

100 days in, Hegseth touts record, dismisses critics in fiery address

With expletive-laden remarks, Trump's embattled defense chief attempts to mount a counterattack and rebuffs Democrats' calls to resign.

By Missy Ryan
Washington Post

The Trump administration is transforming military culture and remaking the U.S. posture overseas, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said Wednesday, marking his 100-day tenure atop the Pentagon with a defiant, expletive-laden address that was both an excoriation of his critics and a dismissal of Democrats' calls to resign.

Speaking to troops at the Army War College, Hegseth touted changes he said were necessary to bring the military in line with President Donald Trump's "America First" agenda, including an end to diversity initiatives, an overhaul of personnel regulations and an intensified campaign against Iran-linked militants in Yemen. He also mounted a pointed counterattack at a moment when his judgment is under scrutiny over his handling of sensitive information, his abrupt firing of a spate of experienced officers, and upheaval among his closest aides.

"The media likes to call it chaos," Hegseth said of his record since taking over in January. "We call it overdue.

"That means no more social engineering. No more climate change worship. No more electric tanks. No more gender confusion. No more pronouns. No more excuses. No more quotas. No more woke bullshit that undermines commanders and command climates," he said. "We are laser-focused on our mission of war-fighting."

Hegseth visited the Army site in rural Pennsylvania as he took the unusual step of using official Pentagon social media to amplify messages of support for him remaining in his job, promoting praise from Republican allies including Vice President JD Vance, Donald Trump Jr. and Sen. Markwayne Mullin (R-Oklahoma). Numerous Democratic lawmakers and at least one

Republican have suggested he step down following revelations that he repeatedly circulated advance attack plans — which former defense officials say would be highly classified in most circumstances — in a commercial messaging app.

Another official Pentagon account, meanwhile, posted a clip of White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt affirming to reporters that Trump retained confidence in Hegseth and denouncing a “smear campaign” against him.

The former Fox News host and Army National Guard officer was narrowly confirmed in January following a bruising confirmation process that aired allegations of heavy drinking and poor management, along with the disclosure that he paid a settlement to a woman who accused him of sexual assault. At the time, he vigorously denied any wrongdoing and sought to bat away the allegations by labeling them “anonymous smears,” a phrase he has revived in recent days as he has campaigned to remain in Trump’s good graces.

In his remarks Hegseth repeated his long-standing criticism of the military’s system for evaluating physical fitness and eligibility for combat roles. Before being tapped by Trump, Hegseth argued forcefully for scrapping policies that for a decade have permitted women to serve in all ground combat roles if they can meet standards for those jobs.

Since taking office he has repeatedly mischaracterized the military’s dual-track system for fitness and occupational standards, in which troops’ physical fitness standards have been adjusted for age and gender, but where separate occupational standards for different military jobs, including ground combat positions, are gender-neutral. This week, the Army announced changes to its physical fitness rules, including the introduction of a gender-neutral fitness standard for troops serving in 21 combat jobs.

“To be the world’s most lethal and effective fighting force, you have to trust that the warrior alongside [you in] battle, or the troops fighting in the unit that many of you will leave are capable, truly physically capable, of doing what is necessary under fire,” he said. “They need to be fit, not fat, sharp, not shabby. ... That’s why we’re reviewing how the department has maintained standards in the past, especially the four years, and whether those standards have dropped, formally or informally.”

Military officials argue that standards have not been lowered to allow women to serve in front-line or any other units.

Since taking office Hegseth has authorized a number of other personnel-related moves, ordering a purge of military websites and training of references to gender and ethnicity, seeking to bar transgender troops — a move now blocked by courts — and unceremoniously firing numerous senior officers, many of them women, people of color or individuals elevated under President Joe Biden. Among them was Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., the second African American officer to serve as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Hegseth cited what he described as a “recruiting renaissance,” attributing recent improvements to the Trump administration’s agenda even though it’s not yet clear whether that data reflects shifting views about the military among young Americans or changes made to the recruiting process during the previous administration.

He highlighted the military’s expanding role in seeking to deter migrants at the southern border, along with the administration’s bombing campaign against Houthi rebels in Yemen and its efforts to pressure European allies to take greater responsibility for securing the continent, potentially with diminished American help.

Hegseth also referenced his relationship with Trump as media reports suggest the White House could be searching for a new Pentagon chief. He offered a brief impersonation of the president, who he said warned him in making the offer for the Pentagon job: “Pete, you’re going to have to be tough as shit,” Hegseth said.

“Boy, he was not kidding on that one,” Hegseth added. “And that’s fine.” While some Democrats are calling for Hegseth to go, others predicted that a dismissal would be unlikely. Rep. Adam Smith (Washington), the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, said recent events had proved that Hegseth lacked the experience to effectively lead the Pentagon but that Trump prized loyalty over other characteristics.

“So, no, I don’t expect Trump to fire Pete Hegseth. Pete Hegseth’s doing a great job for Donald Trump,” Smith told MSNBC. “He’s just jeopardizing the national security of the American people, which we all ought to be concerned about.”