

## Hegseth's ultimatum to generals sparks fears of departures

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Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth speaks to hundreds of generals and admirals at a summit in Virginia. [Link to video](#)

Defense Secretary [Pete Hegseth's](#) “my way or the highway” message to hundreds of generals and admirals at a summit in Virginia last week has sparked fears that some top leaders may choose to bow out of the U.S. military entirely.

The departure of two senior leaders last week stoked those worries, though the Pentagon says they were unrelated to Hegseth's ultimatum.

“His speech directly attacked the values of many of the senior officers and enlisted members in the audience, and I would expect many of them to demonstrate their disgust by retiring,” [Don Christensen](#), a retired Air Force colonel and former military lawyer who watched the speech, said of Hegseth.

The two senior military leaders to leave were Gen. Thomas Bussiere, the head of Air Force Global Strike Command, and Gen. Bryan Fenton, head of U.S. Special Operations Command based at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Fla.

Bussiere, who was appointed by President Trump, was previously nominated to serve as the Air Force's vice chief of staff in August, but his nomination was pulled just weeks later.

In his retirement announcement, posted to Facebook on Tuesday, he cited “personal and family reasons” as the main driver for his departure, noting he had made the “difficult” decision after much reflection.

Fenton's retirement came after three years in the role. “FWIW, Gen. Fenton was planning on retiring, it was not tied to SecWar's speech,” Kristina Wong, an adviser to Hegseth, wrote last week on the social platform X.

The high-profile exits came just hours after Hegseth's speech to hundreds of top admirals and generals in Quantico, Va., in which he outlined his vision of a military void of “woke garbage,” proposing less restrictive rules of engagement and fewer waivers that allow troops to have a beard. He also declared he would curtail whistleblower and inspector general functions, change how the military handles allegations of hazing and other types of abuse, and allow drill sergeants to “put their hands on recruits.”

“If the words I'm speaking today are making your heart sink, then you should do the honorable thing and resign,” Hegseth told the mostly stoic audience.

The comments prompted The New York Times to run an unusual headline last week, in which it invited senior military leaders to speak to the outlet should they indeed decide to resign.

“Are You Quitting the Military? We Want to Hear From You,” the Times's [Sept. 30 headline](#) read.

Some Democrats are urging military leaders who disagree with Hegseth to stay where they are.

“If the challenge was ‘get out,’ then I would say to those generals, ‘stay put,’” Rep. [Chrissy Houlahan](#) (D-Pa.), an Air Force veteran, said on CNN last week. “Because we need you. We need you and your experience to counter the message of Mr. Hegseth and frankly the president himself.”

Hegseth also promised to continue firing top brass who did not align with his vision. And Friday, he announced the ouster of Jon Harrison, the chief of staff of the secretary of the Navy, who was an appointee during the first Trump administration.

“As you have seen and the media has obsessed over, I have fired a number of senior officers since taking over,” Hegseth said in his Tuesday speech. “The rationale, for me, has been straightforward: It's nearly impossible to change a culture with the same people who helped create or even benefited from that culture, even if that culture was created by a previous president and previous secretary.”

Carrie Lee, a senior fellow with the German Marshall Fund, said she would not be surprised to see other retirement announcements following Hegseth's pointed words.

“Even though [Bussiere's] nomination for vice chief of staff of the Air Force had been pulled and his successor had been announced — there wasn't anywhere else for him to really go, right, career-wise — but the fact that the announcement dropped kind of the night of Hegseth's speech, I think that's probably not a coincidence,” Lee told The Hill.

“I would not be surprised to see retirements,” she added. “This is already happening at the more kind of lower senior to kind of upper, mid-grade level. So thinking about colonels and one-stars and two-stars, folks who are refusing assignments, choosing to retire rather than stay in the force, making kind of very personal decisions with their families about whether this is an institution that reflects their values or not.”

Michael O’Hanlon, a senior fellow in foreign policy at the Brookings Institution think tank, said he doubts there will be a mass exodus, but he does sense a “widespread anxiety” among those in the armed forces.

“When I talk to military officers, they have a range of views. Most of them don’t want to pick public fights with Trump. Most of them are not at the point of considering resignation. Some of them even like certain aspects of the administration,” he told The Hill. “You put it all together, there are very few people who are indifferent to these kinds of dramatic events, these kinds of changes.”

He added that he believes there are very few people who are getting ready to resign, “but there are a lot of people who are somewhere between nervous and anxious about where the all-volunteer force is headed, where the country is headed, and for the most part, they’re just trying to roll with the punches and do their jobs as long as they’re not being asked to violate the law or their oath.”

Lee pointed out that in declining to use his speech to focus on several pressing issues within the military, including steadily rising suicide rates among service members and persistent sexual assault rates, and instead harping on the Pentagon’s process for handling complaints and accusations, Hegseth likely alienated his top leaders.

“The Army has been dealing with very high suicide rates. It’s been dealing with a sexual assault crisis. It’s been dealing with a lot of people issues. And so they have made some very necessary, in my opinion, changes to the organization and to organizational culture that it sounds like Hegseth really wants to roll back,” she said.

“For many of the officers who are responsible for formations of troops and watched the suicide epidemic really ravage their units, and watched sexual assault tear units apart ... to then be told that ‘we don’t care about that anymore,’ when the Army is really a people organization, it doesn’t surprise me that there’s a lot of folks who aren’t going to stick around for that.”

Bussiere’s retirement announcement also follows that of the Air Force’s chief of staff, Gen. David Allvin, who in August said he would retire in November after serving two years of his four-year term. Though Bussiere did not mention Hegseth’s speech in his resignation note, he suggested he would find other ways to support the U.S. military after he leaves.

“While I’m stepping away from active duty, my commitment to service remains. I look forward to finding new ways to support our Air Force, our national defense and the incredible people who make it all possible,” he wrote.