

Pete Hegseth, Trump's Pentagon pick, faces tough confirmation test

The controversial former Fox News host has been accused of sexual assault and faces a grueling confirmation hearing on the path to becoming the next secretary of defense.

**By Abigail Hauslohner, Liz Goodwin and Missy Ryan
Washington Post**

President-elect Donald Trump's controversial nominee for defense secretary, Pete Hegseth, will appear for questioning Tuesday on Capitol Hill, in a public confirmation hearing that Democrats will use to interrogate his limited management experience, allegations of illicit and inappropriate conduct, and a long history of public commentary deriding women, minorities and people with opposing political views.

Hegseth, a former Fox News host, who has called for a "full counterattack" to retake America's military from "radical leftists" and Democrats, will be the first of Trump's unconventional cabinet picks to submit to formal scrutiny before a bipartisan panel of senators.

Hegseth's path to winning the job depends in large part on how he weathers the blistering questions he will face this week, with little hope of securing any Democratic votes and as several moderate Republicans have expressed concerns about his appointment.

As the secretary of defense, one of the senior-most positions in Trump's incoming cabinet, Hegseth, a 44-year-old National Guard veteran who served tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, would oversee more than 3 million military and civilian personnel around the world, the vast U.S. nuclear arsenal, and an annual budget of more than \$800 billion.

The task of assessing whether he is up to the job falls now to the Senate Armed Services Committee, where Democrats are expected to hammer him Tuesday with questions about his past conduct and his qualifications to lead the nation's military, as the United States faces threats from Russia, China, Iran and adversaries around the world. If approved by the committee, the full Senate will vote on whether to confirm him.

Hegseth's nomination, while already unconventional for his relative youth and lack of experience, has been blighted by allegations of misconduct since Trump named him in November. He has acknowledged paying an undisclosed sum to a woman who had accused him of sexual assault at a Republican conference in 2017. Former employees who worked with him at two veterans' groups and at Fox News have accused him of financial mismanagement, and

engaging in excessive drinking and sexism as the New Yorker first reported. Hegseth has denied the allegations.

Sen. John Barrasso of Wyoming, the second-ranking Republican, extolled Hegseth as “very qualified” for the job during a Sunday morning appearance on CBS’s Face the Nation. “He certainly has the qualities that we need to lead the Pentagon. He knows about a fit fighting force. ... He has a record, a distinguished record of service in the military,” Barrasso said.

But Democrats are set to argue he is ill-prepared to lead the sprawling Pentagon bureaucracy.

“He is not qualified to do the job,” said Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D-Illinois), an Iraq combat veteran and Armed Services Committee member, who said her “whole focus is going to be on his qualifications and experience in managing an organization. ... He has managed fewer people than the manager of an Applebees,” Duckworth said.

“You want someone serious and you want someone responsible,” said Sen. Jacky Rosen (D-Nevada). “And Hegseth, I’m afraid — with the allegations of sexual misconduct, allegations of financial mismanagement — how is he going to manage billions of dollars? How are people going to respect him?” she said.

The breadth of the allegations against Hegseth have fueled doubts even among some Senate Republicans about whether they would be willing to confirm Trump’s nominee. But Hegseth staged a remarkable comeback last month, shoring up GOP support with the help of a pressure campaign from Trump allies that targeted the Republican senators who had expressed concerns about his background.

Sen. Joni Ernst (R-Iowa), an Army Reserve veteran and sexual assault survivor, initially called for a process to vet the allegations, but tempered her concerns. After a meeting with Hegseth last month, Ernst told reporters that they were having “really good conversations” and, in a later statement, cited “encouraging” pledges he made to support women in the ranks and combat sexual assault.

Since then, Ernst has studiously avoided reporters’ questions and last week declined to say whether she was interested in seeing the results of Hegseth’s forthcoming FBI background check. Senate Majority Leader John Thune (R-South Dakota) said Thursday on Fox News he is “hopeful” for Hegseth’s chances of confirmation.

Hegseth, for his part, has attended a whirlwind of Capitol Hill meetings in recent weeks, focused on winning over Republicans, with Democrats on the Armed Services Committee saying he declined to meet with any of them ahead of the hearing. Brian Hughes, a spokesman for the Trump transition team, said it was the Democrats who had been unresponsive to Hegseth’s attempts to arrange meetings.

The exception was the committee's top Democrat, Rhode Island's Jack Reed, who met with Hegseth on Wednesday. The meeting lasted for only 15 minutes, and it didn't go well.

"Today's meeting did not relieve my concerns about Mr. Hegseth's lack of qualifications and raised more questions than answers," Reed said in a statement.

"Mr. Hegseth has appreciated the chance to meet with over half the Senate so far and has viewed each meeting as a productive part of the Senate's advice and consent responsibility," Hughes wrote in an email. "He looks forward to answering senators' questions on his experience, his qualifications, and President Trump's and his vision for the Department of Defense on January 14."

If all 47 Senate Democrats and Independents oppose Hegseth, Republicans could afford to lose only three senators from their side of the aisle if they hope to confirm him to the Pentagon post.

Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) did not meet one-on-one with Hegseth last month, despite Hegseth's team requesting a sit down, according to a source familiar with the planning, who requested anonymity to disclose private discussions. McConnell's office declined to comment.

Alaska's Sen. Lisa Murkowski and Maine's Susan Collins, both moderate Republicans, have said they still have questions about his record. John Curtis, Utah's new Republican senator who replaced Trump critic Mitt Romney, told reporters that he asked Hegseth to provide references and pledged to "read his book" as he keeps an "open mind" about the selection.

Hegseth has been receptive to the guidance offered by Republican lawmakers during their one-on-one meetings, several senators said. Publicly, he has also disavowed the calls from Trump's supporters to vote out of office any who oppose Trump's picks.

"I told him, I've been a participant in the confirmation hearings of a number of Supreme Court justices, including Brett Kavanaugh, and how ugly that can be, and how hard it can be, not just on him, but also on his family," Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas), who is supporting Hegseth, said last month.

Cornyn predicted that Democrats will go after Hegseth on "anything and everything, and what they don't have, they'll make up."

Beyond the sexual assault allegations against Hegseth, Democratic senators in particular will be looking at his prolific authorship and years of opining in front of a camera on Fox News.

Senate aides from both parties have spent weeks poring over his five published books, and many hours and days of TV appearances, podcast interviews, speeches and media coverage, in preparation for the hearing.

He has called on the next president to overhaul America's armed forces, eliminating what he calls "woke" ideologies like diversity, equity and inclusion programs, and the people who promote them. He has mocked transgender service members as unfit for service, and says that the armed forces should be filled with "patriotic, faith-filled" Americans" or "normal men."

The military is expected to be an apolitical institution, and Hegseth's history of polarizing statements has helped to fuel the left's anxiety surrounding his nomination.

"Lots of people need to be fired," he wrote in his 2024 book, "The War on Warriors: Behind the Betrayal of the Men Who Keep Us Free."

Hegseth is likely to face questions from both parties on his view of women in combat, a subject he devoted considerable space to opposing in his last book.

Women, he wrote, are meant to be "life-givers," and their service in combat roles detracts from the military's ability to fight wars. "Dads push us to take risks. Moms put the training wheels on our bikes. We need moms. But not in the military, especially not in combat units," he wrote.

Since the announcement of his nomination, Hegseth has appeared to walk back that position, telling Fox News host Sean Hannity this month that his comments about women have been "misconstrued."

"Some of our greatest warriors, our best warriors out there, are women," he said.

Democrats, in the week ahead of the hearing, expressed frustration with what they characterized as a dearth of background disclosures provided by the Trump transition team.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Connecticut), complained last week that financial disclosures and an ethics report on Hegseth did not include records of the nominee's transactions while he headed two veterans organizations that were allegedly mismanaged.

"I do not see how this committee can, in good conscience, consider Mr. Hegseth's nomination without a full review of his conduct while leading these organizations," Blumenthal wrote to the Armed Services Committee Chairman, Roger Wicker (R-Mississippi.)

Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Massachusetts) sent Hegseth a list of more than 70 questions, spanning inquiries about his alleged financial mismanagement to his suggestion that Muslims are plotting to take over the West — and reports that he had gotten so drunk at times that he had to be carried out of professional events.

Hegseth has vowed not to drink any alcohol for the totality of his tenure, if confirmed; a tacit acknowledgment of his troubled history.

The FBI on Friday afternoon briefed Wicker and Reed on the findings of Hegseth's FBI background check, a standard procedure, a Senate aide said. It was unclear whether Wicker would seek permission from the transition team and the FBI to share the information with other committee members before the hearing.

If confirmed, Hegseth would replace Lloyd Austin, a veteran battlefield commander who has had to navigate the politically fraught U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the war in Ukraine and ongoing conflict in the Middle East. Neither Trump nor Hegseth have offered a detailed vision for handling those conflicts, although the president-elect has said he would bring an immediate resolution to the Israel-Gaza conflict and vowed to broker an end to the Russia-Ukraine war.

Trump's first term was marked by rapid turnover in cabinet positions, with five acting or confirmed defense secretaries over four years. The first, Jim Mattis, resigned in protest over troop withdrawals from Afghanistan, while Trump fired another, Mark T. Esper, after he clashed with the president over plans to draw the military into political matters.

"There is no confirmation hearing in my experience more consequential than this one," said Blumenthal, who estimates he has attended more than a hundred confirmation hearings in his Senate career. And, he added, it's "with a candidate more lacking in character and competence, and more unqualified and unprepared for such a critical life and death responsibility."

Mariana Alfaro contributed to this report.