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The Pentagon needs sober, judicious leadership, not a drama queen who makes things jarring and fevered.



Pete Hegseth at Quantico Tuesday. ANDREW HARNIK/ ASSOCIATED PRESS



DECLARATIONS

The Embarrassing Pete Hegseth

A lot of people in the Trump administration think this is their moment and America's last chance. They know what time it is, you don't, it's later in the game than you think, the damage is great and right now is the final hope of constructive national change. A sense of urgency is their central driving force.

But when people get into a "last chance" mindset, they become insensitive to, less mindful of and careful about, what they come to think of as "constitutional niceties." When it is constitutional niceties—respecting the other branches' authority, knowing the limits on your own, knowing what's your lane and what the traffic will bear—that have kept us going since 1789, when the new government began functioning.

You can lose a republic while trying to save a republic. No matter what your level of idiocy, you don't want that, you can't want it, so you have to be careful. And serious.

When you are driven by a sense of urgency you must still try to act like a normal person—normal in your comportment, which means sober, judicious. Not like some pumped-up drama queen who makes everything more jarring and fevered, and who comes across as the living answer to the question, "What would it look like if Captain Queeg took Adderall?"

Which gets us to Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth. His unprecedented extravaganza this week, in which he summoned hundreds of generals and admirals from around the world to Virginia's Quantico Marine Base to listen to him speak, shouldn't be lost amid the government shutdown.

It was, as a former general said by phone, "just flat-out bizarre." It was embarrassing to watch. He made everyone in the audience look smaller, which made their profession look smaller. How does that help America?

Mr. Hegseth instructed them as if from a great height. What he told them is that the woke progressive era in the U.S. military is over. He will have a reset to the "warrior ethos." "No more identity months, DEI offices, dudes in dresses."

. We are done with that s—.”

OK. Understood. Understood, in fact, since he was appointed. Mr. Hegseth could have reiterated all this by secure video conference, or just sent a video.

Instead he dragged commanders from their stations to be his audience. So he could pose with a giant American flag behind him like George C. Scott in “Patton,” only Scott delivered a great speech. Mr. Hegseth gave a TED Talk, a weirdly self-reverential one. He paced the stage like a strutting, gelled bantam, like an amped-up actor with rehearsed gestures and expressions and voice shifts.

“You might say we’re ending the war on warriors. I heard someone wrote a book about that.” Mr. Hegseth is author of a book called “The War on Warriors.” I guess he wants us to buy it.

There was braggadocio: “To our enemies, FAFO. If necessary, our troops can translate that for you.” He used “lethal” and “lethality” a lot, like a young Hollywood scriptwriter dreaming up some mad rightwing Army officer because he watched “Platoon” too much as a child, as perhaps Mr. Hegseth did. The frantic drama: “This is a moment of urgency, mounting urgency.” “We became the Woke Department.” “It’s completely unacceptable to see fat generals.”

The retired general later sighed on the phone and said: “I would like you to note that his hero, Norman Schwarzkopf, was fat. And George Patton wasn’t exactly a gazelle.” Sound military leadership has little to do with physical fitness and everything to do with strategic judgment.

Mr. Hegseth also seemed preoccupied with reimposing the military’s height requirement. There goes young Napoleon.

What are we *doing* in this dangerous world having the head of the Defense Department prance around like this and embarrass the generals he used as his backdrop? Why do his highly placed defenders in the administration think this is good for the White House, or even for Mr. Hegseth?

He is right that the U.S. military must be free of demands extraneous to its mission of keeping us and, yes, the world safer. They are the only Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines we have. We can’t jerk them around with our sudden cultural fevers, they aren’t a welfare agency, our defense structure can’t be the cultural left’s plaything. All of that got out of whack and carried away in the years leading up to and after 2020.

Here we must note we are a nation divided by algorithms. If your algorithm knows you as conservative and interested in military matters, you got a lot of videos of young soldiers and sailors acting out the past few years, and of service branches tweeting out showy political sentiments. You felt understandable alarm. If your algorithm knows you as liberal and not interested in military affairs, you haven’t seen that content, and will have been surprised by Mr. Hegseth’s reference to “dudes in dresses.” We are all getting different versions of reality every time we look at a screen, and it’s hurting us.

Mr. Hegseth is right that woke progressive policies have no place in a merit-based, competitive military, but the military follows the orders of civilian leaders. In any case it should have crossed his mind that he himself, when in service, never reached anywhere near the rank of those he was talking down to. They made military service their profession, stuck with it, rose and aren’t paid like TV hosts. All of them could leave and be better paid as board members and consultants. It wouldn’t be shocking if after Mr. Hegseth’s speech some of them moved up their retirements.

A correction to the past five or 10 years was inevitable and is legitimate. But you don’t want it to be an overcorrection; you want it done competently and with calm moral confidence.

You look at all this and say he’s just aping that vulgarian Donald Trump. Well, Mr. Trump does Donald Trump better. A Trump knock-off is cheaper and tackier than the original. You say Mr. Trump’s speech after Mr. Hegseth’s was even worse—a wild, incoherent and yet vaguely menacing mess. Yes, it was, and was worse because he’s president.

Mr. Hegseth has always had bad press, from the scandals that emerged after his nomination through fairly constant reports about chaos in his office. I thought and said early on he was a poor choice—a television host playing a culture warrior who lacked the weight and gravitas the Pentagon needed. This week the Daily Mail, not an immediate foe of all

things Trump, had a story in which Mr. Hegseth was described as paranoid, “crawling out of his skin,” fearful and suspicious.

There are recent reports his Pentagon is putting forward new rules requiring journalists to have their work approved before publication. Where that stands is unclear, but it's nuts. It makes America look like what our foes say we are, a place of make-believe freedom in which even the press is controlled by the government. Which really would be an urgent matter.

You know why people say something's wrong with this guy? Because it appears something is wrong with this guy.

By Peggy Noonan

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