



Pete Hegseth, Trump's embattled pick for defense secretary, wins Senate confirmation

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Tom Bowman



Pete Hegseth, President Trump's nominee for secretary of defense, speaks during a Senate Armed Services confirmation hearing on Jan. 14.

Chen Mengtong/China News Service/VCG via Getty Images

Pete Hegseth overcame allegations of sexual assault, public drunkenness and questions of financial mismanagement at two veterans' groups he ran to narrowly win Senate approval to become Donald Trump's defense secretary.

The vote was 50-50. Vice President Vance cast a tie-breaking vote, later officiating Hegseth's swearing in.

The confirmation vote was razor thin because three key GOP senators — Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, Alaska's Lisa Murkowski and Susan Collins of Maine — voted no.

The only previous time a vice president broke a tie on a Cabinet confirmation vote was during the first Trump term when Vice President Mike Pence cast a vote to confirm Betsy DeVos, who became education secretary.



POLITICS

Pete Hegseth, Trump's defense secretary pick, grilled at contentious Senate hearing

Murkowski and Collins cited the allegations against Hegseth and his lack of executive experience. In a statement, McConnell said: "Mr. Hegseth has failed, as yet, to demonstrate that he will pass this test. But as he assumes office, the consequences of failure are as high as they have ever been."

Talking to reporters in California after the vote, Trump said Hegseth would make a great defense secretary. He said he didn't know McConnell voted no, but added: "Winning is all that matters."

If just one more Republican had voted with Senate Democrats to oppose Hegseth, it would have sunk the nomination.

Among the allegations that Hegseth has faced was an [accusation of sexually assaulting a woman at a Republican conference](#) in 2017. Hegseth later signed a nondisclosure agreement and paid a financial settlement. In addition, [a former sister-in-law accused](#) him of "abusive" behavior toward his second wife, who denied any physical abuse. And Hegseth was in charge of two veterans' nonprofit groups [where more money was spent than was taken in](#). Hegseth has called any allegations against him false, the result of disgruntled employees or part of media smear campaigns against him.

The 44-year-old Hegseth, an Army National Guard combat veteran and a former Fox News host, has no background in running a large organization. During his confirmation hearing, Hegseth addressed his lack of experience, saying instead he had "dust on his boots" from his combat deployments to Iraq. He also vowed to be a "change agent" and "disruptor" at the Pentagon.



POLITICS

Affidavit by Hegseth's ex-sister-in-law makes new claims about his behavior

Since the post of defense secretary was created in 1947, those who have held it all came from senior positions in politics, industry or the military.

The Republican chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, said Hegseth's work as a Fox News host could be beneficial in his new role at the Pentagon.

"We must not underestimate the importance of having a top-shelf communicator as secretary of defense. Other than the president, no official plays a larger role in telling the men and women in uniform, the Congress and the public about the threats we face and the need for a peace-through-strength defense policy," Wicker said.

Hegseth has said he wants to restore lethality to a military he described as "woke" with diversity equity and inclusion (DEI) programs he claims have taken the place of a focus on war fighting. He pledged to make sure promotions are based on merit alone and not what he incorrectly describes as quotas for women and minorities.

At his recent confirmation hearings to lead the Pentagon he was challenged over his allegations of a quota system. New York Democratic Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, holding a copy of the current military standards for men and women serving in the infantry, said, "Commanders do not have to meet quotas for women in the infantry. That does not exist. And your statements are creating the impression that these exist. They do not."

He has also criticized senior Pentagon leaders, including Joint Chiefs Chairman General CQ Brown — the second African American man to hold the job — as well as Admiral Lisa Franchetti, the first woman to lead the Navy.

"First of all, you got to fire the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Any general that was involved, general, admiral, whatever, that was involved in any of the DEI woke s*** has got to go," Hegseth said on the *Shawn Ryan Show*.



NATIONAL SECURITY

What's behind defense secretary pick Hegseth's war on 'woke'

Such comments have sent shockwaves through the Pentagon, amid concerns that Hegseth would start firing senior officers. During the waning days of the first Trump administration there were efforts by Trump officials to remove senior officers to get "their" officers in command, according to *The Melting Point*, by retired Gen. Frank McKenzie, the former top officer at U.S. Central Command.

"This was overpoliticization of the officer corps," McKenzie wrote, "and no single thing could have been more dangerous to the future of the U.S. military than a scheme like this." In the end, nothing came of these proposed personnel changes.

Hegseth has also said on Shawn Ryan's show that women should not be allowed in ground combat units.

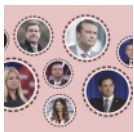
"I'm straight-up just saying we should not have women in combat roles," he said. "It hasn't made us more effective, hasn't made us more lethal, has made fighting more complicated."

Women have been eligible for ground combat jobs since 2016. There are now some 3,800 women serving in Army infantry, armor, artillery. Another 700 women are in Marine ground combat units.

Hegseth at his confirmation hearing softened his stance on women in ground combat roles.

"Every service member, regardless of gender, who can meet objective occupational and readiness standards for a career field should have the opportunity to compete for jobs in that field," Hegseth told the Senate Armed Services Committee earlier this month.

"In those ground combat roles, what is true is that the weight of the ruck on your back doesn't change, the weight of the 155 round that you have to carry doesn't change, the weight of the 240 Bravo machine gun you might have to carry doesn't change. And so, whether it's a man or a woman, they have to meet the same high standards," he said.



POLITICS

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Still, Hegseth has charged that standards have been lowered to allow more women into Army ground combat units, a view strongly disputed by Army officials. Hegseth has pledged to review the standards as secretary.

Issues for the Trump administration's defense department

Hegseth will inherit a military that is no longer involved in a major war, but is still engaged in Iraq and Syria, working with local forces to go after the remnants of ISIS. American troops are also training with African forces to counter any militants in North Africa. Among the questions as this new administration starts is whether Trump will continue that anti-ISIS mission that continues to target ISIS training and command centers.

Another issue likely to come up is the U.S. relations with NATO members. Trump has long criticized the alliance for not paying enough for their own defense and recently called on alliance members to spend five percent of their GDP on defense. The U.S. now spends less than three percent on defense.

An immediate focus for Hegseth will be providing military assistance to the southern border. Already some 1,500 active duty troops have been sent there to assist border patrol, with jobs that include building barriers and providing transportation. Pentagon officials say thousands more troops are expected to be sent in the coming weeks and months.

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