

Pete Hegseth wants a new name for Defense Department: War Department. Why it matters.

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News

After World Wars I and II, war got a bad name. U.S. leaders recast military might as a deterrent, a way to prevent war. Hegseth thinks that went too far. He wants to re-emphasize 'lethality.'

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, a Princeton University graduate, served in Iraq and Afghanistan as an infantry officer.

Jacquelyn Martin/Associated Press

The last time there was a War Department, Hollywood still made most of its movies in black and white, and Americans were falling in love with a new entertainment device called the TV set. They cost an average of \$400 each.

The year was 1949.

In at least one respect, [Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth](#) wants to turn the calendar back to that time. The nation's military forces were organized under the War Department, and Hegseth believes that term, with its bold martial overtones, better suits his desire to remake the armed services to emphasize fighting and killing.

The Trump administration has yet to formally propose renaming the Defense Department. But students of the military say Hegseth's talk about doing so should not be taken lightly. They say it could signal a desire to free combat forces from legal restraints meant to protect civilians — rules of war Hegseth has derided as fussy, burdensome and dangerous to American soldiers.

Rechristening the Defense Department the War Department would put an exclamation point on the Trump administration's combative approach to foreign affairs, evident in its willingness to explicitly threaten the use of force, even against allies.

Trump has spoken repeatedly of making [Canada the 51st state](#), taking back the Panama Canal and annexing Greenland, by force if necessary. The autonomous territory is administered by Denmark, a fellow member state of NATO. "One way or the other, we're going to get it," [Trump said of Greenland in his State of the Union](#) address last month.

The president has been even more truculent in regard to Iran. He threatened to subject the Middle Eastern nation to bombing "the likes of which they have never seen before" if Iran refused to engage in direct negotiations with the U.S. over limits on its nuclear development.

The idea of substituting "War Department" for "Defense Department" ties in with Hegseth's own agenda as well. The defense secretary maintains the armed forces lost their edge under President Joe Biden, privileged diversity above competence and strayed from what he argues should be their overriding focus: "lethality."

'Warriors, not defenders'

Hegseth esteems "warrior culture" and refers to sailors, soldiers, airmen and Marine as "warfighters." The rhetoric goes hand-in-hand with his oft-expressed disdain for the rules of war and a simmering resentment of military lawyers, who he says have handcuffed troops in the field.

"Sure, our military defends us. And in a perfect world it exists to deter threats and preserve peace," Hegseth wrote in his best-selling 2024 memoir, ["The War on Warriors — Behind the Betrayal of the Men Who Keep Us Free."](#)

"But ultimately its job is to conduct war. We either win or lose wars. And we have warriors, not 'defenders,'" he wrote. "Bringing back the War Department may remind a few people in Washington, D.C., what the military is supposed to do, and do well."

Regarding the laws of war, he wrote: "Our boys should not fight by rules written by dignified men in mahogany rooms 80 years ago. America should fight by its own rules. And we should fight to win or not go at all."

[In a March 21 post on X](#), Hegseth invited users to propose a "better name" for the Defense Department. More than 203,000 users cast votes. "Department of War" won, 54.3% to 45.7%.

Among those endorsing the idea was tech billionaire Elon Musk, an adviser to President Donald Trump, leader of the cost-cutting Department of Government Efficiency and owner of X.

"War is more accurate," Musk wrote in a reply to Hegseth's post.



Top, Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal, center, inspects 100th Infantry Battalion troops. He later became the first U.S. defense secretary. Bottom, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth reviews an honor guard during a visit to Tokyo on March 30, 2025.

'Conflict doesn't always mean war'

Congress created the War Department on Aug. 7, 1789, as a Cabinet agency headed by a secretary of war who oversaw the Army, Navy and Marine Corps. It remained the War Department until after World War II. Then [an amendment to the National Security Act of 1947 put the service branches under what is now the Department of Defense](#).

The name change formally took effect on Aug. 10, 1949. James V. Forrestal, a former naval officer and Wall Street financier, was the first defense secretary.

The renaming reflected a new, rule-based international order and a more nuanced view of the military's role. After two devastating global conflicts in the first half of the 20th century, wars of aggression were widely viewed as uncivilized, even illegal.

The legitimate uses of military force were to keep the peace and repel invasion. As a nuclear standoff developed between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the role of armies, air forces and navies was to deter the other side.

The two superpowers fought "proxy wars," supporting opposing sides in low-level regional conflicts while avoiding direct confrontation. The rivalry was called the Cold War to distinguish it from overt "hot" conflict. In that contest of wills, the U.S. objective was not to defeat the Soviet Union on the battlefield but rather to "contain" its expansionism through interlocking economic might, diplomatic influence and military strength.

The name "Defense Department" mirrored this new reality.

"I think the primary purpose was to indicate a broader mission for the armed forces," said [Geoffrey Corn, a former Army lawyer](#) who is now the George R. Killam Jr. chair of criminal law and director of the Center for Military Law and Policy at the Texas Tech University School of Law.

Corn noted that the United Nations Charter, signed in San Francisco in June 1945, sanctioned the use of military force in just two circumstances: when authorized by the U.N. Security Council in response to aggression, and when a country or group of countries was compelled to act in self-defense.

"The pragmatic meaning of war may be the same today as it was 100 years ago," Corn said, "but from an international law perspective, the use of military force is no longer characterized as 'war' because war is technically prohibited. Thus, it would have been inconsistent with the (U.N.) Charter to retain a War Department."

Retired Army Lt. Col. [Dru Brenner-Beck](#), a former intelligence officer who taught at the South Texas College of Law in Houston, said the U.N. Charter and the creation of the Defense Department "reflect the idea of a new world order where war was not used as an instrument of policy.

"The experience since that time belies that," she said, "but the concept and its legal enunciation in the U.N. Charter remain relevant."

Retired [Air Force Gen. Gregory "Speedy" Martin](#), a former commander of U.S. Air Forces Europe and the Air Force Materiel Command, said Defense Department is the more appropriate label for the organization because it does many things beyond waging war — and exists specifically to prevent it.

Martin said the current name "is the cleanest way to describe" the mission of the U.S. military, which he defined as "being prepared to defend the neighborhood against all threats.

"Conflict doesn't always mean war," he added. "You don't always have to have guns firing to have two nations in conflict.

A retired senior defense official, speaking on condition he not be named, said Hegseth's preoccupation with the agency's name suggests misplaced priorities.

"There are 3 W's that define every secretary of defense," the retired official said. "The best secretaries in our history have always understood that their job was the world, then Washington and then warfighting. And the worst secretaries have been the ones that got that in reverse."



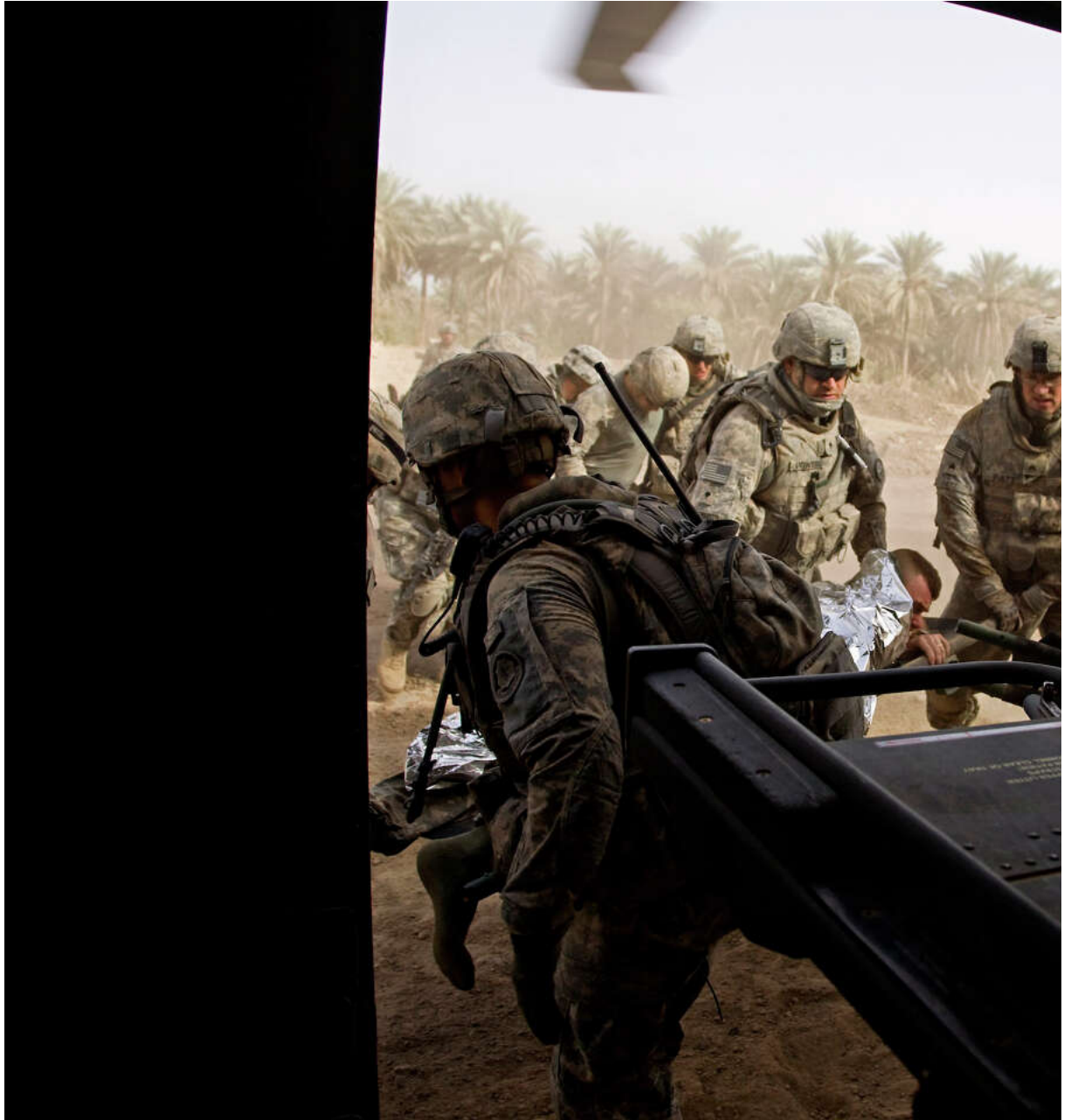
Pvt. Brandon Ellis of the Army's 422d Civil Affairs Battalion heads for cover during a sandstorm in the southern Iraqi town of Kifil on March 10, 2003. The laws of war were powerfully influenced by serving as an infantry officer in Iraq.

BAHRAM MARK SOBHANI/SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS NEWS



Iraqi soldiers surrender to U.S. troops in the desert after a battle at Najaf on March 23, 2003.

BAHRAM MARK SOBHANI/SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS NEWS



U.S. soldiers load Staff Sgt. Micah Lewis onto a medical evacuation flight in Iraq's Diyala province on Oct. 2, 2008. Lewis was injured by :

NICOLE FRUGE/SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS



From left, Sgt. Jason Grizzle, Pvt. Richard Krum, Pvt. John Lewis and Pfc. Michael Nash clean their weapons in northern Kuwait on March 10, 2003.

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Iraqi prisoners of war are unloaded from a truck at Saddam International Airport in Baghdad on April 4, 2003.

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Two Iraqis in a pickup raise their hands to signal they are unarmed as a U.S. Abrams tank rolls through Al Yusufiyah south of Baghdad or
BAHRAM MARK SOBHANI/SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS NEWS



U.S. soldiers march in formation at Saddam International Airport in Baghdad on April 6, 2003. They were headed to a memorial for Sgt. 1
BAHRAM MARK SOBHANI/SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS



Iraqi POWs sit in the back of a U.S. Army vehicle after they were captured near Saddam International Airport in Baghdad on April 4, 2003

BAHRAM MARK SOBHANI/SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS NEWS



In the town of Navit Al Ajil south of Baghdad, a captured Iraqi soldier waits to be taken to a POW camp on April 3, 2003.

BAHRAM MARK SOBHANI/SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS NEWS

A rocky beginning

Hegseth, 44, became defense secretary with much less experience running large organizations or commanding troops than his predecessors had.

After graduating from Princeton University in 2003, he served as a junior infantry officer in the Minnesota Army National Guard, including stints in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, before embarking on a career as a conservative commentator and Fox News contributor and weekend host.

His Pentagon tenure, which reached the 100-day mark last week, has been turbulent. Early on, he [fired the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of State, Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., a San Antonio native](#), along with the head of the Navy and other senior officers.

Brown was only the second African American to lead the Joint Chiefs. Adm. Lisa Marie Franchetti, head of naval operations, was the first woman to hold that position. Hegseth offered no explanation for the firings, but he previously had cited Brown as an example of someone promoted for reasons of race, not merit.

Hegseth also canceled DEI initiatives and [cultural awareness events across the armed forces, including the annual celebration of Black History Month](#), and he ordered commanders to purge from military websites material that celebrated diversity and the accomplishments of women and minorities.

He has come under fire for his handling of sensitive information. The Pentagon inspector general is investigating whether he improperly disclosed classified information by using the commercial messaging app Signal to discuss an imminent air strike against Houthi militants in Yemen.

Amid the tumult, Hegseth has kept a steady emphasis on war-fighting, "lethality," and removing obstacles to battlefield domination.

Prime among those obstacles, in his view, is the Judge Advocate General Corps, the lawyers who advise military commanders on the laws of war and the legal boundaries surrounding deadly force.



During his first term, President Donald Trump watches as Vice President Mike Pence swears in Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., right, as Air Force native, was the first African American to hold the position.

Pool/Getty Images



Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., center, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, listens as Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth answers reporters' on Feb. 5, 2025. Less than three weeks later, Hegseth fired Brown, who was just the second African American to lead the Joint Chiefs.

Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images



Air Force Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., then commander of Pacific Air Forces, arrives at Kunsan Air Base in Korea for a tour on Oct. 18, 20

Staff Sgt. Mackenzie Mendez/Courtesy U.S. Air Force



Cindy Cole Chal, right, receives a U.S. flag from Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., then Air Force chief of staff, during a burial ceremony for Charles Cole, the last of the famed Doolittle Raiders, died on April 9, 2019, at age 103.

Jerry Lara/San Antonio Express-News



Air Force Lt. Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., then head of Air Forces Central Command, talks with airmen assigned to a security forces squadron at Swafford Air Force Base, U.S. Air Force



Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., a San Antonio native, was chief of staff of the Air Force and later chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Air Force/The Washington Post

JAG officers deploy to battle zones and work closely with commanders to review target lists and operational plans, sometimes in the heat of combat. They're widely regarded as a vital safeguard against excesses on the battlefield.

In "The War on Warriors," Hegseth contends American troops were hamstrung in Iraq and Afghanistan by JAG Corps lawyers, who he refers to repeatedly as "jagoffs."

"We have watered down the last twenty years of armed conflict into morality plays over what 'should have happened' and how a 'morally superior' person should react when their friends become pink mist from an Iranian-built, Chinese-financed roadside bomb," he wrote in a chapter titled "The Laws of War, for Winners."

Hegseth heaped scorn on a Biden-era policy that said people in a war zone must be presumed to be civilians, which he said causes troops "to hesitate every time they fire."

A 'bull— rule'

In the book, he describes a briefing by a JAG corps officer on the Army's rules of engagement in Iraq. It was 2005, and then-Lt. Hegseth was the leader of a platoon posted to Forward Operating Base Falcon in Baghdad's Rashid neighborhood, an area torn by bitter sectarian fighting.

The JAG officer posed a hypothetical, asking the soldiers if they could fire on an insurgent armed with a rocket-propelled grenade.

The GIs said yes.

"Wrong answer, men," Hegseth quotes the lawyer as saying. "You are not authorized to fire at that man until that RPG becomes a threat. It must be pointed at you with the intent to fire. That makes it a legal and proper engagement."

"We sat in silence, stunned," the future defense secretary wrote.

Hegseth said he gathered the soldiers together afterward and told them, "Men, if you see an enemy who you believe is a threat, you engage and destroy the threat."

He called the JAG's guidance a "bull— rule that's going to get people killed."

Martin, the retired Air Force general, said Hegseth's mistake was believing the JAG officer had the authority to dictate how soldiers should respond to a threat. His actual role was to make a recommendation, Martin said.



Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, center, at a meeting of NATO Defense Ministers, harbors a simmering resentment for military lawyers, who he contends hamstrung U.S. troops in Iraq.

Omar Havana/Getty Images

Once in office, Hegseth moved against the JAG Corps on Feb. 21, the same night he fired Brown and Franchetti. He [sacked the judge advocates general of each of the service branches](#): Lt. Gen. Joseph B. Berger III of the Army, Lt. Gen. Charles Plummer of the Air Force and Rear Adm. Lia M. Reynolds of the Navy.

Rosa Brooks, a specialist in national security law who teaches at the Georgetown University Law Center, said at the time that the removal of the top JAGs was "even more chilling" than the firing of Brown.

"It's what you do when you're planning to break the law: you get rid of any lawyers who might try to slow you down," she wrote on social media.

Trump also firing the Army, Navy and Air Force JAGs. In some ways that's even more chilling than firing the four stars. It's what you do when you're planning to break the law: you get rid of any lawyers who might try to slow you down.

— Rosa Brooks (@brooks_rosa) [February 22, 2025](#)

Hegseth denied that.

"We want lawyers who give sound constitutional advice and don't exist to attempt to be roadblocks," he told Fox News.

'Acme of skill'

Retired Air Force Maj. Gen. [Charles Dunlap Jr.](#) helped oversee more than 2,200 JAG officers worldwide as the Air Force's deputy judge advocate general from 2006-10. He is now a law professor at Duke University.

Dunlap expressed a dim view of the idea that a "War Department" would make America stronger.

"As to renaming the Department of Defense to the more belligerent-sounding Department of War, I would have two observations," he said. "One, sometimes the military is involved in operations that do not amount to 'war' such as guarding the border, suppressing civil disorders, or providing disaster relief. Is this meant to suggest that the military would no longer be doing those missions?"

"Two, I would invite the secretary to consider that resorting to war is not the 'acme of skill,'" he said.

Dunlap quoted Sun Tzu, the Chinese general, military strategist and philosopher: "To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill."



Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth contends the U.S. military lost its way under President Joe Biden, emphasizing diversity over competence and "lethality."

The Washington Post/The Washington Post via Getty Im

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He embedded with the 3rd Infantry Division during the Iraq invasion, and reported from Baghdad and Afghanistan seven times since. A University of Houston graduate, he covered the Branch Davidian siege, the 2003 space shuttle breakup, the 2009 Fort Hood shooting and its subsequent legal proceedings, as well as hurricanes, tropical storms and floods.

He's won awards from Hearst Newspapers and the Associated Press, was named "Reporter of the Year" by his peers in 2004 and is a co-founder and former president and board member of Military Reporters & Editors, established in 2002.