

Captain calamity: Pete Hegseth under fire for ‘inept’ leadership of US military

The US defense secretary faces internal dissent and discord at the Pentagon, accused of focusing on culture war issues and his own political ambitions as the Iran war drags on

In a different Washington, under a different president, a return to the well-worn playbook of all-out sanctions to counter Iran might have been the signal for a publicity-hungry US secretary of defense to adopt a lower profile.

But these are no ordinary times. And [Pete Hegseth](#) is no ordinary defense secretary.

Barely a week after the treasury secretary, [Scott Bessent, unleashed a supposed “economic D-day”](#) aimed at crushing the regime in Tehran under the weight of commercial pressures, Hegseth once again returned to the limelight – and the center of controversy.

The former Fox News host usurped Bessent from center stage as the conflict with Iran reverted to open warfare and discontent at the Pentagon was laid bare once more.

Turf wars within Hegseth’s own fiefdom resurfaced with the resignation of the army secretary, fresh revelations of blocked promotions and leaked disclosures of resistance from military top brass of extended deployments to the Middle East.

While the Pentagon insists that any suggestion the defense department is in disarray under Hegseth is “completely baseless”, alarm over his conduct in the role – and the implications – has not merely been expressed by Hegseth’s political opponents.

“The secretary of defense is a clear and present danger to the national security of the United States and the world,” said Randy Manner, a retired major general in the US national guard – in which Hegseth also served – and member of National Security Leaders for America (NSL4A), a group of former military leaders. “He has done more harm to the national security of the United States than any secretary of defense since the country was created.”

Thom Tillis, the Republican senator from North Carolina, who is stepping down from the US Senate after clashes with Donald Trump, bluntly urged the US president this week to fire his defense secretary.

“I have never witnessed more inept management of the brave men and women who serve our country,” Tillis wrote on social media. “He is intimidated by competence and retreats to ginning up culture wars instead of soberly attending to the vital work of our national defense and the health and wellbeing of our fighting force.”

After a month-long lull, the resumption of strikes on Iranian targets near the strait of Hormuz meanwhile renewed questions over just what the US wants to achieve in its war with the Islamic regime, which Trump and his defense secretary once loudly vowed to topple.

The strikes, on mainland Iran as well as Iranian islands in the Gulf, caused multiple casualties. In one incident, Iranian media reported that five people, including a six-year-old child, were killed in the southern city of Kuhestak when a missile struck a wedding party.

Iranian authorities labelled the deaths a war crime. The episode had echoes of strikes in the city of Minab on the first day of the war on 28 February, when more than 150 people, including 120 children, were killed when missiles hit an elementary school. The US has not formally admitted responsibility, although officials have said the incident is under military investigation.

The latest strikes were quickly followed by disclosures that Hegseth had [extended military deployments in the Middle East](#), where the US currently maintains 50,000 troops and 19 warships – partly to enforce a naval blockade on Iran – into the middle of next year.

The extensions were ordered even after several commanders in other sectors voiced objections, formally known as “non-concurs”, to the deployments, arguing that they could leave the US at risk of being unable to meet its commitments in other areas, while subjecting forces to the additional strain of being at sea for too long.

The non-concurs were recorded in the Secretary of Defense Orders Book of 14 August, a classified document whose contents were leaked and [reported by the Washington Post](#).

The Pentagon reached out to the Guardian after publication of this story. Hegseth “has been a transformative leader for the Department of War and, at President Trump’s direction, has ushered in a new era of Peace Through Strength”, press secretary Kingsley Wilson said in a statement. “Standards and merit are back, our arsenal is stronger than ever before, and morale and recruitment across every service are at all time highs.

“Secretary Hegseth has slashed bureaucracy, unleashed innovation, and delivered for our warfighters every step of the way. The entire Department is unified behind the Secretary’s vision and will continue working to put our warfighters and America first.”

‘The past six months has failed’

“I’m not sure what the strategy is here,” Kevin Carroll, a former army colonel and military intelligence officer who served in the offices of the defense secretary and joint chiefs of staff, said of the war on Iran. “What’s the enemy’s center of gravity that we’re going after?”

“We tried decapitating their leadership. That didn’t work. We tried going after their missile program. We were not able to destroy it. Tried sinking the navy, but they still maintain a mining capability.

“We could easily take out their energy infrastructure. But that would drive the price of oil much, much higher, and lead to retaliatory attacks on the energy infrastructure of our Gulf allies. It’s not clear what this target set is intended to do.”

Nate Swanson, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and a former White House and state department adviser on Iran, said Hegseth’s long-term deployment orders reflected the administration’s decision to embrace a policy of long-term economic blockade.

“It’s a recognition of the fact that the past six months has failed, but they don’t know what to do,” argued Swanson, who suggested that Trump was attracted by the idea of abandoning the conflict, but wanted to do so in way that enabled him to project strength.

As the war drags on, Hegseth stands accused of being insufficiently engaged with such grave policy matters, preferring instead to focus on “cultural” issues – sacrificing the careers of talented career officers in the process – and his future political ambitions.

The defense secretary, who has evaded awkward questions or scrutiny by not holding a formal Pentagon briefing since 5 May, has [reportedly](#) told associates that he is considering a bid for the 2028 Republican presidential nomination.

In the midst of a burgeoning trade war between the US and Canada, Hegseth – who has previously railed against “fat” generals and instituted testosterone tests for service personnel – found time to wade in by [apparently “body shaming” two Canadian female teenage cadets](#).

The social media post attracted a storm of criticism. In a [podcast](#), Joe Walsh, a former Republican congressman who is now a Democrat, accused Hegseth of “fucking online harassment” and denounced the defense secretary as a “punk”.

Tensions over Hegseth’s priorities reached a head this week when the army secretary, [Dan Driscoll – a friend and ally of Vice-President JD Vance – resigned](#) after repeatedly clashing with Hegseth over blocked promotions and purges of senior commanders on flimsy pretexts.

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Randy Manner

A large proportion of those blocked or fired have been black or female, in line with Hegseth’s vocal crusade against “woke” DEI (diversity, equity and inclusiveness) initiatives. In the latest of a series of purges, the New York Times [reported](#) that Hegseth had blocked the promotions of seven officers to the two-star general rank.

In submitting his resignation, Driscoll – who has spearheaded efforts to modernize the army, including through embracing drone warfare – voiced concerns “surrounding Army transformation and readiness and Hegseth’s blocking those efforts specifically by firing the generals who were responsible”, a source [told CNN](#).

Driscoll's departure – and the reasons for it – aroused anger even among Republicans, most notably Tillis, the outgoing GOP senator. "Dan was the right man at the right moment to lead our Soldiers and Army civilians," wrote Tillis.

The withering verdict is seconded by some retired generals, who say misgivings over Hegseth's leadership are quietly shared by many serving officers who remain.

Manner said Hegseth was depriving other parts of the armed forces to fund the Iran war out of "readiness accounts". "These are for training the rest of the force," he said. "So the rest of the force is losing training hours, equipment and money for maintenance and operations. The rest of the military is significantly degraded."

Manner also said his conversations with serving officers bore out the leaked concerns voiced in the Secretary of Defence's Orders Book. "I have firsthand knowledge of people who are serving on active duty who echo the exact same concerns that we are headed to a situation where we can no longer defend Taiwan, that we are very unlikely to be able to defend even, quite frankly, South Korea," he said.

'Infinitely worse' than Rumsfeld

Hegseth, who has drawn accusations of war crimes for ordering a succession of strikes on alleged drug-ferrying boats off the coasts of South America, is not the first US defense secretary to come under a harsh spotlight over the conduct of a far-off American war.

Robert McNamara, defense secretary under Lyndon Johnson, became a lightning rod for criticism during the Vietnam war before eventually undergoing a crisis of conscience and being moved to a new role as head of the World Bank.

During George W Bush's administration, Donald Rumsfeld became the target of fierce criticism after failing as defense secretary to plan adequately for the occupation of Iraq after the initial invasion to topple Saddam Hussein.

But Paul Eaton, a retired major general who trained Iraqi troops after the invasion and is now an adviser to VoteVets – an advocacy group for progressive military veterans – said Rumsfeld's failings paled in comparison with Hegseth.

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Paul Eaton

"Rumsfeld had 'next war-itis', which was a contributing factor to Bush firing him after the shellacking that the Republican party had in the [2006] midterms," Eaton said. "All this sounds faintly familiar with what we're going through right now.

"But this is infinitely worse because we had a lot of other very smart people to corral the bad ideas coming out of Rumsfeld. [This time] we've had the whole removal of seasoned men and women who have learned things the hard way most of the time in combat.

“If you fail to plan, plan to fail, and what we’re seeing in the Iran war is just evidence. The frustration is, we’re better than this in the uniformed military but we got handed a terrible set of guidance from our civilian leadership.”

Michael O’Hanlon, a defense and strategy expert at the Brookings Institution, argued that the armed forces had enough “bench strength” to survive Hegseth’s purges without imminent collapse, but lamented the loss of certain key individuals who could not be easily replaced.

He singled out Gen Chris Donahue, who recently stepped down from his post as head of the US land command in Europe and Africa.

“We haven’t had a TV talkshow star with a strong partisan and cultural agenda wind up as secretary of defense,” said O’Hanlon. “There may be some echoes of previous secretaries, but the political and culture stuff is Pete Hegseth through and through.”

Hegseth was “not going to wind up leaving a major mark”, O’Hanlon predicted. “He’s going to wind up being known as the guy who fought Trump’s culture wars for him – and maybe failed to help Trump stay out of trouble in the Iran war, depending on how bad that gets.”

This article was amended on 5 September 2026. An earlier version erred in saying that Robert McNamara became head of the International Monetary Fund; he was head (as its president from 1968 to 1981) of the World Bank, the IMF’s sister organization.

This article was amended on 6 September 2026 to include a statement from the Pentagon.