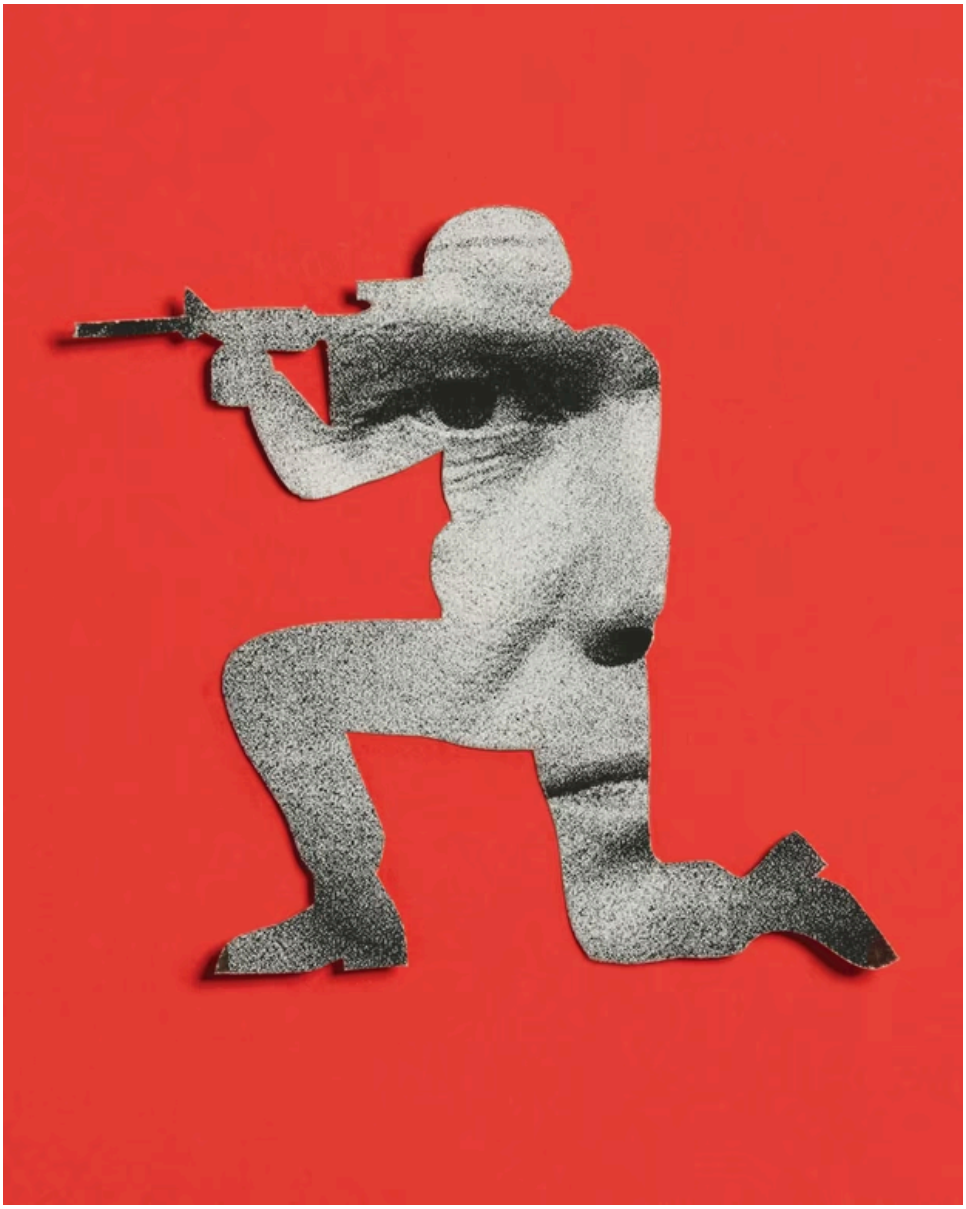
NATIONAL SECURITY

WHAT PETE HEGSETH DOESN'T UNDERSTAND ABOUT SOLDIERS

Lethality alone doesn't win wars.

By Mike Nelson



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In the summer of 2014, I was leading a company of Green Berets—from the 5th Special Forces Group—in Afghanistan's Kunduz province. President Barack Obama had recently promised an end of combat operations in the country, and the Taliban understood the tactical implications of his statement, believing that the drawdown of coalition forces meant they could now operate with impunity. They further believed that during the holy month of Ramadan, our Afghan partners, too tired from fasting during the day, would not conduct large-scale operations against them. My company, along with commandos from Afghanistan's 5th Special Operations Kandak, decided to surprise them.

Over the course of a week, we would assault Taliban strongholds, striking enemy forces when and where they believed they were most secure.

During one of these operations, in Dasht-e-Archi district, a combined American and Afghan team had just stepped off the helicopters when Taliban machine-gun crews opened fire. Our soldiers responded without hesitation, killing several enemy fighters and capturing a Taliban machine gunner. At that moment, the team leader radioed me. He was suddenly confronting a scenario that every Green Beret officer prepares for during the Special Forces Qualification Course: His foreign counterpart was about to commit a war crime.

The machine gunner was severely wounded and, in the dark colloquialism of our profession, circling the drain. An Afghan lieutenant argued that the fighter didn't deserve mercy; his commandos should finish him off. The impulse was understandable in the lieutenant's heightened post-combat state; the proposal was also illegal and morally reprehensible.

The team leader helped talk the Afghan lieutenant down. The Talib would not be executed. Our medics worked to stabilize the man who had just tried to mow them down with a PKM machine gun. This decision was less about what the fighter deserved and more about the kind of soldiers that my men were, and that we wanted our Afghan partners to be.

That night's events tell two stories. The first is that my team needed to destroy the enemy, using quick and lethal violence. This imperative is the core rationale for any army's existence. But my team members also needed to act as professional soldiers: to set aside their emotional impulses, even in moments of fear, and uphold the law and the moral standards of the United States Army. Anger, resentment, and the desire for retribution can never be fully suppressed. Just as saints feel tempted to sin, even the most moral people can find themselves pushed to the limits by the compounding stresses of combat.

I spent 23 years as a paratrooper and Green Beret, most of them during the War on Terror, and I faced many frustrating moments. During the first year of the Iraq War, civilians regularly stopped Americans on the street and hectored us: "You guys are the authority now. When is my electricity coming back? Where can I go to get ice?"

After enough confrontations, even the most idealistic among us started to think, *Screw these people*. But in our disciplined fighting force, somebody would pipe up: "That Iraqi's upset because he has no power, and he's just trying to feed his family." The malignant impulse to start hating all Iraqis or Afghans was checked before it was allowed to metastasize. Through shared expectations, we held one another accountable. Sometimes, service members would provide calm, steady counsel to someone at risk of lashing out. In other cases, when American soldiers violated our norms and committed crimes, their colleagues would seek justice, as was the case when three Iraqi detainees were killed in 2006 by soldiers from 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division— a unit that had recently included a young lieutenant named Pete Hegseth.

THE QUESTION of how the U.S. military should conduct itself is under new scrutiny, as Hegseth, now the secretary of defense, has declared that his priorities for the Pentagon will be lethality and returning the military "to the war fighters." As he said at the Army War College in April, "Everything starts and ends with warriors in training and on the battlefield. We are leaving wokeness and weakness behind."

Hegseth, who served in Iraq as an infantry platoon leader and in Afghanistan as a staff officer, was not involved in the Iraqi detainees' deaths, but he knew men whose lives were upended by the investigation. Today, he is tapping into the notion that President Joe Biden and some of his predecessors tied up the American military with overly restrictive rules of engagement, and that the country's long and disappointing post-9/11 wars might have turned out better had service members been given freer rein. Anything that falls outside Hegseth's vision of lethality is painted as a woke distraction, and anyone suggesting restraint is a hindrance or a remnant of the previous regime.

Parts of this agenda seem like common sense. Why wouldn't a department charged with fighting America's wars encourage a warrior spirit by empowering the people who risk their life in combat? Clearly it should. Still, Hegseth risks creating a false dichotomy—that one must choose between lethality and professionalism. This view comes at a cost to operational effectiveness as well as moral clarity.

Hegseth is positioning himself as the tribune of the common soldier, whom he will protect from ladder-climbing careerists. As a Fox News commentator, Hegseth campaigned on behalf of three American service members accused or convicted of war crimes. Eddie Gallagher had been accused by his fellow SEALs of killing a wounded teenage prisoner; acquitted of murder, he was convicted of posing for photos with the prisoner's body and demoted. (He later seemed to admit on a podcast to a role in killing the detainee.) Mathew Golsteyn, a former Green Beret officer, was charged with murder for allegedly executing a released Afghan detainee. The paratrooper officer Clint Lorance was convicted of ordering his soldiers to kill Afghan civilians. Golsteyn and Lorance both maintained that they had acted legally.

These suspects were turned in not by woke Pentagon officials but by other "war fighters." Nevertheless, during Donald Trump's first term as president, he pardoned Golsteyn and Lorance and reversed Gallagher's demotion. In effect, Trump and Hegseth have taken an extreme position: that the way to support American troops is to avoid second-guessing anything they do.

The suspicion that senior officers care more about appeasing their superiors than easing the average soldier's predicament is hardly new. Anton Myrer's 1968 novel, *Once an Eagle*, contrasted the Army career of the obsequious Courtney Massengale with that of the muddy-booted warrior Sam Damon. In *The Centurions*, Jean Lartéguy's classic 1960 novel about the French campaigns in Indochina and Algeria, one character wishes there could be two distinct armies—one for display in polite society and one engaged in the dirty business of winning battles. These books prefigure the view held by some Iraq and Afghanistan veterans that lawyers, politicians, and the cowardly generals who kowtowed to them prevented American victories.

Hegseth's perspective reflects what he learned as a platoon leader—when his duty was to maximize his subordinates' effectiveness at inflicting violence when needed. It also bespeaks his lack of experience at higher levels of military or civilian leadership. The complexities of procuring new weapons systems, making trade-offs among competing priorities, and maintaining relationships with foreign governments were all someone else's job, as was, of course, providing strategic military advice to the president.

Just as a *Fortune 500* company does not hire its CEO directly out of college, the Pentagon does not assign a new lieutenant to command a division. In most cases, the military gives emerging leaders just enough responsibility to help them grow, while senior commanders temper their rougher instincts.

On the morning of June 6, the 81st anniversary of D-Day, Hegseth boasted on X that he was doing physical training on Omaha Beach with soldiers from the 75th Ranger Regiment. It was only the latest in a series of updates about his workouts with elite units. The posts might be good for morale, but he appears far more eager to present himself as a jacked-up model warrior than to do the less glamorous work of running the Pentagon.

Every branch of the military faces multidimensional problems. Accelerating the construction of Navy vessels—to choose just one of many pressing examples—means dealing with budget and personnel constraints, nuclear-safety laws, and the limited

capacity of the American shipbuilding industry. Solving these big, difficult, and often boring strategic challenges is what the troops most need a defense secretary to do.

When I was a junior officer, I bristled at commanders who I felt didn't understand the realities I was dealing with. Sometimes, my frustration was the product of youthful arrogance divorced from larger realities— a problem remedied by time and experience. In some cases, though, the frustration was legitimate. I watched as decisions at the highest levels wasted initiative, resources, and, in many cases, lives.

I also understand why many soldiers feel hemmed in by Pentagon bureaucracy in more prosaic ways. Anyone who has spent time at Fort Bragg, as I did at the start of my career, knows the elaborate lengths the Army has taken to avoid disturbing the red-cockaded woodpecker. Military personnel are subject to annual training requirements—on avoiding phishing scams, handling classified information—that feel oppressive in the aggregate. When Don't Ask, Don't Tell ended in 2011, the exhaustive training sessions in preparation for the policy change were far more disruptive to our work than the change itself was.

But for all the complaints about weakness and wokeness, America's military remains at its most effective when inspired to maintain both its professionalism and its warrior culture. In 2005, General Erik Kurilla, currently the head of U.S. Central Command, found himself in a close-up fight in the alleys of Mosul—a fight that ended with Kurilla shot multiple times and his sergeant major beating an insurgent in hand-to-hand combat. Kurilla embodied a warrior ethos. But he was also the officer who, after a British aid worker was killed in a failed attempt to rescue her from the Taliban in 2010, insisted on holding SEAL Team 6 members accountable for deceiving higher-ups about the circumstances of her death.

Meanwhile, America's disciplined armed forces outperform those that have supposedly embraced an unbound warrior mentality. In 2021, Senator Ted Cruz and others bemoaned that U.S. Army recruiting commercials were not sufficiently masculine compared with those for the Russian Airborne Forces, only to see the same Russian forces largely wiped out at Hostomel, in Ukraine, nine months later. Perhaps Cruz

could have learned from the 2018 rout of hardened Russian veterans who tried to challenge the U.S. military in Khasham, Syria.

Military historians can point to many examples of cultures—Sparta, the Confederacy, early-20th-century Germany—that counted on their martial spirit to bring them victory, but instead lost to armies that had both a warrior ethos and important strategic advantages. Many soldiers in a losing fight will blame external factors: After World War I, disgruntled Germans refused to acknowledge that their country's war aims had been dishonorable and unrealistic and that their armaments makers had been too slow to innovate. Instead, they insisted that their army had been stabbed in the back. This mindset leads in dangerous directions, as Germany showed two decades later.

Although most wars have been fought for conquest or plunder, Americans tend to be more comfortable with the use of force when it is seen as virtuous, an extension of the values that we feel make us exceptional. This moral dimension is also a concrete strategic asset. When American forces are perceived as acting immorally, they directly undermine national objectives. Domestic and international support erode, fueling enemy propaganda and complicating cooperation with allies and local populations.

Sometimes, broader strategic goals force high-level commanders to limit what soldiers do. In Afghanistan in 2011, many disliked the constraints our superiors imposed on nighttime raids at the demand of Hamid Karzai, the country's American-backed president. Yet those constraints reflected the basic premises of the war: Americans were liberators, not occupiers. We had troops in the country at the request of the local government, which meant that, at times, we had to modify our tactics and procedures in deference to the local government.

Leadership at the Defense Department should not overcorrect for past mistakes. Failure to recognize the brutal truths of combat and to embrace a warrior ethos risks losing future wars. But a cultlike devotion to achieving that ethos without connection to larger values risks losing our way.

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