

“Slavery produced a genuine affection between the races”: Hegseth’s church foretold “DEI” firings

Defense secretary's contempt for Black military leaders has roots in his religion's defense of white supremacy

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Pete Hegseth (Photo illustration by Salon/Getty Images)

Donald Trump's administration is barely bothering to pretend that the firings at the Department of Defense are about anything but bigotry. On Friday, [Trump fired Air Force Gen. CQ Brown Jr., only the second Black](#) person to be chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. To add insult to injury, the highly qualified Brown was replaced by Air Force Lt. Gen. Dan Caine, a white man [who, according to the Associated Press](#), "has not had key assignments identified in law as prerequisites for the job." Promoting unqualified white men over qualified women and minorities isn't just [the modus operandi](#) of the Trump administration. There's a long paper trail pointing to [race as the reason](#) they painted a target on Brown's back.

With Hegseth, there's a direct line from his bigoted religious beliefs to his bigoted writings to his bigoted behavior in office.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, who is the [shining example of Trump's love of giving plum jobs](#) to wholly unqualified white men, has long held a racialized resentment of Brown. By his own admission, Hegseth's military career was a failure. [He complained the Army "spit me out,"](#) though he tries to save face by claiming "the feeling was mutual." General Brown had a dramatically more successful career than Major Hegseth, with four stars and a storied journey from fighter pilot to commanding the Pacific Air Forces. Yet [Hegseth sneeringly suggested in his 2024 book](#) that Brown only got his promotion because of "his skin color." Hegseth claims this

insult is justified because Brown "made the race card one of his biggest calling cards." This appears to be a reference to Brown's willingness to publicly state both that racism exists and that racism is bad, sentiments that should be unobjectionable to anyone who is not a racist.

The levels of gaslighting and hand-waving on the right are getting to ridiculous levels, in their unconvincing efforts to deny that the firing of Brown was discrimination. So to offer more context for Hegseth's resentments of Brown, it's helpful to [look at the church Hegseth joined a few years ago](#), the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC). The [denomination is led by a pastor named Doug Wilson](#), whose work Hegseth has promoted in podcast appearances and his writings. In December, I wrote about [how Wilson's teachings about women's inferiority appear](#) to inform Hegseth's hostility to women in the military. Wilson's views on race are just as grotesque, unscientific, and ahistorical.

"Slavery produced in the South a genuine affection between the races that we believe we can say has never existed in any nation before the War or since," Wilson wrote in his 1996 defense of Confederate slave owners, "[Southern Slavery As It Was](#)." "There has never been a multi-racial society which has existed with such mutual intimacy and harmony in the history of the world," he continued, painting slavery as an Edenic paradise for those captured in it. "Slave life was to [the slaves] a life of plenty, of simple pleasures, of food, clothes and good medical care."

In 2020, Wilson tried to defend these repulsive quotes [with a blog post insisting they're taken out of context](#). But reading further, it's clear he hasn't changed his views. He admitted that there were "abuses" under slavery, but insisted "the benevolent master is not a myth." He quoted formerly enslaved people saying stuff like "Whippings was few," they were allowed "preachings and prayers" and the enslavers would sometimes "teach the young ones how to read and write" to defend his minimizations. Wilson also [insists that his 2005 book "Black and Tan" is a better example of his views, but in it, he writes, "the South was right on all the essential constitutional and cultural issues surrounding the war" and "it was possible for a godly man to own slaves," so that's not quite the defense he thinks it is.](#)

Wilson plays word games [like this frequently, such as in a 2024 blog post](#) — since deleted — in which he [defended white supremacist groups who troll college campuses](#) with "it's okay to be white" fliers. Obviously, no one said otherwise, and the purpose of these fliers is to imply that being anti-racist is inherently anti-white. Wilson's response was to argue that to "talk about white privilege is envious and sinful." He compared people who object to white privilege to children "glancing around the room in order to see what everyone else received" on Christmas and "squabbling over the presents."

Despite his excessive verbiage and gaslighting of his critics, Wilson's worldview seems quite simple: God placed men over women and white people over Black people. Any effort to disrupt the "natural" hierarchy is dangerous and sinful. As [Adam Serwer wrote for the Atlantic on Saturday](#), the goal of the Trump administration is to "repeal the gains of the civil-rights era in their entirety." While Trump, Hegseth, and other MAGA figureheads occasionally "pay lip service to ideals of color-blind meritocracy," Serwer argues, it's swiftly evident that "merit" is code for the Trumpian "conviction that white men are by definition the most competent possible candidates."

The religious aspect in Hegseth's case helps fill out the picture more. Liberals respond to Trumpian talk about "merit" and "best person for the job" by pointing out that Trump regularly promotes unqualified people over incredibly qualified people. Hegseth, for example, was a minor Fox News host who had been pushed out of nearly every job he's had, based on allegations of mismanagement, problematic drinking and mistreating coworkers. But his pastor has an elaborate worldview where the right to hold power and authority is god-given, based on identity and not on competence. It's hard to back a white supremacist system with evidence and logic. It's easier to shrug and say, "If you have a problem with the unfairness, take it up with God."

Wrapping discriminatory beliefs in religious garb also helps shield them from outside scrutiny, because outsider criticism can be demonized as "religious intolerance" or even "persecution" of Christians. During his Senate confirmation hearing, multiple Democrats brought up Hegseth's past comments denouncing women in the military, but no one brought up that his religious leader has questioned whether women should have the right to vote. The slavery apologia in his faith went completely unremarked upon. [Bluesky user upyernoz suggested that Democrats](#) still feel burned after Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett's hearing, [where Republicans accused Democrats of "religious bigotry"](#) because they [asked her about her participation in a religious group](#) that preaches extreme female submission to men.

Far-right Christians in politics certainly want to have it both ways. They insist on the right to infuse their political action with their religious beliefs. When people criticize the bigotry of their beliefs, however, they cry foul and declare their privacy is being invaded. It certainly would be one thing if people with conservative religious views left those views at the church door. President Joe Biden, for instance, was personally opposed to abortion but supported women's right to access it if her faith (or lack thereof) spoke differently. With Hegseth, there's a direct line from his bigoted religious beliefs to his bigoted writings to his bigoted behavior in office. Putting unqualified people in charge based on elaborate, ahistorical views on racial hierarchy isn't just unfair, it threatens the integrity of our national defense.