policy. Washington has repeatedly tried to justify its pressure campaign by invoking regional stability, nuclear nonproliferation, and the security of its allies. Yet a strategy that continuously increases tensions risks undermining those very objectives.

The problem is not simply that Iran refuses to accept American demands. It is that Washington has often approached diplomacy from a position in which meaningful concessions are expected primarily from Tehran, while American economic and military pressure is treated as an unquestionable instrument of policy. Such an approach leaves limited room for a sustainable diplomatic settlement. Iran, like any sovereign state, has legitimate interests concerning its territorial integrity, national security, and political independence. A durable regional order cannot be constructed through permanent economic pressure or the assumption that one country has the right to determine the strategic choices of another.

Cost of Washington's choices

The relocation of senior American officials to military bases is important because it exposes the growing security implications of a confrontation that Washington has repeatedly chosen to sustain. The United States remains a powerful international actor, but power does not guarantee immunity from strategic miscalculation.

The experience of its confrontation with Iran demonstrates that economic pressure and military intimidation cannot automatically produce political compliance. For Tehran, the central objective remains the preservation of sovereignty and the prevention of foreign coercion. For Washington, the challenge is increasingly whether it can recognize the limits of its own pressure strategy.

Ultimately, the most revealing aspect of this episode is not that American officials may have to live behind the security barriers of military bases. It is that a government accustomed to projecting power across the world must now confront the domestic security consequences of its own international policies. Washington can continue to invest in military protection, intelligence operations, and economic sanctions. But none of these measures can substitute for a realistic diplomatic strategy. The lesson is straightforward: Iran cannot simply be pressured into surrendering its strategic independence, and American power cannot eliminate the consequences of confrontation. If Washington genuinely seeks stability, it must abandon the illusion that security can be achieved by permanently threatening the secu-

Hegseth's unmaking of US military



By James M. Lindsay

Former director for global issues at the US National Security Council

OPINION

Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's efforts to remake the US military — and the turnover that has followed — have no parallel in US history.

Beyond sacking a range of four stars, Hegseth has blocked or delayed the promotions of 80 or more senior and flag officers. More than half of the officers affected are women or Black. He has also sought to end all diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs in the military, saying that the phrase "diversity is our strength" is the "single dumbest phrase in military history".

Five former secretaries of defense have written to Congress to express "deep alarm" at Hegseth's efforts. My colleague Linda Robinson recently wrote a CFR report calling Hegseth's moves a "war on military talent," and arguing that he is driving highly talented individuals to leave their service early or perhaps never join at all. These are serious concerns. The resolution introduced recently to impeach Hegseth, which the House narrowly rejected, did not address Hegseth's efforts to remake the US military.



Charles Bolden



Michael E. Smith

It is still worth assessing the impact of his personnel decisions. Although the services are unique in what they do, they are organizations like any other. All successful organizations rest on the ability to sustain a culture that promotes their fundamental ideals. But successful cultures are far easier to destroy than to repair.

The best way to understand the impact of Hegseth's efforts to remake the Pentagon is to speak with people who have served at the highest levels of the US military. So, for Veterans Day, I recorded the latest episode of The President's Inbox with two retired flag officers, Marine Corps Major General and former NASA administrator Charles Bolden and Rear Admiral Michael E. Smith, founder and president of National Security Leaders of America.

Here are three takeaways from my conversation with Charlie and Mike:

1. The damage being done to the US military is real: Charlie described Hegseth's changes as "doing generational damage," while Mike said that "the secretary is doing more damage to the ethos of the military as being a nonpolitical organization than I've ever witnessed in my career." Both Charlie and Mike are confident that the services can weather this storm, as they have overcome tumult in the past. However, repairing the damage will take years.

2. The assault on senior leadership and DEI programs will hurt retention and recruitment: Charlie and Mike both fear that Hegseth's personnel decisions, his direct (and unusual) intervention in senior promotions, and his attacks on DEI programs will drive talented leaders out of the services. Both Charlie and Mike disagree with Hegseth's attacks on diversity. Charlie was blunt: Hegseth "is dead wrong when he says that diversity destroys our organizations". To the contrary, "diversity is critical to having a strong, knowledgeable, well-run military." Mike added that by firing and sidelining the careers of so many Black and women officers Hegseth "is implementing the same type of political and racial and gender policies that theoretically he is challenging." People are unlikely to join or stay in an organization that they see as hostile to them. As a demographic note, more than half of all people under the age of 30 identify with a nonwhite race or ethnic group.

3. The US military is being politicized: Charlie and Mike repeatedly stressed that members of the US military take an oath of loyalty to the Constitution, not to a person, an office, or a political party. As Mike put it: "Whatever the political policies of the president, the duly elected president, you go by them. As long as it's not an illegal order, you implement them. And if a new administration comes in, you support them. That's the strength of the military."

Hegseth's moves to fire or block the promotions of senior officers because they previously implemented policies he dislikes risks undermining that foundational principle. Military officers at all levels now have to worry that faithfully executing their orders today could harm their careers in the future. That is not a healthy situation.

Charlie, Mike, and I also covered several other topics in our discussion. These included: lessons from their own careers in the US military; the merits of Hegseth's plan to reduce the overall numbers of flag officers; how military promotion boards work and why Hegseth's personal intervention in them is so alarming; and why noncommissioned officers (NCOs) are the backbone of the US military. I encourage you to give the episode a listen.

The article was first published by the Council on Foreign Relations.



The illustration shows US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth over a torn picture of the Pentagon.
ERIC FAISON/THE DAILY BEAST



Senior US military officers attend Secretary of War Pete Hegseth's "State of the Force" address at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia, on September 30, 2025.
KEVIN LAMARQUE/REUTERS

> Hegseth's moves to fire or block the promotions of senior officers because they previously implemented policies he dislikes risks undermining the foundational principle that the US military take an oath of loyalty to the Constitution, not to a person, an office, or a political party. Military officers at all levels now have to worry that faithfully executing their orders today could harm their careers in the future. That is not a healthy situation.