

**OPENING STATEMENT OF U.S. SENATOR JACK REED
RANKING MEMBER, SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**

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[To conduct a hearing on the nomination of
Mr. Peter Hegseth to be Secretary of Defense](#)

(As prepared for delivery)

REED: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to congratulate you on your Chairmanship. I look forward to continuing our committee's strong tradition of bipartisanship and collaboration.

I would also take a moment to join Chairman Wicker in welcoming the new members to our committee. Senators Slotkin, Banks, and Sheehy: welcome. We look forward to working with you.

Mr. Hegseth, I welcome you and your family to today's hearing. I am also glad to recognize my former colleague, Senator Norm Coleman, as well as Congressman Mike Waltz.

Mr. Hegseth, I want to begin by saying that I respect and appreciate your military service in the Army National Guard. I know from experience that there is no greater privilege than to lead American soldiers, and I thank you for answering that call.

You have been nominated to be Secretary of Defense. The Secretary is responsible for leading a Department of three and a half million servicemembers and civilians,

an annual budget of nearly \$900 billion, and hundreds of thousands of aircraft, ships, submarines, combat vehicles, satellites, and the nuclear arsenal.

The Secretary also plays a powerful role with our allies, partners, and adversaries abroad. As we speak, China is seeking to undermine our interests, intimidate our friends, and challenge our standing in world. Russia's campaign against Ukraine threatens not only Europe, but the entire global order. Ongoing violence in the Middle East has teetered on edge of all-out war. And the ideologies and actions of violent extremists endanger our citizens, even on our own soil, as the recent tragedy in New Orleans painfully reminds us.

These are perilous times, and the position of Secretary of Defense demands a leader of unparalleled experience, wisdom, and, above all else, character. The Secretary is expected to be a fair, nonpartisan, and responsible leader, as well as a trustworthy advocate for men and women he leads.

Mr. Hegseth, I do not believe that you are qualified to meet the overwhelming demands of this job.

We must acknowledge the concerning public reports against you. A variety of sources – including your own writings – implicate you with disregarding laws of war, financial mismanagement, racist and sexist remarks about men and women in uniform, alcohol abuse, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and other troubling issues. I have reviewed many of these allegations, and find them extremely alarming.

Indeed, the totality of your own writings and alleged conduct would disqualify any servicemember from holding any leadership position in the military, much less being confirmed as the Secretary of Defense.

Nonetheless, I understand that you reject many of these reports as they involve whistleblowers, nondisclosure agreements, and anonymous—although numerous—sources; including those who have faced political intimidation for sharing their experiences. I hope you will address each of these allegations thoroughly and truthfully during your testimony. Just as importantly, I hope you will pledge to prevent any repercussions for whistleblowers, both civilian and military, if confirmed.

Mr. Hegseth, during our meeting last week, you said that, if confirmed, your top priority would be, quote, “restoring a warrior culture” to the Department of Defense, because you believe the U.S. military has been weakened by “political correctness.” Over the years, you have made clear your opinion of the military’s diversity initiatives. As you have said, quote, “Diversity is not our strength. Unity is.” And on a recent podcast, you said, quote, “I’m straight up just saying we should not have women in combat roles.”

When I joined the Army as a young officer in the 1970s, the U.S. military was rife with racial tension, women were prohibited from serving in most roles, gay servicemembers were banned, and we relied on a national draft to fill our ranks. The soldiers I served with were proud to do so, but it was certainly not the nation’s most capable military by any standard.

We have made great progress since then. Today, the Department of Defense is fully integrated, every race and religion is accepted, women serve in all combat roles and leadership positions, sexual orientation is irrelevant to service, and the All-Volunteer Force visibly reflects the nation it protects.

Our military is more diverse than it has ever been, but more importantly, it is more *lethal* than it has ever been. This is not a coincidence. Mr. Hegseth, I hope you will explain why you believe such diversity is making the military weak, and how you propose to “undo” that without undermining military leadership and harming readiness, recruitment, and retention.

Mr. Hegseth, another reason I am deeply concerned about your nomination is your disregard for the law of armed conflict and your support for servicemembers who have been convicted of war crimes. You have championed the pardoning of military members who were turned in by their fellow soldiers and SEALs, as well as military contractors convicted of killing 14 Iraqi citizens without cause.

You have also advocated for the reinstatement of interrogation methods like waterboarding that have been defined as torture, and you have belittled the advice and counsel of the Judge Advocates General while on deployment. In your book, *The War on Warriors*, you write, quote: “Should we follow the Geneva Conventions?...If our warriors are forced to follow rules arbitrarily and asked to

sacrifice more lives so that international tribunals feel better about themselves, aren't we just better off in winning our wars according to our own rules?!"

Mr. Hegseth, I would ask that you explain how you, if confirmed, would maintain good order and discipline and the support of our allies and partners with such alarming views.

I am also concerned about your abilities as a competent manager of organizations far less complex than the Department of Defense.

From 2008 to 2010, you led the organization Veterans for Freedom, which had an annual budget of less than \$10 million. In each year you were in charge, expenses far exceeded revenues, until the organization teetered on bankruptcy and had to be merged with another group.

In fact, according to public reporting, an independent forensic accountant reviewed the organization's finances and discovered evidence of gross financial mismanagement. I would note that this report has not been made available to any government agencies. A Republican advisor to you during your tenure at the organization, who read the report, stated, quote, "I watched him run an organization very poorly, lose the confidence of donors. The organization ultimately folded and was forced to merge with another organization who individuals felt could run and manage funds on behalf of donors more responsibly than he could. . . I don't know how he's going to run an organization with an \$857 billion budget and three million individuals."

A similar thing happened with Concerned Veterans for America, a second veterans' group that you led from 2011 until 2016. During those five years, tax records show that the organization spent more than it raised. Just as troubling are reports that a significant amount of debt was incurred from social events and parties filled with excessive drinking and questionable personal behavior. Mr. Hegseth, I hope you will explain what actions you will take, if confirmed, to be a better steward of the Defense Department's large budget.

Finally, while I appreciate our meeting last week, it is unacceptable that you did not meet with any other Democratic members of this committee before this hearing, as has been our bipartisan tradition.

During my time in the Senate, I have voted for, and worked closely with, Secretaries of Defense appointed by Republican presidents. While we may disagree politically, there was always an understanding that rank partisanship should have no place when it comes to providing for the men and women who serve in uniform.

Mr. Hegseth, I am troubled by the many comments you have made both as a commentator and in your published writings. For example, in your book, *American Crusade*, you wrote, quote: “Modern leftists, who represent the soul of the modern Democrat Party... literally hate the foundational ideas of America.” You also wrote, “The other side—the Left—is not our friend. We are not ‘esteemed colleagues,’ nor mere political opponents. We are foes. Either we win, or they win—we agree on nothing else.”

Mr. Hegseth, if confirmed as Secretary of Defense, you would lead an organization that, like the country it represents, is composed of Democrats and Republicans. Yet, your language suggests that you regard many of these men and women as ‘foes.’ I would ask that you explain why servicemembers and civilians who do not share your political opinions can trust that they will not be targeted during your tenure.

Indeed, the challenge of the Secretary of Defense is to *remove* partisan politics from the military. You propose to *inject* it. This would be an insult to the men and women who have sworn to uphold their own apolitical duty to the Constitution.

Mr. Hegseth, you are the ninth nominee for Secretary of Defense that I have had the honor to consider as a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. I have voted in favor of *all* your predecessors, including those in the first Trump Administration.

Unfortunately, you lack the character and composure to hold the position of Secretary of Defense.

Thank you. Chairman Wicker.