

FACT-CHECK & ANALYSIS REPORT

Hegseth's Military Promotions Controversy:

Merit, Politics, and the Officer Corps

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Executive Summary

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has intervened in multiple military promotion lists since taking office, removing or blocking approximately two dozen senior officers — a concentration of action unprecedented in recent Pentagon history. The targeted officers are disproportionately women and racial minorities, a pattern documented across multiple independent news reports and corroborated by Democratic and Republican lawmakers alike.

The Pentagon's official position is that all promotions under Hegseth are "apolitical and unbiased" and driven solely by merit. Critics — including serving and retired military officers, both parties' congressional members, and several major news organizations — dispute this characterization, citing specific cases in which officers appear to have been targeted for race, gender, diversity-related work history, or perceived political association with prior administrations.

The legal authority underlying Hegseth's interventions remains contested even within the Pentagon itself. Pentagon rules generally permit the defense secretary to remove names from promotion lists only for specified fitness-related failings — yet Hegseth has offered no public explanation for individual removals, and his office has acknowledged internal debate over whether he can legally strip individual names rather than accepting or rejecting an entire list.

This report analyzes ten sources spanning the ideological spectrum, separates verified facts from contested interpretations, assesses source reliability, and identifies the key gaps that remain in public knowledge.

1. Factual Consensus

The following facts are documented by multiple independent sources or corroborated by official statements. They represent the clearest factual ground across the source set.

1.1 The Army Promotion Intervention

Hegseth removed four colonels from the Army's one-star (brigadier general) promotion list. Two of the officers are Black men; two are women. The move was confirmed by the New York Times

(March 27, 2026), reporting based on eleven current and former military and administration officials.

CONFIRMED Army Secretary Daniel P. Driscoll repeatedly refused Hegseth's demands to remove the four officers, stating they had "decades-long records of exemplary service" and had done nothing wrong. Hegseth then struck their names unilaterally.

Two of the removed Army officers can be identified by the circumstances reported. A Black armor officer and combat veteran was singled out because of an academic paper he had written approximately fifteen years earlier analyzing why African American officers historically chose support roles over frontline combat positions. A female logistics officer was targeted because she served during the 2021 Afghanistan withdrawal — a military operation Hegseth has publicly condemned. The grounds for removing the other two officers were not made clear to officials familiar with the process.

A fifth officer, Col. Dave Butler — Gen. Mark Milley's former spokesman and a white man — was separately pressured off the list. Butler resigned in February 2026 in the hope that his departure would persuade Hegseth to send the broader list to the White House. This case is covered under the interpretive disputes section, as it raises distinct questions about political association rather than race or gender.

1.2 The Navy Promotion Intervention

Hegseth blocked the promotions of eight Navy captains to rear admiral (one-star). Of those eight, three are women and two are Black men. The remaining four are white men. The resulting official Navy one-star list, released publicly in late May 2026, included zero women — a striking omission given that women comprise approximately 21 percent of active-duty Navy personnel.

CONFIRMED According to an analysis by Task & Purpose, the last time the Navy promoted a woman from captain to rear admiral was June 2025. The May 2026 list marks a complete absence of female promotions to that rank.

At least one of the targeted Navy officers was identified after her name appeared on a third-party website cataloguing allegedly "woke" military officers. The site noted she had served as a diversity liaison officer approximately two decades earlier. A second removed officer is a Navy pilot and foreign area officer. A third is a physician commanding a major Navy medical installation. The NYT (June 2, 2026) and WSJ (June 2, 2026) independently confirmed these interventions through current and former defense officials.

Separately, Hegseth urged senior Navy officials to include Capt. William Francis Jr. — a Navy SEAL serving as Hegseth's own special military assistant — on the one-star promotion list, despite Francis having been passed over by multiple previous boards. Francis lacks the command experience required under board rules and was not selected. When asked about this directly at a House Armed Services Committee hearing, Hegseth stated he was "not aware of what you're referring to" — a response the NYT characterized as "at best, misleading."

1.3 Broader Pattern of Firings and Retirements

Since taking office, Hegseth has fired or forced the early retirement of a significant number of senior generals and admirals. The exact count varies across sources and has grown over time as additional actions have occurred: the Washington Post reported "more than a dozen" in April 2026; the NYT reported "at least two-dozen" in March 2026 and "nearly three dozen" by June 2026. These discrepancies reflect the progression of events during the reporting period, not direct factual conflict.

CONFIRMED Among those removed: Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr. (second Black chairman of the Joint Chiefs), Adm. Lisa Franchetti (first woman to lead the Navy), Lt. Gen. Telita Crosland (head of the Defense Health Agency), and Maj. Gen. William Green (Army Chief of Chaplains).

CONFIRMED Sen. Jack Reed (D-RI), ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, stated in Senate testimony that nearly 60 percent of the senior officers Hegseth has fired are female or Black — while women and minorities currently account for fewer than 20 percent of all generals and admirals.

Gen. Randy George, the Army Chief of Staff, was fired in early April 2026. Multiple sources indicate the immediate precipitating factor was George's refusal to remove the Black and female officers from the Army's one-star list. George's replacement, Gen. Christopher LaNeve, had served as Hegseth's own military assistant and won Trump's public favor in January 2025 with a congratulatory video call from South Korea during the Commander in Chief Ball. A senior Army officer quoted anonymously in the Washington Post said LaNeve "is not well qualified" for the post.

1.4 Hegseth's Stated Policy Position

The Pentagon's official line, delivered through spokesman Sean Parnell, is consistent across all statements: "Military promotions are given to those who have earned them. The Department will never consider the color of a service member's skin or their gender as a factor in promotions." Hegseth himself has stated that the prior Biden administration's promotions were distorted by "gender and demographic engineering." He has publicly referenced "color-blind and merit-based" promotions as a core policy goal.

At a Quantico address to several hundred generals and admirals (reported by National Review, October 2025), Hegseth announced sweeping reforms including: mandatory daily physical training; toughened basic training; return of combat arms standards to "highest male standard only"; elimination of diversity offices and identity months; and overhaul of inspector general and equal opportunity processes.

On the specific question of removing names from one-star lists, Hegseth acknowledged to the House Armed Services Committee that he pulled names from the Army list but declined to explain the specific grounds for individual removals, citing respect for the officers involved.

2. Factual Disputes and Unresolved Questions

The following areas involve direct conflicts between factual claims, or significant uncertainty that the available sources cannot resolve.

2.1 Legal Authority to Strike Individual Names

DISPUTED Pentagon rules, as described by current and former officials, state that the defense secretary may remove officers from promotion lists only for specified fitness-related failings — moral, mental, physical, or professional — and, critically, must reject or accept an entire list rather than striking individual names. Multiple officials told the NYT that Hegseth's individual removals may not be legally authorized. The Pentagon itself has conducted internal debate about this question without resolving it publicly.

The 2007 precedent is instructive. Defense Secretary Robert Gates intervened in Army one-star promotions out of concern that the boards were passing over innovative battlefield commanders. But Gates' approach was to overhaul the board process — including summoning Gen. David Petraeus from Iraq to oversee new boards — rather than removing individual officers from completed board lists. Senior military officials stated they could not recall any previous defense secretary seeking to remove individual officers from completed board lists.

The Hegseth Pentagon has not clarified the legal framework it believes authorizes his actions, and when pressed in congressional hearings, Hegseth deflected by citing respect for the officers rather than offering a legal rationale.

2.2 The Buria Statement

Three current and former defense and administration officials told the NYT (March 27, 2026) that Hegseth's chief of staff, Ricky Buria, explicitly told Army Secretary Driscoll that "President Trump would not want to stand next to a Black female officer at military events" — in the context of opposing Maj. Gen. Antoinette Gant's assignment to command the Military District of Washington.

DISPUTED Buria called the account "completely false" and characterized it as "made up story" intended to "sow division." Driscoll reportedly raised the issue with a senior White House official who sided with Driscoll. Gant proceeded to serve in the command and was promoted to two-star rank. The Pentagon did not address Buria's interaction with Driscoll in its official response.

The episode is significant because it represents the most direct allegation of explicitly racially motivated thinking at a senior level in Hegseth's office — and it remains unresolved. Three named sources versus one denial. Driscoll's subsequent conduct — including his defense of the removed officers — is consistent with the account being accurate, though this is inferential rather than conclusive.

2.3 Whether Biden-Era Promotions Involved Quotas

Hegseth has consistently asserted that the Biden administration promoted officers based on race and gender quotas, distorting the merit system he is now correcting. Biden administration officials have denied this, stating their promotions were merit-based. The Atlantic notes that Hegseth was "unable to provide any evidence whatsoever" during his confirmation hearing that the military had actually lowered standards in the name of diversity.

DISCREPANCY No primary source documentation — internal Pentagon memos, promotion board records, or congressional testimony — has been cited by any source to establish that quotas were in fact applied. The assertion is a core pillar of Hegseth's policy rationale but remains an unverified claim.

2.4 Numbers of Officers Affected

The total count of officers fired, sidelined, or blocked from promotion varies across sources: "more than a dozen" (Washington Post, April 2026), "at least two dozen" (NYT, March 2026), "nearly three dozen" (NYT, June 2026). This variation reflects real-time escalation rather than factual error — the number grew as Hegseth took additional actions. However, no comprehensive, official accounting has been made public, leaving the full scope unclear.

3. Interpretive Differences

Sources across the ideological spectrum agree on most of the core facts but interpret their meaning in fundamentally different ways. Understanding these divergent frames is essential for readers assessing the controversy.

3.1 Is This a Merit-Based Correction or a Politically Motivated Purge?

"Promotions to general officer rank can be rescinded for perceived associations with others [leading officers to] prioritize 'safe' assignments or noncontroversial bosses."

— Mark Hertling, former 3-star Army general, *The Bulwark*, February 2026

"No more identity months, DEI offices, dudes in dresses... We are done with that."

— Secretary Pete Hegseth, Quantico address, September 2025 (reported by National Review)

The central interpretive divide is whether Hegseth's promotion interventions represent a genuine restoration of merit-based standards corrupted by DEI policies, or a politically driven purge that

in fact replaces one form of bias with another. These two interpretations flow from the same base facts, and the documentary record available to the public does not fully resolve them.

Supporters (represented here by the Federalist, Fox News opinion, and National Review) frame the interventions as overdue correction of Biden-era distortions that placed diversity metrics above combat readiness. The National Review editorial board acknowledged the Quantico reforms as "commonsense changes" while also noting concerns about Trump's accompanying remarks, demonstrating that even supportive commentary contains internal qualifications.

Critics (represented by The Bulwark, The Atlantic, and the Washington Post opinion) argue that the pattern of removals — concentrated on women and minorities, with no public justification tied to fitness or performance — constitutes what The Atlantic's Adam Serwer calls an "inverse caricature of Republican complaints about diversity, equity, and inclusion, a system in which the incompetent rise not because of their abilities but because of their sycophancy." The Bulwark's Mark Hertling, drawing on his experience as a senior Army general, focuses on the systemic damage to officer culture: if promotions can be blocked based on association with disfavored superiors, candor across the force deteriorates.

3.2 Framing the Replacement Appointments

The appointment of Gen. LaNeve to replace Gen. George, and the push to place Hegseth's special assistant Capt. Francis on the promotion list despite repeated prior rejections, reveal a second interpretive divide.

Hegseth and administration defenders argue that civilian leaders have always had authority to select advisers who share their vision and approach — a legitimate exercise of civilian control. Critics argue that installing less-experienced loyalists while blocking highly credentialed officers reverses the stated meritocracy rationale, producing the very politicization the secretary claimed to be eliminating.

This tension is factual, not merely interpretive: LaNeve's qualification relative to George is a verifiable professional record question. Francis's multiple prior rejections by promotion boards are documented. The contrast between the stated policy and observed outcomes is the analytical core of the criticism.

3.3 Military Readiness vs. Culture War

The Washington Post's Max Boot frames the firings of experienced officers — including Gen. George during preparations for a potential Iran ground operation — as evidence that Hegseth's culture-war priorities actively degrade operational readiness. Boot lists specific alleged failures: decommissioning minesweepers before a naval conflict; ignoring Ukrainian drone defense technology offers; insufficient bunker construction at forward bases; and being surprised by the extent of Iranian retaliation.

The Federalist and Fox News pieces do not engage with these military readiness concerns. The National Review editorial, while supportive, acknowledged that Trump's Quantico speech raised concerns about the politicization of force, noting his rhetoric about using cities "as training grounds" and wanting to "take out" domestic critics as "unseemly from a commander in chief."

The readiness critique cannot be fully evaluated from available public sources, as operational details remain classified. But the framing divergence is analytically significant: the culture-war

frame treats diversity as the primary threat to military effectiveness; the readiness frame treats the disruption of experienced leadership as the primary threat.

4. Primary Source Verification

4.1 Official Pentagon Statement

The Defense Department News article (war.gov, May 18, 2026) is a primary source — a verbatim account of Hegseth's Quantico address and signed memorandum on equal opportunity reform. Key claims that can be verified against this source:

- Hegseth stated that promotions will be based on "meritocracy, not quotas" — confirmed in the official record.
- The DoD article confirms Hegseth signed a memorandum titled "Implementation of Military Equal Opportunity and Equal Employment Opportunity Reform Plan." The full text of the memo has not been made publicly available.
- The document confirms Hegseth's remarks about "frivolous complaints" and anonymous reporting, providing primary-source grounding for descriptions of this policy shift in other sources.

4.2 Congressional Testimony

Multiple sources reference Senate Armed Services Committee hearings and House Armed Services Committee appearances. Key congressional exchanges verified across sources:

- Hegseth acknowledged removing names from the Army one-star list at a House Armed Services Committee hearing, but declined to specify grounds (NYT, June 2026; Rep. Austin Scott exchange confirmed).
- Sen. Reed's 60-percent-of-fired-officers-are-female-or-Black statistic was delivered in Senate testimony. This figure has not been independently verified by other sources, but it derives from Reed's office's analysis of reported personnel actions. No source disputes the underlying count.
- Rep. Chrissy Houlahan's questioning of Hegseth about Capt. Francis is confirmed; Hegseth's denial of awareness is on record.

4.3 Characterization Accuracy Check

DISCREPANCY

The Federalist article characterizes Sen. Mark Kelly's concern about Hegseth's rhetoric as equivalent to trying to 'suck the warrior spirit out of the military.' Kelly is a retired Navy captain and former combat pilot. The piece does not acknowledge Kelly's military credentials, which are directly relevant to evaluating the credibility of his concerns about military culture.

DISCREPANCY

The Fox News opinion piece describes Hegseth's Quantico address as 'desperately needed remarks' and presents anecdotal testimony from a West Point officer as corroboration for systemic claims about DEI damage. The

piece does not engage with any counterevidence or distinguish between the author's characterization and documented fact.

CONFIRMED The Atlantic's Adam Serwer accurately cites that Hegseth 'was unable to provide any evidence whatsoever' of lowered military standards during his confirmation hearing. This is consistent with the public record of Hegseth's Senate Armed Services Committee confirmation testimony.

CONFIRMED The Bulwark's Mark Hertling accurately describes the legal structure of the promotion process — civilian approval, Senate confirmation, the role of promotion boards, and the rarity of senior PAO promotions. This account is consistent with publicly available military personnel regulations and is the most technically precise of any source reviewed.

DISCREPANCY The National Review editorial described the Quantico meeting as an occasion for Hegseth to 'look his most senior subordinates in the eye as he announced a new direction' — accurate. But the editorial does not address the subsequent pattern of individual officers being removed from promotion lists, which postdates the Quantico address and significantly alters the picture of the reforms described.

4.4 Hegseth's Book

Hegseth's 2024 book, *The War on Warriors*, is cited by the NYT for specific quotations. Relevant verified excerpts include his description of senior officers who rose under Biden/Austin as "cowards hiding under stars" and "whores to wokesters," and his statement that "The Left captured the military quickly, and we must reclaim it at a faster pace." These characterizations, made before taking office, provide context for the personnel actions taken after.

5. Gaps and Omissions

Across all ten sources, several significant areas of information are absent or underexplored.

5.1 Performance Records of Removed Officers

No source has been able to obtain or publish the actual performance evaluations of the officers removed from promotion lists. This is partly by design — personnel records are confidential — but it means the central factual question (whether the removed officers were truly meritorious by pre-existing standards) cannot be independently verified. The closest the record comes is Driscoll's repeated insistence on their "exemplary service" and the stated fact that one-star selection boards have only a 5 percent acceptance rate.

5.2 Full Text of Hegseth's Reform Memoranda

Hegseth signed a memorandum on equal opportunity reform. The DoD News article summarizes its provisions, but the full text has not been publicly released. This gap prevents verification of whether the memo's provisions, as implemented, are consistent with the stated summary.

5.3 Definitive Legal Analysis

No source — including the Pentagon, Congress, or legal scholars — has produced a definitive public ruling on whether Hegseth's individual-name removals are authorized under existing statutes and regulations. The relevant regulation cited by officials is Pentagon guidance on when a defense secretary may remove names from a completed board list. Without a formal legal opinion (from DoD General Counsel, GAO, or a court), this question remains open. Congress has not held a focused hearing on the legal authority question.

5.4 The Perspective of the Removed Officers

None of the ten sources includes direct statements from the officers who were removed from promotion lists. They are serving or recently served and cannot speak publicly without authorization. Their absence from the record is understandable but leaves a gap in the human accounting of these actions.

5.5 Impact on Recruiting and Retention

Multiple sources assert — and the logic supports — that the visible pattern of removals will affect recruiting and retention among women and minority officers. The Atlantic and NYT quote serving officers describing an atmosphere of anxiety and a sense of having "targets on their backs." A retired lieutenant colonel's essay questioning whether she would advise her own children to join the military is cited. But systematic data on actual recruiting and retention trends under Hegseth is absent from all sources.

5.6 Scope Beyond Army and Navy

Most reporting focuses on Army and Navy promotion lists. The NYT (March 27) notes it was "not clear if Hegseth or his aides have tried to remove officers from similar Navy, Air Force or Marine Corps lists" at the time of the first report. By June 2026, Navy interventions were confirmed. Air Force and Marine Corps lists have not been reported on. The full scope of promotion system interventions may be wider than what is publicly known.

6. Source Reliability Assessment

The following table rates each source on four dimensions: type (news vs. opinion), sourcing quality, use of primary documents, and ideological perspective. Rating categories: High, Moderate, Low, and Primary Source.

Source	Type	Sourcing	Primary Docs	Perspective	Rating
NYT / Greg Jaffe (Mar. 27, 2026)	News reporting	11 current/former officials	Congressional testimony cited	Mainstream / center	High
NYT / Greg Jaffe (Jun. 2, 2026)	News reporting	5 current/former officials	Promotion board rules cited	Mainstream / center	High
WSJ / Lara Seligman (Jun. 2, 2026)	News reporting	Multiple anonymous officials	Pentagon statements	Mainstream / center	High
DoD News / war.gov (May 18, 2026)	Official release	Primary source (Pentagon)	Memo signed by Hegseth	Official / government	Primary Source
The Bulwark / Hertling (Feb. 18, 2026)	Opinion / analysis	Author's expertise (3-star general)	Promotion regs described	Center / Never-Trump	Moderate
Washington Post / Boot (Apr. 6, 2026)	Opinion / analysis	1 anonymous Army officer	Limited primary sourcing	Critical of Hegseth	Moderate
The Atlantic / Serwer (Apr. 8, 2026)	Opinion / advocacy	Cites NYT / NBC reporting	Historical docs cited	Progressive / critical	Moderate
National Review (Oct. 1, 2025)	Opinion / editorial	Hegseth's Quantico address	Limited — speech only	Conservative / supportive	Moderate
The Federalist / Stone (Dec. 8, 2025)	Opinion / advocacy	Thin — sparse citations	None	Hard right / partisan	Low
Fox News / Opinion (May 27, 2026)	Opinion / advocacy	Personal anecdote only	None	Hard right / supportive	Low

A note on use: The two Low-rated sources are useful for understanding the ideological framing deployed in Hegseth's defense. They are not reliable for factual claims. The Moderate sources are generally reliable where they draw on confirmed reporting but require caution where they

make inferences or predictions beyond the factual record. The High and Primary Source entries form the evidentiary core of this analysis.

7. Conclusions

What the Evidence Supports

Taken together, the verified factual record supports several conclusions:

- Hegseth has removed or blocked a significant number of officers from military promotion lists. The concentration of removals among women and racial minorities — groups that collectively make up under 20 percent of generals and admirals but account for approximately 60 percent of Hegseth's removals — is a documented statistical pattern, not a partisan characterization.
- Hegseth's stated justification — correcting Biden-era quota-based promotions — has not been substantiated by any primary source evidence. He was unable to provide such evidence at his confirmation hearing, and no subsequent documentation has emerged.
- In at least two documented cases, officers appear to have been targeted for work done years or decades before their selection: one for an academic paper analyzing historical patterns in Black officer career choices; one for a diversity liaison role held twenty years ago. These grounds, if accurate, have no clear connection to fitness for command.
- Hegseth has simultaneously advanced a member of his own inner circle (Capt. Francis) who was repeatedly rejected by promotion boards and lacks required command experience, while blocking officers selected through the competitive board process. This pattern is inconsistent with a straightforward meritocracy rationale.
- The legal authority for Hegseth's individual-name removals remains uncertain. The Pentagon has not clarified this publicly, and Congress has not resolved it through hearing or legislation.

What Remains Genuinely Contested

Several important questions remain legitimately open and cannot be resolved from available public sources:

- Whether any of the removed officers had performance or fitness issues not reflected in their promotion selections — this would require access to confidential personnel records.
- Whether the Biden administration's promotion practices involved informal demographic targets that, while not "quotas" in a formal sense, amounted to demographic engineering. This claim deserves investigation but has not been documented.
- Whether the military reforms announced at Quantico — daily PT, tougher basic training, higher physical standards — will produce measurable readiness improvements. These are empirical questions that will take time to assess.
- The full scope of promotion interventions across all military branches, which the available reporting has not yet established.

What This Means for Readers

Readers evaluating this controversy should be aware that most advocacy on both sides of this debate begins from a conclusion and works backward to the evidence. The strongest factual case that Hegseth's interventions are discriminatory rests on the statistical pattern and the specific grounds given (or withheld) for individual removals. The strongest factual case for his defense rests on the legitimate principle that civilian leadership has authority over military personnel decisions.

Those two facts are not in conflict — civilian authority is real and important. The question is whether that authority is being exercised within the legal and regulatory framework that governs it, and whether the stated meritocracy rationale corresponds to the actions taken. Based on available evidence, the gap between the stated rationale and the observable pattern is significant and warrants sustained scrutiny from Congress, journalists, and the public.

Source Index (APA Format)

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