despised the Pentagon. They had

always tried to rake the generals over the coals. We knew that stereotype of the radical Democratic Party.

But the last 10 years, especially under the Obama administration, they said: Wait, wait, wait, wait. They have the chain of command. They don't have to argue in Congress. They don't have to get a bill passed. All we have to do is bring these generals and admirals in here, especially under a Democratic Obama or Biden administration, and say, you're gonna do this, and you're gonna do this. Abortion. You're gonna make that base have abortion to everybody. [DEI](#), you're gonna make that artillery unit have—so, they could get an instant fiat right through the chain of command.

And all of a sudden, Pete Hegseth came in and said: You're abusing the military for your political agenda. We're not gonna do it anymore.

A couple of other things: Pete Hegseth, compared to what?

I didn't hear anybody say that Lloyd Austin might have had a conflict of interest coming out of Raytheon right into the secretary of defense. Was that a good paradigm that we're doing? Generals go out of the Pentagon, they go to defense contractors, then they rely on their former subordinates for, maybe, advice about which weapon systems to buy, and then they often go back into government in retirement, and then they'll go back again to these defense? What Eisenhower warned us about the military-industrial complex.

And Lloyd Austin was AWOL for seven days. We never knew where he was. Did anybody suggest he should step down? No.

So, this is political. And the calls for Pete Hegseth to step down—it's ridiculous.

And finally, about the drug interdiction. We've had about 30 of these. Are we all suffering from collective amnesia? [President Barack Obama](#), on the Pakistani-Afghan

border, Somalia, somewhat in Libya, in Afghanistan, in Syria, Iraq, was a master of Predator drone assassinations. He didn't kill, I don't know, 60 or 70 narco-terrorists on 30 boats or more. He killed over 500 people, including a 16-year-old U.S. citizen.

And when he was asked about this, according to Mark Halperin's co-authored book, he said: You know, I never really knew that I was pretty good at killing. Pretty good at killing. It suited me. That's what Obama said.

He also said at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, he joked about using Predators and killing people. He said, if people wanted to date his daughter, they better be careful because of Predators. In other words, that his hallmark, his brand, had been Predator assassination. That's kind of a very light way of approaching human assassination, if you ask me.

What am I getting at? If you look at what Pete Hegseth has actually done, it was long overdue, and he's doing it very well. And the criticism against him has two themes: It's entirely political, and it's not symmetric. Everything they said about Pete Hegseth in a negative context could have been applied to both the Obama and Biden administration, and much more egregiously.

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