

THE ATLANTIC DAILY

The Administration Wants Military Women to Know Their Place

Pete Hegseth seems to be on a mission to erase women from the top ranks of the U.S. armed forces.

By Tom Nichols



Brendan Smialowski / AFP / Getty

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Updated at 7.44 p.m. ET

President Donald Trump and Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth seem to be on a mission to erase women from the top ranks of the U.S. armed forces. Last week, they took another step along this path by removing the first female head of the United States Naval Academy, in Annapolis, Maryland.

The Naval Academy was founded in 1845, but didn't admit its first class of women until 1976. The head of the school is known as the superintendent, and Annapolis would not get its first female admiral in that position until 2024. Now the first woman to serve as the “supe” has been reassigned and replaced by a man, and for the first time in the academy's history, the role went to a Marine. Last week, the Navy removed Vice Admiral Yvette Davids from her post and replaced her with Lieutenant General Michael Borgschulte. (Maybe Hegseth thinks Marines are more *lethal*, to use his favorite Pentagon worship word.) Davids has been sent to the Pentagon, where she will be a deputy chief of naval operations, a senior—but relatively invisible—position.

No reason was given for reassigning Davids. Superintendents typically serve for three to five years, but Davids was pulled from the job after 18 months. (A short tenure can be a sign of some sort of problem; for what it's worth, the secretary of the Navy, John Phelan—who has never served in the Navy and has no background in national-defense issues—offered rote praise when announcing her de facto firing as the supe.)

Trump and Hegseth have been on a firing spree throughout the military, especially when it comes to removing women from senior positions. This past winter, the administration fired Admiral Lisa Franchetti, the first female chief of naval operations; Admiral Linda Fagan, the first female Coast Guard commandant; and Lieutenant General Jennifer Short, who was serving as the senior military assistant to the secretary of defense, all within weeks of one another. I taught for many years at the

U.S. Naval War College, where I worked under its first female president, Vice Admiral Shoshana Chatfield. In 2023, she became the U.S. military representative to the NATO Military Committee—and then she was fired in April, apparently in part because of a presentation she gave on Women’s Equality Day *10 years ago*.

At this point, women have been cleared out of all of the military’s top jobs. They are not likely to be replaced by other women: Of the three dozen four-star officers on active duty in the U.S. armed forces, none is female, and none of the administration’s pending appointments for senior jobs even at the three-star level is a woman.

Some observers might see a pattern here.

Discerning this pattern does not exactly require Columbo-level sleuthing. Hegseth’s antipathy toward women in the armed forces was well documented back in 2024 by none other than Hegseth himself. In his book *The War on Warriors*, Hegseth decried what he believed was “social engineering” by the American left: “While the American people had always rejected the radical-feminist so-called ‘Equal Rights Amendment,’ Team Obama could fast-track their social engineering through the military’s top-down chain of command.” (This is probably why Hegseth also fired the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General C. Q. Brown, who is a Black man; Brown was let go for ostensibly being too interested in promoting diversity in the armed forces.)

Not that the secretary hates women, you should understand. Some of his best friends ... well, as he put it in his book last year: “It’s not that individual women can’t be courageous, ambitious, and honorable. I know many phenomenal female soldiers. The problem is that the Left needs *every* woman to be as successful as every man, so they’ve redefined success in a counterproductive way.”

I’m sure that the more than 225,000 American women who serve their country in uniform are relieved to know that they, too, can be courageous, and all that other great stuff. But Hegseth seems to be implying that many women in today’s military might have had their fitness reports massaged “in a counterproductive way” to meet some sort of “woke” quota. And that, you see, is why the U.S. military’s most-senior female officers had to be removed: They were clearly part of some affirmative-action

scheme. *Thank you for your service, ladies, but let's remember that the Pentagon's E-Ring is for the men.*

Oddly, Hegseth has no problem with “social engineering” as long as it’s engineering something closer to 1955 than 2025. Indeed, he writes, the military “has always been about social engineering—forging young men (mostly) with skills, discipline, pride, and a brotherhood.” One might think that the goal is also to instill respect for one’s comrades, regardless of gender, and to defend the country and honor the Constitution, but Hegseth is more worried about what he fears is the distracting influence of women in the military. “Men and women are different,” he writes, “with men being more aggressive.” (I read this in Cliff Clavin’s voice: “Yes, Diane ... hold on to your hat, too, because the very letters *DNA* are an acronym for the words *Dames are Not Aggressive.*”) Hegseth goes on: “Men act differently toward women than they do other men. Men like women and are distracted by women. They also want to impress, and protect, women.”

In other words, after forging these neo-Spartans with some of the finest training from the most powerful military the world has ever known, Americans still must worry that these carbon-steel warriors, ready to do battle with any number of global menaces, might have their “lethality” sabotaged by the fluttering eyelashes and shapely gams of their sisters in arms.

I was teaching senior officers, male and female, from all branches of the armed forces when Hegseth was still in high school. His view of women in the U.S. military would be beneath serious comment were he not, through the malpractice of the Republican majority in the U.S. Senate, the sitting secretary of defense. Instead of defending the nation—or keeping track of the security of his own communications—he is trying to make the American military inhospitable to half of the nation’s population.

As Nora Bensahel, a scholar of civil-military relations at Johns Hopkins University, told me, the firing of Davids and other women “is deliberately sending a chilling message to the women who are already serving in uniform, and to girls who may be thinking about doing so, that they are not welcome—even though the military would not be able to meet its recruiting numbers without those very same women.”

Today is my late mother's birthday. She enlisted in the Air Force and served during the Korean War. She came from a poor family, and had to leave the military when her father was dying. But she was deeply proud of her service in America's armed forces; I remember watching her march in uniform in hometown parades. She would be heartbroken—and furious—to know that more than a half century after her service, the message to the women of the United States from the current commander in chief and his secretary of defense amounts to a sexist warning: *Feel free to join the military and serve your country—but know your place.*

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Today's News

1. House Speaker Mike Johnson [blocked a potential floor vote](#) on the release of additional files in the Jeffrey Epstein case until at least September.
2. The Trump administration released [more than 240,000 pages](#) of long-sealed FBI files on Martin Luther King Jr. last night, prompting [warnings from his family](#) about the potential misuse of surveillance records to distort his legacy.

3. President Donald Trump met with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. at the White House and agreed to a trade deal that imposes a 19 percent tariff on goods from the Philippines.

Evening Read



A narrow street in Corfu's Old Town Alice Zoo for The Atlantic

Chasing le Carré in Corfu

By Honor Jones

Black dress, pink coat, thick beige stockings. This is the third time I've seen her. She walks down the middle of the street outside my window, her head bent forward under its helmet of grandmother hair.

She carries her handbag like a briefcase with a bomb in it. She has the look of someone whose friends are all dead.

I saw her first outside Saint Spyridon Church, lighting a candle. And then again in Spianada Square, among the scootering children. I lean out the window to watch her disappear around the corner. Maybe there's nothing suspicious about it. Corfu is a small city, on a small island in Greece. From my hotel room I can see the green edge of the cricket pitch where, in John le Carré's *A Perfect Spy*, the Czech agent, Axel, chased Magnus Pym in slow, limping circles.

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Culture Break



Universal Pictures / Alamy

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P.S.



Courtesy of Tom Nichols

I hope that readers of the Daily won't mind a personal reminiscence. My mother used to tell me, when I was a boy in the 1960s, that if any other kid used the old insult "Your mother wears Army boots," I should always correct them: "*Air Force* boots." Here's a picture of my mother, barely an adult, in her uniform. She joined alongside

her sister, and both of them went to basic training in Texas—at that time, the farthest from home my mother had ever been. She later was assigned to do office work at an Air Force base in Massachusetts. Like other poor kids from rough backgrounds, she found order and a home, however briefly, in the military, and was proud of her service 'til the end of her life.

— Tom



Courtesy of Tom Nichols

This article originally misidentified who was responsible for firing Admiral Linda Fagan.

Rafaela Jinich contributed to this newsletter.

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