

Classification Analysis Report: Pete Hegseth Signal Messages

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Date: March 27, 2025

Executive Summary

This report assesses the classification status of messages sent by U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth via the Signal messaging application on March 15, 2025, under Executive Order 13526 (EO 13526). The analysis is based on the transcript released by The Atlantic on March 26, 2025, detailing operational plans for U.S. military strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen. Sent at 11:44 a.m. ET, two hours before strikes commenced at 1:45 p.m. ET, the messages are evaluated against the U.S. classification levels—Confidential, Secret, and Top Secret—considering potential damage to national security if disclosed, the feasibility of a Houthi reaction, and the context of Signal’s use with an assumed controlled audience. The report concludes that the messages merit a Confidential classification, as their disclosure could cause minor damage, but practical constraints and the secure transmission intent limit greater harm.

Introduction

On March 15, 2025, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth transmitted messages in a Signal group chat titled “Houthi PC small group,” inadvertently including journalist Jeffrey Goldberg of The Atlantic among its 18 senior official members. The messages provided operational details for imminent U.S. airstrikes on Houthi targets in Yemen, sparking debate over their sensitivity after their publication on March 26, 2025. This report determines their appropriate classification under EO 13526 by analyzing content, potential disclosure impacts, Hegseth’s authority as an Original Classification Authority (OCA), and the significance of using Signal with an intended controlled audience, as highlighted by the requester.

Data and Methodology

Source Material

- Transcript: Released by The Atlantic, March 26, 2025, from the Signal chat:
 - Hegseth (11:44 a.m. ET): “TIME NOW (1144et): Weather is FAVORABLE. Just CONFIRMED w/CENTCOM we are a GO for mission launch.”
 - “1345: ‘Trigger Based’ F-18 1st Strike Window Starts (Target Terrorist is @ his Known Location so SHOULD BE ON TIME – also, Strike Drones Launch (MQ-9s))”
 - “1410: More F-18s LAUNCH (2nd strike package)”
 - Waltz (2:10 p.m. ET): “Strikes underway ... Tomahawks launched from Red Sea.”
 - Post-strike: References to a “top missile guy” hit in a collapsed building.
- Context: 18-member chat including VP JD Vance and NSA Michael Waltz; strikes occurred at 1:45 p.m. ET (9:45 p.m. Yemen time); Signal used as an encrypted platform; no reported Houthi reaction.

Classification Standards (EO 13526)

- Confidential: Disclosure could cause “damage” to national security.
- Secret: Disclosure could cause “serious damage.”
- Top Secret: Disclosure could cause “exceptionally grave damage.”

Methodology

- Examine message content for sensitivity.
- Assess potential damage if disclosed, including Houthi reaction feasibility within two hours.
- Evaluate Hegseth’s OCA role, Signal’s use, and the controlled audience assumption.
- Assign a classification level based on synthesized findings.

Analysis

Content Assessment

- Timing: Sent at 11:44 a.m. ET (7:44 p.m. Yemen time); strikes at 1:45 p.m. ET (9:45 p.m. Yemen time)—a 2-hour lead.

- Weapons: F-18 jets, MQ-9 drones, Tomahawks (confirmed post-strike).
- Targets: “Target Terrorist” at a “Known Location”; later a “top missile guy”—no specific identifiers or coordinates.
- Details: CENTCOM approval, weather conditions, strike sequencing.

Potential Disclosure Impact

- Scenario: Disclosure at 11:44 a.m. ET to the Houthis via leak (e.g., Goldberg publication or chat member relay).

- Houthi Reaction Feasibility:

- Capabilities: Decentralized militia with limited comms (radio, runners); basic defenses (SAMs); no real-time U.S. media monitoring.

- Access: Signal’s encryption limits external interception; Goldberg published days later (March 24).

Immediate relay to Houthis requires insider action (unsubstantiated).

- Response Options:

- Evacuation: Relocating a target needs transport and a new site. Two hours at night (7:44 p.m.–9:45 p.m. Yemen time) restricts mobility; “Known Location” vagueness hinders precision.

- Defenses: Activating SAMs or dispersing assets demands preparation. Two hours permits basic alertness, but not effective countermeasures against F-18s/drones.

- Counterattack: No capacity for preemptive action in 2 hours.

- Conclusion: A significant reaction is infeasible due to time, logistics, and lack of specifics.

Damage Levels

1. Confidential:

- Potential: Minor disruption—e.g., heightened alertness or a lucky VIP evacuation—could reduce strike effectiveness. Two hours might allow small moves, but success is improbable without detailed intel.

- Likelihood: Low but possible with fortunate Houthi guessing.

- Signal Context: Use of an encrypted app for a controlled audience aligns with Confidential handling, suggesting intent to limit disclosure risk to minor damage.

2. Secret:

- Potential: Significant disruption—e.g., relocating key assets or thwarting strikes—requires time and specifics beyond 2 hours and “Known Location.” Signal’s security further reduces leak feasibility.

- Likelihood: Negligible given constraints and transmission context.

3. Top Secret:

- Potential: Grave harm—e.g., troop deaths, intel compromise—needs detailed data (e.g., sources, coordinates) not included. Two hours and Signal use don’t enable this.

- Likelihood: None based on content and platform.

Hegseth’s OCA Authority and Signal Use

- As Secretary of Defense, Hegseth can classify/declassify within EO 13526. His use of Signal, an encrypted platform, and assumption of a controlled audience (18 cleared officials) indicate he viewed the info as sensitive but not requiring classified systems, aligning with Confidential protocols. His statement (“no war plans”) suggests he deemed it unclassified, though no formal declassification is noted. Standard practice (e.g., CENTCOM norms) tags pre-strike details as Secret, but Signal’s use supports a lower risk intent breached by Goldberg’s inclusion.

Actual Outcome

- No leak reached the Houthis; strikes succeeded (9:55 p.m. Yemen time). This informs feasibility but not classification, which focuses on potential.

Findings

- Confidential: The messages fit here. Disclosure could cause “damage”—e.g., minor operational setbacks—but the 2-hour window, vague targets, and Houthi limits cap impact. Signal’s encryption and controlled audience assumption reinforce this, reflecting a secure handling intent consistent with Confidential.
- Secret: Overstated. “Serious damage” requires a feasible, major disruption, which the content, timing, and platform don’t support.
- Top Secret: Inapplicable. No intel sources or troop-endangering specifics justify “exceptionally grave damage.”

Conclusion

The Signal messages sent by Pete Hegseth on March 15, 2025, warrant a Confidential classification under EO 13526. Unauthorized disclosure could potentially cause “damage” to national security by enabling minor Houthi adjustments, but the two-hour window, lack of actionable specifics, and practical constraints on Houthi reaction render a significant response infeasible, precluding “serious” or “exceptionally grave” harm. Hegseth’s use of Signal and assumption of a controlled audience of senior officials further support this level, reflecting an intent to protect the information consistent with Confidential handling, though the accidental inclusion of a journalist breached that control. As an OCA, Hegseth could designate it unclassified, but absent a formal rationale, Confidential reflects the content’s inherent risk and aligns with standard criteria.

Recommendations

- Policy: Review Signal use for operational discussions to prevent accidental disclosures.
- Further Inquiry: If additional chat details emerge (e.g., specific targets), reassess for higher classification.
- Training: Reinforce classification protocols for senior officials to align with EO 13526.

End of Report

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