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Veterans See Costs and Risks in Hegseth's Military Rewind to 1990

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Dave Philipps



Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth gathered nearly all of the nation's generals and admirals at Quantico, Va., on Tuesday to hear his vision for the military. Doug Mills/The New York Times

A ban on beards. A focus on physical fitness, and more protections for unapologetically aggressive leaders. In an unusual speech in front of hundreds of generals and admirals, and in a flurry of memorandums afterward, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth outlined his vision of a tougher and more disciplined military, without what he called “woke garbage” getting in the way.

But former military officers took issue with Mr. Hegseth's list of policy changes, saying that some of them seemed redundant and others threatened to undermine his goals of increased readiness and lethality.

The secretary focused heavily on personnel matters. In are mandatory shaving, more harrowing basic training and daily physical training for everyone. Out are requirements that protect whistle-blowers from

retribution and rules that require formally reviewing past misconduct when screening leaders for promotion.

[Don Christensen](#), a retired Air Force colonel and former military lawyer who watched the speech, said it seemed “disconnected from reality.”

“The big issues in the military are not with beards and people being out of shape and rampant D.E.I.,” said Mr. Christensen, who after retiring from the military led Protect Our Defenders, a group that protects whistle-blowers.

Mr. Hegseth urged the assembled generals and admirals to apply what he called the “1990 rule,” and scrutinize any changes to training or standards that were made in the last 35 years. “1990 seems to be as good a place to start as any,” Mr. Hegseth told his audience.

It was also the last year before laws that excluded women from combat roles were changed, starting a long process that has led to women serving in nearly every part of the armed forces, including top leadership. And since then, the military has become increasingly diverse as well.

Though Mr. Hegseth issued no new guidelines specific to women, he said all combat troops would be required to meet “the highest male standard only.”

“This is not about preventing women from serving,” he said. “But when it comes to any job that requires physical power to perform in combat, those physical standards must be high and gender-neutral. If women can make it, excellent. If not, it is what it is.”

This left a lot of people in uniform scratching their heads, because women who serve in combat roles already have to meet the same physical performance standards as men, and have been required to do so for as long as they have been allowed into those jobs, the last of which were opened to women nearly a decade ago.

Another of Mr. Hegseth’s directives was aimed at excluding from deployment nearly all troops who wear beards, including those with religious exceptions.

He spoke disparagingly about such troops. “No more beardos,” Mr. Hegseth told the assembled generals and admirals. “The era of rampant and ridiculous shaving profiles is done.” He added that if troops “don’t want to shave and look professional, it’s time for a new position or a new profession.”

Sukhbir Toor, a field artillery officer and observant Sikh who retired from the Marine Corps this year, said Mr. Hegseth’s remarks seemed disconnected from military reality.

“I just don’t think he understands what he’s talking about,” Mr. Toor said, “and the way he goes about it is extremely disrespectful.”

Like hundreds of other Sikhs, he was given permission to [wear a beard and a turban](#) while in uniform, and has shown he can effectively wear a gas mask with his beard. He said the new restrictions excluding troops with beards from deployment — an important step in earning promotion — would effectively cut short the careers of many observant Muslims and Jews, as well as his fellow Sikhs.

“We have Sikh service members serving right now in artillery, in infantry, in Special Operations, deployed around the world, away from their families,” he said. “We’ve shown we can do the job and we represent the warrior ethos that the secretary is talking about. To hear the secretary refer to us as beardos — to me, it’s appalling.”

To be sure, some of the issues Mr. Hegseth raised in his speech resonated with many in uniform. Shaving exemptions have proliferated, and leaders have been told not to question troops about them, for fear of violating medical privacy rules. Resolving complaints made to inspectors general can take months even when they are not supported by evidence, stalling the careers of the troops involved. And commanders often struggle to fit in all the training programs they have to take on topics like human trafficking and cybersecurity — requirements that Mr. Hegseth said would be reviewed.

“I don’t know how many of those trafficking trainings I sat through, even though it’s something I never dealt with,” said Mr. Christensen, who served in the Air Force for 20 years. “I one-hundred-percent agree that a review of those trainings makes sense.”

Mr. Toor also said Mr. Hegseth was right to call out many of the issues he raised in his talk. As a Marine captain, he encountered onerous training mandates and uneven enforcement of fitness standards, and saw scruffy faces proliferating in the ranks.

“The problems are real,” he said. “But I’m not sure he is going about them in a way that helps. I had really good Marines who, because of a medical condition, legitimately couldn’t shave. Under these rules, I would lose those guys. How is that making our military better?”

Mr. Christensen expressed similar concerns about changes that Mr. Hegseth made to the military’s offices of equal opportunity and inspector general, which investigate reports of misconduct and discrimination. Mr. Hegseth said those offices had been “weaponized, putting complainers, ideologues and poor performers in the driver’s seat.”

The new directives mandate that reports be dealt with swiftly, but also allow the military to identify and punish people who make complaints that are determined to be unfounded.

“This is only going to hurt,” Mr. Christensen said. “If you are afraid you’ll be punished for speaking up, just because the allegations couldn’t be proved, it will discourage a lot of people.

Noting that he had seen repeated abuses in his time running a group that protects whistle blowers, he added: “This system is in place for a reason. You only need to go back through recent history to see that complaints of sexual harassment, discrimination and other misconduct were founded.”

Mr. Christensen also found the secretary’s plans to allow drill instructors to be more aggressive during boot camp, and to drop long-established rules that restrict instructors from physically touching trainees, to be puzzling.

“Those rules were created after decades and decades of abuse and assault,” Mr. Christensen said. “I don’t think that will end well.”

Many of the regulations Mr. Hegseth is rolling back were put in place after 1990, as an increasingly diverse military learned to deal with problems like harassment and discrimination. For many troops, the year that

Mr. Hegseth has set as his standard was a dark time when sexual harassment **went unpunished** and **women were barred** from flying combat missions, serving on many warships or doing other work central to the military's mission.

"If we went back to the way it was in 1990, I would not have been allowed to do my job," said Elisa Cardnell, a former Navy officer who served on a destroyer and now runs the Service Women's Action Network. "Times have changed. We have a lot of women serving in combat, and we have shown that it can work."

There are now about 10,000 women serving in combat units. The number of women in the most physically demanding Special Operations jobs remains small, in part because the grueling physical standards required of all candidates for those roles are something that few men, and even fewer women, can meet.

Ms. Cardnell said she found it confusing when Mr. Hegseth, who has repeatedly said that he believed women did not belong in combat jobs, demands that the military stop lowering performance standards to make accommodations to women.

"He keeps talking about fixing a problem that doesn't exist," she said. "We all are required to meet the same standards. But I'm afraid we are at a point where women just existing in the military has become a political issue."