

I should point out that of course Presidents are entitled to lots of people in their administration as political appointments. In fact, there are about 4,000 political appointments in our current system. Obviously, you have the Secretaries of various Departments—I am going to talk about one of those in a minute—but you have the Deputy Secretaries, and you have many Assistant Secretaries.

So you have 4,000 political appointments already available to be made by President Trump, but that is not enough, apparently. They are talking about converting approximately another about 16,000 additional positions that are currently merit-based systems, based on your qualifications, to political cronyism-based systems.

That is a recipe for corruption. It is a recipe for reducing the quality of services to the American people from coast to coast. You do not want somebody who is chosen just because of who they know and what their politics are to be the people doing your food inspection or working on policy on all sorts of important things that impact the American people.

A lot of those positions will be at the Department of Defense, so I want to turn now to the nomination of Pete Hegseth to be the Secretary of Defense.

NOMINATION OF PETER HEGSETH

Now, I mentioned that Presidents have the flexibility to appoint many political folks to positions in the U.S. Government, but for the top ones—for the Secretary of Defense, for example—the Founders of this country—those who wrote the Constitution—put a little bit of check and balance in that. They said the Senate has the right to advise and consent on those very top positions because those are incredibly consequential decisions, and we want people of good judgment and good character in those positions. So that is what the Senate is engaged in right now, is a debate under the advice and consent clause of the U.S. Constitution.

I think we all recognize that we are here at a very perilous moment in the world. We have Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine. Our allies are watching closely to know whether we are going to stand with the people of Ukraine. Other people are watching too. President Xi of China has one eye on what is happening in Ukraine and he has another eye on Taiwan. We have huge challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. We have a very combustible Middle East, with the malign actions Iran continues to take. We have a very fragile cease-fire in Gaza, with the return of hostages. If you look around the world, it is in a very, very sensitive and explosive moment.

We should keep that in mind as we decide whether we are going to provide advice and consent to Pete Hegseth for Secretary of Defense—somebody who will be overseeing 3.4 million servicemembers and employees; someone who will be second to the President in mak-

ing decisions on the operation of our nuclear forces; someone who will oversee what represents over half of the entire discretionary budget of the United States of America—\$850 billion.

So in this moment, it is especially important that we look at his qualifications because what we don't want is somebody who is untested and incompetent and someone of low character running the Defense Department in the highest position of that Department. Yet, as we have heard from ample testimony, that is exactly what will happen if Pete Hegseth is confirmed to be Secretary of Defense.

As our colleague, Senator REED of Rhode Island, the ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee and someone who served in the 82nd Airborne, has said, servicemembers with Mr. Hegseth's record would be disqualified not just from the highest position of the Defense Department but any position in the military.

This Secretary of Defense would be overseeing all of those men and women whom we ask to uphold the highest tradition and values of our country, and yet the person who would be in charge, if confirmed, would be somebody who would be disqualified from being one of them. That is a terrible message to send.

Let's take a look at the record on management as well as the personal conduct of the person President Trump has nominated to be head of the Defense Department, Mr. Hegseth.

He led two veterans organizations and, based on the testimony, in both cases engaged in financial mismanagement and wasteful spending. When managing a budget of under \$10 million, he repeatedly overspent until the organization was on the edge of bankruptcy.

In his next leadership role, he continued to overspend, including on social events and excessive drinking. His successor in that position was told:

Among the staff, the disgust for Pete was pretty high. Most veterans do not think he represents them nor their highest standard of excellence.

He was told that funds had been used to fund Mr. Hegseth's partying and drinking, as well as his use of work events to "hook up with women on the road."

Mr. Hegseth has a disturbing history of sexual harassment. In 2017, he was credibly accused of raping a woman in a California hotel room. We learned yesterday that Mr. Hegseth paid the woman \$50,000 to prevent her from talking about the assault. We also know that he failed to disclose that information to the transition team, attempting to keep it secret.

We can understand why he didn't want the American people and the Senate to know that.

So I really wonder how the Senate could possibly confirm Mr. Hegseth for an entry-level security clearance, let alone the enormous responsibility of leading the Department of Defense and the men and women who serve there.

Let's take a look at another aspect of Mr. Hegseth's record, because whoever is Secretary of Defense has to understand that they represent the great American military—every single person in it, regardless of background, regardless of religion, regardless of race, regardless of sexual orientation. That is their job. They all bleed red. They are all out there fighting for the United States of America. They have all sworn to defend our country.

And, yet, if you look at his statements, it is very clear that he believes military service is for some, but not all, Americans who want to serve. His remarks are centered on disparaging women, people in the LGBT community, and Muslim Americans.

Let's look at the women serving in the military. He has said:

I'm straight up just saying we should not have women in combat roles.

Now, I watched some of the hearing. I saw him try to wheedle out of statements that he had made very clearly, like this one I just read. And, frankly, nobody should be fooled by this eleventh hour conversion as he seeks to be confirmed by the U.S. Senate. He said what he said, and it was actually part of a pattern when it came to women serving in the military.

In his 2024 book called "The War on Warriors," Mr. Hegseth criticized both the don't ask, don't tell, as well as its repeal, writing that these policies are just part of a social justice agenda.

I would say to those men and women who are serving in our military who have been condemned and criticized by Mr. Hegseth, we all thank you for your service. Most of us thank you for your service.

In his 2020 book, "American Crusade," Mr. Hegseth portrays contemporary cultural and political conflicts in the United States. He portrays them as part of the Crusades—the Crusades—and frames "Islamism" and Muslim immigration as existential threats to American society.

Again, we have a military comprised of people of all different faiths. They have all sworn an oath to defend this country, and we should not have a Secretary of Defense that maligns a big group based on their faith and engages in that kind of bigotry.

And yet, in 2015, a former employee reported that Hegseth chanted: "Kill all Muslims." In a "drunk and violent manner" he said that.

So these are just some examples of the words and conduct of the person that we are considering to be Secretary of Defense for all the men and women who serve in our Armed Forces and in the Pentagon. And we should not want any member of our military to be fearful of the person who is leading them. And, yet, if you are falling into one of these groups—or even if you are not—you should be very scared about what he has said, maligning certain Americans and trying to pit people against each other based on faith, based on gender, based on sexual orientation.

I want to turn to one other category of important issues that we would think—I hope we would think—should be upheld by the Secretary of Defense. Mr. Hegseth has lacked moral clarity and expertise about lots of elements of the military and war, including the laws of armed conflict. And his comments suggest that he does not believe that the U.S. Armed Forces should follow the laws of war.

One of the very important principles we instill in our professional U.S. military is the importance of following the laws of war. And yet Mr. Hegseth has lobbied for pardons of military members who were turned in, based on testimony of their peers, for illegal behavior and convicted by military courts. He defended military contractors convicted of war crimes, including killing 14 unarmed Iraqi citizens without cause, just for fun, just because they thought they could get away with it.

He has repeatedly mocked the laws of armed conflict and expressed unequivocal support for servicemembers who have been convicted of war crimes. In his book, so-called “The War on Warriors,” he writes:

Should we follow the Geneva Conventions?

Aren't we just better off in winning our wars according to our own rules?

A former colleague of ours and a great American hero, Senator McCain, would be turning in his grave to hear these kinds of comments. I want to read what Senator McCain said about the importance of the laws of war.

War is retched beyond description, and only a fool or a fraud could sentimentalize its cruel reality. The Geneva Conventions and the Red Cross were created in response to the stark recognition of the true horrors of unbounded war. And I thank God for that. I am thankful for those of us whose dignity, health and lives have been protected by the Conventions.

Senator John McCain in 1999.

Hegseth, 2025: Let's just get rid of those rules of war—put in place because of the hard-earned lessons of, as Senator McCain said, the wretchedness of war.

Mr. Hegseth has also talked about going back to the days of illegal waterboarding and ignoring the Geneva Conventions on the rules when it comes to torture in interrogation, saying that we should—again, as he said—just sort of ignore those rules; do our own thing.

Here is what Senator McCain said about that when it was debated here in the U.S. Senate:

I know from personal experience that the abuse of prisoners will produce more bad than good intelligence. I know that victims of torture will offer intentionally misleading information if they think their capturers will believe it. I know they will say whatever they think their torturers want them to say if they believe it will stop their suffering. Most of all, I know the use of torture compromises that which most distinguishes us from our enemies, our belief that all people, even captured enemies, possess basic human rights, which are protected by international conventions the U.S. not only joined, but for the most part authored.

Senator McCain.

Now, I know that President Trump disdains that great American hero, Senator McCain. In fact here is what Candidate Trump said back in 2015:

He's not a war hero. He was a war hero because he was captured. I like people who weren't captured.

Says somebody who never served in the military.

Colleagues, I urge us to apply the standards that Senator McCain would apply. I urge us to listen to our colleague JACK REED, who served in the 82nd Airborne and, with great diligence, serves as the ranking members of the Senate Armed Services Committee. I would ask our colleagues, based on this record of personal misconduct, financial mismanagement, Pete Hegseth's disregard for many men and women who serve in the military—based on his own statements—and his contempt for the rules of war that John McCain so eloquently upheld, when it comes to this Senator—I hope other Senators—when it comes to providing advice and consent as part of our constitutional duty under the Constitution and balance of powers, I will withhold my consent, and I urge my colleagues to vote no on the nomination of Pete Hegseth to serve as the Secretary of Defense.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oregon.

Mr. MERKLEY. Mr. President, when I came out of graduate school, I was hired by Secretary Weinberger as a Presidential Management Intern—now called PMF, or Presidential Management Fellows—five of us who were brought in to do a series of rotations to bring, well, an injection of policy determination to the conversation in Secretary of Defense's Office.

And it was really quite an enlightening experience. My first assignment involved being desk officer for Jordan at the Defense Security Systems Agency, because the desk officer who worked for both Jordan and Lebanon had to pay a lot more attention to Lebanon because we had the horrific bombing of the Marines in the tower.

And then there was an argument inside the defense establishment about how to keep Russia from going forward at a faster pace technologically. And the research and development side said: If you classify everything, you will slow us down and Russia will catch up.

And the policy said: Unless we classify everything, the Russians will steal so much, they will speed up and catch up.

And there was this fundamental difference of opinion about how to control technology in order to maintain our technological lead over Russia.

And I was asked to set up a steering committee and bring both parties to the table to try to work out where they could work together and try to resolve their differences.

And in the course of things, I was drafted to become a programmer to do

computer studies of survivability related to what strategies with our strategic forces would decrease the risk of nuclear war happening? What would strengthen deterrence? And then on to a service at NATO, and then to an R&D budgeting cycle, where I learned many of the budget games the Defense Department employs in order to get a whole lot of money that seems to be never accounted for.

In fact, it has become universally recognized that the Defense Department can never pass a budget, can never pass a budget test—that is, an audit—because they don't track anything very closely, and there are just all kinds of loose ends left.

And year after year, Democrats and Republicans have said: Audit the Secretary of Defense. Audit the Defense Department. We want to know where our funds go.

And here we are, decades and decades later, and we still have that same problem.

You know, it was a valuable several years that led, then, to me working for Congress on strategic nuclear issues. And in the decade of the 1980s, we saw some real advances in our security. We saw some real advances in terms of the stability of the nuclear dynamic with the then-Soviet Union.

And, in fact, the folks who put together the Doomsday Clock, which was very close to midnight when I started working on defense issues, was turned back some 13 or 15 minutes from midnight by the late eighties because of a series of agreements and policies and force changes that had been worked out over the eighties.

The Defense Department is massive. It is massive—an annual budget of about \$850 billion, 3.4 million people working for it, 2.5 million servicemembers, 900,000 civilians. It is massive. It is complicated.

But what experience does Mr. Hegseth bring? He ran two little micro-nonprofits, and he ran them into the ground. He had documented problems with drinking on the job. He had credible and repeated accusations of sexual assault. He showed disrespect for female servicemembers and diverse servicemembers, including the current—well, the former Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Brown.

What?

This man who couldn't manage his way out of a paper bag, who mismanaged the enterprise he had undertaken—that is the man we are going to confirm to run the U.S. military that has massive needs for reform?

Is this man some expert in military strategy? No. Is he some esteemed driver of the new technology of war with drones? No. Did he have diverse experiences inside the Defense Department that gave him many perspectives about the incredible sections of the Defense Department that deal with so many different issues? No, no.

So why are we having this conversation? What has happened to the idea of

credible leadership? I can tell you what happened. The President of the United States, President Trump, said: Do what I want, or I will primary you. And now we have a bunch of folks across the aisle that are not doing their job under the Constitution. The Constitution says it is our responsibility to advise and consent, to vet nominees and to make sure they are qualified before they take these positions.

I say to my colleagues: Stop shaking and shivering under the aura of an authoritarian President and do your job. And your job is to say no, because this man is not qualified.

He did not even tell President-elect Trump about all the accusations made against him. If he could not tell President Trump the truth before he was serving and before President Trump is President Trump, how will he be able to stand up for the truth and say what needs to be said after President Trump is in office and he is Secretary of Defense?

The Department of Defense has failed seven audits in a row. The Secretary of Defense must be able to get the department on track to pass an audit. It is mandated by Congress. It has been mandated before, and they still fail year after year. But both sides say it should happen. We should put some teeth into that.

But I tell you, putting a man who can't manage a tiny nonprofit isn't going to get the job done. They ran up enormous debt. And by 2008, the financial records show they were unable to pay their creditors—irresponsible in the max.

I know running a small nonprofit is hard. I was the director of an affiliate of Habitat for Humanity, and I ran the housing division of another nonprofit that developed affordable housing, and then I was President of the World Affairs Council and had the managerial responsibilities. And it was tough making sure we hit payroll each month, making sure we raise more money for the aspirations we had for those organizations. It was hard work. I worried about it all the time, but we always met payroll. We always advanced in our mission.

Maybe, if we are going to hire somebody from a sole nonprofit to run a gigantic organization, we should at least know they can run the small organization before they get promoted to running an organization with millions of people and the better part of a trillion dollars in its budget.

A Republican strategist who worked with him at that organization said:

I don't know how he's going to run an organization with an \$857 billion budget and 3 million individuals.

On more than a dozen occasions, Mr. Hegseth's FOX News colleagues report smelling alcohol on him before he went on air, including just a couple of months ago. Former employees of the nonprofit he ran reported him being drunk on the job and having to be carried out of events.

That is the person we want running the Department of Defense?

A former employee noted in a letter of complaint that Mr. Hegseth was drunkenly chanting "Kill all Muslims, Kill all Muslims" at a bar while on a work trip.

You know, we have many faiths serving us in the defense of this country because we are a multifaith Nation. Having a person who advocates for killing people of a particular religious faith is not acceptable to run the Department of Defense.

He said: Well, I will reform. I have broken the rules on drinking before, but I will reform. How many times have you heard that from people who are—well, they have an addiction. They try to reform. Maybe they make it for a little while. But in the end, they relapse. Shall we put that risk upon the security of the United States of America?

We used to have a more responsible attitude here in the Senate. In 1989, when President George H. W. Bush nominated John Tower, an FBI investigation revealed that he was a drunk and a womanizer and Mr. Tower pledged not to drink any alcoholic beverages during his time as Secretary of Defense, just as Mr. Hegseth has. And then the Senate weighed the risk of putting somebody with an addiction in charge of the Department of Defense and rejected his nomination.

It is an insult to the servicemembers of the United States of America to put a man with an addiction in charge of them. It is irresponsible to the security of the Nation and all civilians of this Nation.

The Department of Defense struggles with high levels of sexual assault of female servicemembers, so a person who has been involved in numerous incidents of misbehavior on the issue of treating women isn't the right person to have as the Secretary of Defense.

In 2023, the year I have numbers for, 29,000 Active-Duty troops reported experiencing unwanted sexual contact. Mr. Hegseth has been accused of sexual assault. He paid the accuser \$50,000 in a settlement. It took place in 2017 after a speaking appearance at a Republican women's event in Monterey, CA. No charges were filed. But this, in combination with multiple other reports of his treatment—accusations of mistreatment of women, means he is the wrong person to have at an organization in which women provide enormously valuable contributions.

During his time at the head of a veterans' organization, the employees report that Mr. Hegseth "sexually pursued the organization's female staffers." It is not like this was one misunderstood event somewhere in his way past life.

Women are 18 percent of our Active-Duty servicemembers, but Mr. Hegseth dismisses them.

We need moms. But not in the military, especially not in combat boots.

He went on to say:

I'm straight up just saying we should not have women in combat roles. It hasn't made us more effective. Hasn't made us more lethal. Has made fighting more complicated.

And he is wrong on every point. Women in combat roles have helped fill out ranks. We do have a volunteer Army. We do recruit to get the staff we need in the military in order to be able to operate the weapons systems and the communication systems and the supply systems and the repair systems—all of it. They work in every role—valuable, valuable contributors.

We should not put a person at the head of our Department of Defense who somehow thinks half the jobs in the world can only be done by men, because it is wrong and because it undermines the effectiveness of the military providing security.

He also doesn't like minorities. Well, minority groups comprise 30 percent of servicemembers. I don't care what color of skin you have. I do care if you work hard as a member of the military to support the security of this Nation. And people of every race are a valuable part of our military. And a man who thinks the color of your skin controls the content of your character and the ability and talents that you possess doesn't belong as the head of the military.

He has said:

The dumbest phrase on planet Earth is "our diversity is our strength."

You take away the diversity in our service and you will soon see our diverse servicemembers are invaluable, and a person who doesn't understand that should never be confirmed. That is our job. Our job, under the Constitution, is to say: Mr. President, sometime Presidents get it wrong. Maybe it is for political reasons; maybe you woke up and didn't know all the background of the person. But we have to vet them, and we have to help make sure your executive branch is successful.

That is our job. You are not helping President Trump by voting for a man totally unqualified—the most unqualified man who could be found in America to head the Department of Defense.

Mr. Hegseth says:

I told my platoon they could ignore directives limiting when they can shoot.

A person who violates the directives in the military doesn't belong running the military. There is a strong command structure in the military, and it includes how you behave in certain situations that are crucial to the security of this Nation. But he did not understand that.

He has argued that "U.S. forces should ignore the Geneva Conventions and other elements of international law governing the conduct of war."

As my colleague from Maryland was just talking about and reciting the wisdom of John McCain saying how the Geneva Conventions and rules on torture serve us well, because you get misinformation when you torture people and you get Americans tortured when

they are captured if we are torturing people. So a man who believes in torturing people doesn't understand how to get accurate information and is putting our own servicemembers at risk when they are captured.

Why would any Member of this body so disrespect the servicemembers of the United States of America as to put this man in charge?

I was honored to work for Secretary Weinberger. I believed that the world was at great risk of the possibility of nuclear war, and that is the issue I focused on in my time there and then my time working for Congress. There is nothing I saw during my time in the Pentagon that equals this level of failure to protect and defend the United States of America. I did not see people put into command who talked about killing members who were of a different religion than they were. I did not hear people talking about how women should not even be there or how diversity was a problem rather than a strength. I saw her as people working hard together, people who had served in Vietnam together.

Many of the folks who I served with during those 2 years in my role as a civilian being hired to work with Secretary Weinberger had served in Vietnam. The war had ended by the time I had reached draft age, and I so respected the service that they had given and their dedication to the security of this country.

If you are dedicated to the security of this country, if you respect the servicemembers of the United States of America, then do not give them a boss who is the wrong fit in every way possible.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

Mr. WELCH. Mr. President, we are here discussing the nomination of the next potential Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth.

Of course that job, as we all know, is probably the second most difficult job in the country. He presides over the welfare of 3.4 million people in Active service and Active Reserve all around the world. He presides over a budget of \$850 billion. The person who has that position has to be a preeminent strategic thinker: How do we modernize our Navy? How do we recruit in the modern world? How do we maintain force preparedness? How do we cement strategic alliances? It is a job that you can't just show up and start doing; there has to be behind it a lifetime experience that gives you some capacity to be able to do all of these things and respond to the emergencies that inevitably arise when you get that phone call at 3 in the morning.

There has been a lot of discussion by my colleagues about the lack of experience of Mr. Hegseth. I share that concern. There has been a lot of discussion about his views on women in the military, and our distinguished Senator TAMMY DUCKWORTH is the most preeminent example of the capacity of

women to serve effectively and bravely.

Mr. Hegseth has repudiated his well-founded, longstanding view that he is against women in the military. Frankly, it sounds to me like a nomination-eve consideration.

Speaking, of course, to the Presiding Officer, I really respect the military service he has provided to our country.

But the big concern I have about Mr. Hegseth, in addition to the character issues, the experience issues, and the drinking issues—and by the way, I am puzzled as to his assertion that if he gets the job, he will stop drinking. Why wait?

But here is the concern I have: Unlike the Presiding Officer, I did not serve in the military. My draft lottery number was high—this was during Vietnam—and I wasn't drafted. Many of my college classmates were. They served in Vietnam. Some of them came home injured, and some did not come home. I think about them every day and how it is that they served. Some were badly injured, and some died.

When I think about the situation most Americans are in, most of us didn't serve, but all of us who didn't serve are so indebted to those who did.

My high school classmates were like the young people I see now who are volunteering to go into the military.

So we as Americans have a profound obligation to honor the service of those who volunteer to respond to the call of the Commander in Chief, who says: You are going to be deployed. They don't know where. They are not involved in the discussion of whether. They are not involved in the discussion of when. They show up.

Our democracy so profoundly depends on the idealism of young people who are willing to subject themselves to the decisions of the Commander in Chief, and I believe that every one of us here who is involved in the decisions about authorizing the use of military force has an absolutely profound obligation to do that with care because the folks who are going to do the work and be in harm's way are going to be there because we sent them there.

It is why I have been so insistent, as have many of us here, that we have to have a good VA, that we have to have medical care for our soldiers and sailors and airmen and marines.

But what we need, too, is a Secretary of Defense who honors that idealism of these young Americans who decide to enlist. That idealism is borne in a sense of common commitment, a sense of wanting to do something for the common good, and it is also to live by the code of military conduct.

There is great honor in our services. Those men and women whom I so admire know they may have to use lethal force to defend our values, to defend our country, to protect their fellow soldiers, but they know there are limits, and they use it when they must but never more than that.

By the way, that is asking a lot of our soldiers, to be restrained when

they are in a combat zone and can be killed themselves.

So what distresses me so much about Mr. Hegseth is how he used his very powerful forum on FOX TV, in my view, to dishonor the soldiers who acted with restraint and valor and integrity by taking up the cause of some of our soldiers—there are not many of them, but they do exist—who kill people, who use violence not in furtherance of our defense but for their own reasons.

I am speaking about Mr. Lorange. Clint Lorange was a soldier. He was sent, in 2012, as a new commander without combat experience to lead a platoon of young soldiers who were deployed to Afghanistan with the mission of defeating the local Taliban and winning over the area's population—an incredibly hard task. But one day, for reasons Mr. Lorange—then Soldier Lorange—knew, he threatened to kill a farmer and his son, a 3- or 4-year-old boy. A day later, he ordered his men to shoot within inches of unarmed villagers—that was including near children.

He said: It is funny watching the villagers dance.

Mr. Lorange's men, who were honorable, brave, willing to be in harm's way, and willing to act like warriors but were not ever willing to kill indiscriminately, balked at his orders. And you know how hard that is to do if you are a soldier when you are given an order even if you know it is the wrong order. Then they were told to make false reports about taking fire from the village to justify this conduct, but they refused to do it.

The next day, Lorange ordered fire on unarmed Afghans who were over 100 yards from the platoon. They were killed. They filed a false report claiming the bodies couldn't be reached.

The people I honor are the people under his command who refused to take those orders. The people I honor are soldiers whose bravery extends not just to putting their own physical well-being in harm's way but who maintain that commitment to the ideals of the military code of conduct that give us the standing and legitimacy that are so important to our well-being.

So my problem is this: I want a Secretary of Defense who is as good as the soldiers he leads. Mr. Hegseth, in my view, fails to meet that standard.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New Jersey.

Mr. KIM. Mr. President, I rise today because it is inevitable that at some point in the near future, President Trump will have to convene his national security team in the Situation Room at the White House in response to a global crisis, whether in Ukraine or in the Taiwan Strait or in some other hotspot.

The Situation Room is a room that I have had the privilege of working in as staff on the White House National Security Council. It is a room where the

most consequential decisions are made, where the safety and security of our country is decided, and where the lives of people are determined. But who will be in the room with the President, advising the President during these difficult and stressful times? As the President sits at the end of the table, flanking him will be some of the most senior advisers. One of them, the closest to him, will be the Secretary of Defense.

Mr. President, I rise today because I know the importance of that role in that room. I have seen what it means for the President to turn to the Secretary of Defense for counsel. In fact, I even worked at the Pentagon, in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. I have seen the massive operation that the Secretary needs to lead every day and what it takes. I have seen the readiness necessary for the Secretary of Defense to turn to the President and provide the right recommendations for America's national security.

I have seen Mr. Pete Hegseth make his case. I have seen his answers in front of the Senate Armed Services Committee. I have seen the reports. I can say from my experience in the Secretary of Defense's Office as well as in the Situation Room, that Mr. Hegseth's appointment is an unnecessary risk in a dangerous global moment.

Now, I get it. President Trump wants to be a disruptor. He wants to bring in people who are going to shake up the system. He wants people who represent a change from the status quo. I am sure a number of us here in the Senate would like to see some changes at the Pentagon—changes as to how things are done and understanding that the status quo is not something we can lean on. We certainly have disagreements on how best to add certainty and stability to the world that seems to be off the rails in this moment. But there is talking about change and there is actually having the skills and the capacity to implement change.

The Department of Defense is our largest employer in our government and one that requires critical leadership.

Let's look at the world that Mr. Hegseth would inherit as Secretary of Defense, the world that President Trump will ask him about in the Situation Room.

On Ukraine, it is clear that Mr. Hegseth simply doesn't know his history. During his nomination hearing, he called Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea a "minor incursion." He has also downplayed the threat that Putin's Russia poses to our NATO allies.

On China, Mr. Hegseth demonstrated a lack of depth of knowledge when asked by Senator DUCKWORTH to name the importance of even one of the ASEAN countries and the type of agreement we have with them. He could not name one. These countries—including multiple treaty allies—are on the frontlines of our competition with China. Multiple ASEAN members

are locked in territorial disputes with China.

This is a critical partner, so much that the Department of Defense 2 months ago released a strategic document called "U.S. Department of Defense Vision Statement for a Prosperous and Secure Southeast Asia" that was centered on ASEAN and even mentioned that "The United States has worked closely with ASEAN on defense and security in the Indo-Pacific region since former Defense Secretary Robert Gates attended the inaugural ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting . . . in 2010." It goes on to say that the "U.S. Secretary of Defense has attended and supported ASEAN at every single one of those gatherings ever since."

In a moment where these disputes could easily flare up to conflict, the President needs a Secretary by his side who doesn't draw a blank on questions about our allies.

And on the Middle East, Mr. Hegseth remarked that ISIS was "raging across Iraq" when President Trump was first sworn into office in 2017 was simply not reflective of the reality on the ground at the time.

Combined, that lack of knowledge and qualifications alone should disqualify Mr. Hegseth from this role. But there is one more disqualifying factor, which is his character.

Now, there has been a lot said about this already in terms of personal challenges and behaviors, so I will leave it at this: Someone who is being asked to lead millions of uniformed and civilian personnel, his statements on women and transgender servicemembers are simply unacceptable.

Claiming that standards have been lowered for women and that allowing LGBT Americans to serve in the military is somehow part of a Marxist agenda is beyond offensive; it is absurd. And it is far beneath the person that is supposed to be setting the standard and serving as a leader for the men and women who have dedicated themselves to protecting this country.

I have said before that every President, including President Trump, has the prerogative to choose the people who sit at that table with him in the Situation Room. But our job here in the Senate is to make sure that those people have the competence and the character to serve our country. This is not a reality TV show. This is real life, and there are real lives at stake.

Mr. Hegseth should be recognized for his service, but he should not be Secretary of Defense. If that is not enough, we are voting also to approve someone to be the sixth in line of Presidential succession. Is Mr. Hegseth ready for either of these distinctions? The answer for me is no.

For the sake of our country and our national security, I encourage my colleagues who want to support this President to oppose this nomination and bring forth another nominee more qualified for the role, more ready for the role. I encourage my colleagues

who want to deliver change to oppose this nomination and bring forth another nominee with the experience and credibility to deliver it. I encourage my colleagues who want to make our country safe, who want to make our world a more stable place, and who want to leave a legacy of peace and strength, to oppose this nomination and bring us a nominee ready to deliver for the American people.

I urge a "no" vote on Pete Hegseth for Secretary of Defense.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. KELLY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Senator from Arizona.

Mr. KELLY. Mr. President, I am concerned that soon the U.S. Senate might confirm the most unprepared nominee to lead the Department of Defense that has ever been put forward.

I look at every nominee based on whether they are qualified and committed to do the job. It is how I evaluate nominees from the last President, and it is how I am evaluating nominees from this President. And I approach each person with an open mind. It is our responsibility to make sure the folks we consider are ready to do these jobs for the American people.

But this one, the Secretary of Defense, it is especially important. Outside of the Presidency, it might be the biggest job in the country. It is almost impossible to imagine the scale of it.

You have about 3 million people working for you. You are the civilian leader at the top of a massive operation that includes every single soldier, sailor, guardian, airman, marine, and civilian contractor and employee. These folks are spread out across hundreds of military installations in dozens of countries. So it is basically the toughest management job in the world.

You are also responsible for overseeing a budget that exceeds \$850 billion every single year, so it is one of the most complicated budget-management jobs in the world as well.

You are overseeing some of the most complicated weapons systems and defense programs that exist. Some of these are multibillion-dollar projects that happen over the course of years to develop, test, and field.

It is also one of the most demanding policy and program implementation jobs.

Now, not every Secretary of Defense nominee checks the box for each of those qualifications. It is impossible for us to expect that. The job is too big. But what is clear to me at the end of this process is that Mr. Hegseth does not check any of the boxes.

I appreciate his service in the U.S. Army and his service to this country,

especially in combat, but that is not a requirement for this role.

During his career in the Guard and Reserve, Mr. Hegseth did not rise to a command position where he would learn the management, joint forces operations, logistics, and other skills that are relevant to fill this job. In his civilian roles, he has led two veterans organizations, neither of which were larger than about 50 people. And he spent 7 years as a TV host. Normally, this would be the end of the conversation. Normally, it would be clear to every single person in this Chamber that this is not someone ready to do this job.

Now, I understand that the case for his nomination is in part because he is an outsider—I get that—that he can shake things up. I am not opposed to that. The Pentagon needs to be leaner. It needs to move more quickly and be willing to lose things that aren't working and adopt things that will work. Having someone who isn't beholden to the current way of doing things—that is exciting.

My concern is not that Mr. Hegseth is going to succeed in whipping the Pentagon into shape; my concern is that he would fail. Given his lack of experience, it is much more likely that the bureaucracy is going to crush Mr. Hegseth than he is going to crush the bureaucracy. It is not just that Mr. Hegseth is unprepared for this role; the experience he does have is riddled with serious issues that should concern us all.

During his time leading two veterans organizations, he was accused of financial mismanagement.

In 2009, after just about 2 years leading a group called Vets for Freedom, it has been reported that forensic accountants found that the organization had about \$1,000 in the bank, more than \$400,000 in unpaid bills, and \$75,000 in credit card debt. Mr. Hegseth wants to get the Pentagon to finally pass an audit. Yet the much smaller—much smaller—organization he led could not do the same.

During his time leading Concerned Veterans for America, the organization was forced to reach a financial settlement with a female employee who accused a male colleague of trying to sexually assault her. The woman was reportedly ostracized and faced reprisals in the workplace after that settlement. For a Department that is working to address sexual assault and harassment, what would it say to confirm someone who has already fostered environments where these are an issue?

It has also been reported that he frequently abused alcohol, getting drunk in front of his staff and in public. I want to remind folks of some of these incidents:

Memorial Day 2014; CVA event in Virginia Beach. Hegseth needed to be carried out of the event.

Summer 2014 in Cleveland. Drunk in public with the CVA team.

November 2014; "Get Out the Vote" event in North Carolina. Hegseth got

drunk with three young female staff members. CVA had instituted a no-alcohol policy at its events in October—this was 1 month later—but Mr. Hegseth and another manager lifted the policy.

In December 2014, at the CVA Christmas party at the Grand Hyatt in this city, Washington, DC, Hegseth was "noticeably intoxicated and had to be carried up to his room."

Another time, a CVA staffer stated that Hegseth "passed out" in the back of a party bus.

On May 29, 2015, a now-former CVA employee sent a complaint letter to management that Hegseth was chanting "Kill All Muslims" at a bar in Cuyahoga Falls, OH, in "a drunk and violent manner."

While at FOX News, in October 2017, following his dinner speech at the California Federation of Republican Women's 40th Biennial Convention in Monterey, CA, Hegseth was reportedly engaged in a loud argument by the pool and was "very intoxicated."

FOX News employees have reported that after a St. Patrick's Day segment on St. Patrick's Day, after being on TV, Hegseth drank several beers that had been sitting out for hours. These employees also noted that the segment finished before 10 a.m. and they were shocked at Hegseth's behavior.

One current and two former FOX News employees told NBC News that they felt that they had to "babysit" Hegseth to mitigate the effects of his drinking. This is a quote: "We'd have to call him to make sure he didn't oversleep because we knew he'd be out partying the night before."

Two FOX employees—current or former—said that on more than a dozen occasions during Hegseth's time as a cohost on "Fox & Friends Weekend," which began in 2017, they smelled alcohol on him before he went on air. That was in the morning. Those same two people, plus another, said that during his time there, he appeared on television after they heard him talk about being hungover as he was getting ready or on set.

In the fall of 2024, one FOX employee said they heard him complain about being hungover.

In November 2024, one FOX employee said they smelled alcohol on him as recently as this past November, 3 months ago.

During his confirmation hearing, I gave Mr. Hegseth the opportunity to answer for a number of these incidents. I asked him point blank: Are these true or false?

He had the opportunity to say "These things did not happen" or to explain how he is prepared to account for them and how he won't repeat this concerning behavior as Secretary of Defense. He wouldn't answer, with one notable exception. I asked him about reports that in 2014 he was drunk at a strip club with staff in Louisiana. He replied to me: Absolutely not. He specifically denied that incident. He was

prepared to say that one—but only that one—didn't happen, but the rest of these incidents, well, he would not deny them. Instead, he called them "anonymous smears."

Well, first of all, they are not all anonymous. The committee has had access to sworn affidavits from individuals who witnessed this behavior firsthand.

This confirmation process was rushed. The FBI background check, which the entire committee was never given access to, was clearly inadequate and had to be updated multiple times. And despite repeated efforts, Mr. Hegseth has refused to meet with me and many others on the committee in private to discuss these concerns further.

But beyond all of that, it defies belief that this behavior does not represent a pattern. The incidents listed earlier stretch out across a decade. These are individuals who worked with him across three different organizations, and in each place, these people witnessed him abuse alcohol. It is obvious to anyone willing to see it that this is a pattern.

Let's be clear. These are not smears. If Mr. Hegseth were a private citizen, these issues with alcohol would only be a concern for those around him. But when you are nominated to be Secretary of Defense, it is a concern for all of us, each and every American. This is not a job where you clock in at the beginning of the day and clock out at the end of the day. You have to be able to move seamlessly between advising the President on matters of national security, sitting with foreign leaders to hammer out agreements, and discussing complex weapons systems with your staff. And that might just be in the afternoon. Some of these things might happen on a plane across an ocean on a weeklong trip or during a phone call that comes late at night, with quick decisions that affect the lives of our servicemembers.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Robert McNamara was briefed at midnight about the first photographs from U-2 spy planes showing the likelihood of Soviet ballistic missile sites in Cuba. The same has likely happened when North Korea has tested ballistic missiles that could threaten Guam or our allies.

This is a demanding job for anyone. It is a concerning job for someone with Mr. Hegseth's track record.

So as the Senate moves towards a final confirmation vote on this nominee, Mr. Hegseth, here is what I want to ask my colleagues: Are you sure? Are you sure that you trust him with this job? Are you sure there isn't another individual the President could choose who could pursue the same goals but is better prepared to do this job? Are you sure it is worth the risk to our servicemembers, to our national security, and to your families?

I know I am not.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. SCHATZ. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST

Mr. SCHATZ. Mr. President, anyone who has tried to buy a carton of eggs at the grocery store lately has probably seen a sign on the empty shelves saying there is a national shortage of eggs because of the bird flu.

The reason notices like this exist is because the Department of Health and Human Services tracks disease outbreaks around the clock and notifies the public in real time. And, of course, we take that for granted. We should take that for granted. It is the kind of thing that the government just does and that we normally don't argue about.

There are a lot of things for us to argue about, but whether or not the government should tell us if there is a public health problem has never been something that we have argued about. We take it for granted, but it is an invaluable service that keeps the public safe and healthy, which is why it was so bizarre that in one of his first acts as President, Donald Trump suspended all—all—communications from HHS—health advisories, scientific reports, updates on the website, all of it.

What is that supposed to do other than keep people from getting the information that they need to keep their families healthy? This is about being able to know if a certain kind of meat or vegetable has been contaminated and staying away from it.

For instance, when there was an E. coli outbreak at McDonald's last year, the FDA immediately sent out an alert, which the press picked up on and warned the public about. Those communications are paused. Cucumbers at Costco is another example. E. coli at McDonald's—I don't mean to pick on these particular companies; lots of retail operations have their various public health problems.

I understand elections have consequences, right? And it is within the scope of a new administration that is reasonable for them to kind of take a look at all public policy and implement their own public policy. But, look, this is a little nuts.

I am assuming that there was a person in the White House or in the transition team writing up a bunch of Executive orders and thinking through an ideological lens or even an electoral lens. Fair enough. And they wanted to have a bunch of Executive orders ready to roll. So day one—boom, nothing coming out of HHS.

But the problem is, this isn't partisan; this isn't what people thought they were voting for; and this really could jeopardize the public health. So

the resolution I am introducing and asking for unanimous consent on is very simple. It reaffirms the very basic belief that people deserve to have timely and accurate information relevant to their health and well-being.

We are not arguing about like a COVID response. We just want to know if there is a problem in what you are about to eat. And suspending those communications has nothing to do with party. It has to do with keeping everybody safe. So if there is a problem during this pause, the Department of Health and Human Services will not communicate to the public about it.

As if in legislative session, notwithstanding rule XXII, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the consideration of my resolution at the desk; further, that the resolution be agreed to, the preamble be agreed to, and that the motions to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table with no intervening action or debate.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

The Senator from Florida.

Mr. SCOTT of Florida. Reserving the right to object, I think all of us can agree with my colleague. We can agree it is very important the American people have readily available access to accurate and timely public health information. I don't think anyone disputes that, and no one should have to doubt the important work done by the Department of Health and Human Services to provide the American people with the information they need to remain healthy and safe.

But this resolution is unnecessary. The new administration just took office and issued a temporary pause until February 1 on all communications coming from its Agencies without approval. They have every right to do this.

To be frank, they have a lot of problems to solve from the prior administration.

I hope we can focus on confirming nominees quickly. The sooner his team gets in place, the sooner he can deliver on his promises to the American people. Therefore, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

NOMINATION OF ROBERT F. KENNEDY, JR.

Mr. SCHATZ. Mr. President, a new story was published today about the extent of Mr. Robert F. Kennedy's involvement in the 2019 measles outbreak in Samoa, and it shot a chill down my spine. That is not a rhetorical flourish. I read it and I felt hot, I felt angry, I felt worried.

We already know that he flew halfway across the world to Samoa to spread lies about the measles vaccine and discourage people from taking it. We already know that as a result, there was a measles outbreak. Five thousand people got measles; 83 people died; 79 of them were children.

But I think there is a new fact here that is worth lingering on. He saw it as

a great research opportunity—he saw it as a great research opportunity. He literally took an informatics expert—somebody who studies how people receive information—with him to Samoa to run a “natural experiment” studying what would happen to kids if they weren't vaccinated.

Let me tell you why this is personal to me. My dad is my hero. May his memory be a blessing. He is my hero for a number of reasons; but among them, he was a young doctor, and he was reading the *New England Journal of Medicine*. He was right out of medical school, and he read about something called the Tuskegee experiments.

What happened in the Tuskegee experiments is the United States Public Health Service withheld lifesaving medication from African-American men to “observe the disease process.” They considered these men expendable. They provided half of the cohort with penicillin, which they knew would cure syphilis, and half of the men with a placebo without telling them to, again, observe the disease process.

And so my dad went on the record and Congress actually intervened many years later with Tom Harkin, and on a bipartisan basis, making it explicit that the U.S. Public Health Service has to observe the Hippocratic Oath: “Do no harm.”

Do no harm.

And it is a dark history for America but a proud moment as I think of my father and his legacy.

But the one thing I never thought would ever occur is that more than 50 years later, we would be at the precipice of confirming a person to run the Department of Health and Human Services who, in this era—50 years after the Tuskegee experiments—flew to Samoa, encouraged people not to take the measles vaccine, watched 5,000 people get sick, watched 83 people die, watched 79 kids die and said: This is a real opportunity for data collection so we can see how this plays out.

I am still a little shocked that this person isn't going to be rejected 100 to 0. I understand partisanship. I understand loyalty. I am not immune to partisan pressures on my own side. But this guy is different. This guy is about to run the Department of Health and Human Services and he doesn't have just, like, one weird idea about one certain aspect of public health. He is a person who has flown across the planet to cause outbreaks of diseases that are generations in our past.

And to add insult to injury, he is repeating the moral mistakes of the Tuskegee experiment that has been actually outlawed by the United States Congress.

I will be talking about this more, but I am just hoping that—we fight about a lot of stuff in this building, but I know there are a lot of people on both sides of the aisle that take their obligations seriously to provide advice and consent to the President of the United States, whether you voted for him or not,