

Pete Hegseth's press crackdown smells like a coverup

Story by Sophia Tesfaye



Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth speaks during a press conference in the White House briefing room on April 6, 2026. Celal Gunes/Anadolu via Getty Images

What is Pete Hegseth trying to hide? That is the question Americans should be asking as the Pentagon moves to [punish journalists](#) and crackdown on military whistleblowers. What, exactly, is the defense secretary so desperate to keep the public from seeing about the human cost, [operational failures](#) and fiscal wreckage of Donald Trump's war of choice in Iran?

On Aug. 21 the Pentagon [fired](#) the publisher, editor-in-chief and a reporter at Stars and Stripes, the military newspaper that has been reporting on American troops since the Civil War. The dismissals came after the paper published damning reports on the deteriorating conditions aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln, an aircraft carrier that has just begun the long journey home to San Diego after a nine-month deployment to the Middle East. After spending more than 260 days at sea without a single liberty port, the crew of roughly 5,000 sailors and Marines had been subjected to degrading, inhumane conditions. Families of service members detailed severe shortages of fresh water and food, overflowing toilets, broken facilities and a complete breakdown in mental health support.

The Navy has disputed some of the reporting, with Acting Navy Secretary Hung Cao calling accounts of the crew's struggles dishonest. The commander of the U.S. Central Command, Adm. Brad Cooper, took to the pages of the Wall Street Journal to do [damage control](#). Hegseth has similarly dismissed reports of deteriorating conditions as "completely misrepresented." Some of the loudest voices defending the administration have treated the sailors themselves as the problem. In response to their distress aboard the Lincoln, Fox News host Joey Jones [asked](#) a heartless question: "How weak are you?"

The three Stars and Stripes employees — editor-in-chief Erik Slavin, Middle East correspondent Lara Korte and longtime publisher Max Lederer — are now [suing](#) the federal government, alleging retaliation for their reporting and their defense of press freedom. According to the lawsuit, Pentagon officials demanded that publisher Lederer fire Slavin and Korte shortly after Stars and Stripes published its report on the Lincoln. Lederer refused. He was then fired too. Slavin's crime, [in his own account](#), was saying in a televised interview with CBS that censorship of news for service members would be a personal red line he would not cross. The Pentagon had previously fired Stars and Stripes' ombudsman for criticizing the Trump administration's oversight of the paper.

Hegseth's purging of the publication's editorial leadership, under the fraudulent guise of insubordination, for making troubling information public is a signal that the administration's public relations take precedence over the lives and wellbeing of American service members. The current regulations are explicit: Stars and Stripes reporters are authorized to report on the Defense Department "good and bad." They are supposed to have the same rights to ask questions and seek information as commercial journalists. Military commanders [cannot control the paper's content](#) because trying to serve both the First Amendment and the military chain of command at once creates [an inherent conflict](#). Congress settled that conflict decades ago by law, guaranteeing the paper's editorial independence.

Far from being an isolated incident, the move is just the latest in Hegseth's all-out assault on the press. Apparently unhappy with what independent, civilian journalists report, in April he released a so-called modernization plan for the Defense Department that mandates Stars and Stripes "content must be consistent with good order and discipline." Hegseth is also said to be increasingly [relying on a secret network of anonymous internet trolls](#) to spread his message. In a hilarious self-own, the pro-Trump social media personality known as DataRepublican, who garnered attention during Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency spending cuts spree and has spent months attacking Hegseth's rivals on X, revealed last weekend that she has quietly been on the Pentagon payroll as a special government employee since July, a fact she never disclosed to the MAGA audience she was riling up. Hegseth will not say what her job actually is.

There is a reason America's soldiers need an independent news source. Many of them know propaganda when they see it. The military has also historically understood something Hegseth apparently does not: Morale does not come from pretending everything is fine. It comes from trust, which requires telling people the truth.

But rather than addressing any systemic failures on the part of the department, Hegseth's command structure has resorted to authoritarian retaliation. MS Now [reported](#) this week that a sailor who [attempted suicide by jumping overboard](#) has been slapped with disciplinary charges including "malingering" and absence without leave, transforming a mental health crisis into a punitive disciplinary spectacle. This accompanies the news that Air Force Major Jason P. Watson, a senior military officer who expressed dissent, was [charged](#) under Article 88 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice for using contemptuous words against Trump, marking a draconian escalation in silencing internal critiques of a failing administration. According to Watson's attorney, he is believed to be [the first major in history](#) charged under the article.

This is how an insecure political operation behaves when the facts catch up with its propaganda. It tries to control the story. But the story is getting harder to control, as reports continue to reveal a military apparatus in severe financial and logistical distress.

A Pentagon [memo](#) recently reviewed by the Guardian warned of shortfalls in payroll accounts caused by the department pulling money to cover combat costs, and at least one contractor said non-emergency maintenance on shore facilities has been deferred to free up cash. It was also [revealed](#) this month that the destruction of the U.S. naval logistics hub in Bahrain on the very first day of the Iran war forced the military to rely on distant supply chains, multiplying the logistical strain on already exhausted carrier strike groups.

When a war this unpopular is also this mismanaged, it appears the administration's priority is to make sure fewer people find out about it.

Trump has repeatedly [attacked journalists](#) who report unfavorably on the war. On Thursday he went after Fox News correspondent Jonathan Hunt during a broadcast, [accusing](#) him of inaccurately describing the current state of the war, and telling Fox anchor Bret Baier to "straighten out" his reporters. Even Fox News is not immune when its coverage strays too far.

Hegseth is building [a military culture](#) in which loyalty to the commander in chief increasingly means loyalty to the commander in chief's political performance. That is not the same thing as military discipline. The silencing of the press and scapegoating of desperate sailors does not hide Hegseth's mess. As the war's abysmal poll numbers show, the American people see through the fog of Hegseth's propaganda.