THE PRESIDENT'S CHOICE · THE SECOND TERM · BOOK FIVE

Pete Hegseth

The Secretary of War

Pete Hegseth's Outstanding Service Under President Donald J. Trump · Peace Through Strength, 2025–2026

by Robert Miller

Free Sample · Preface, Author's Note, and Chapter One

The President's Choice · The Second Term · Book Five

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Preface

Why This Book

Books about cabinet secretaries are usually written after they leave office, when the passions of the moment have cooled and the documents have been declassified. This book is different. It is written while Pete Hegseth is still serving as Secretary of War, in the immediate aftermath of the most turbulent month of his tenure, and it is written as an appreciation rather than a neutral history.

The reason is simple. The record of the first twenty-two months of the Secretary's tenure is already substantial, and it deserves to be assembled in one place while it is fresh. Much of what has been written about the Secretary has been written in the heat of controversy, in news reports focused on the latest dispute and commentary shaped by partisan loyalties. Very little has attempted to look at the whole: the cultural reforms, the border mission, the recruiting recovery, the operations abroad, the rebuilding of the industrial base, and the relationship with the President that made all of it possible.

This book attempts that whole view. It does so from a clear perspective. The author believes that the Secretary has done an outstanding job, and he says so. But he has tried to ground that judgment in facts that readers can verify, drawn from official sources and contemporaneous reporting, and to present the criticisms of the Secretary fairly so that readers who disagree can see the strongest version of the other side.

The book also has a thesis that goes beyond the Secretary himself. It argues that the relationship between President Trump and Secretary Hegseth represents a particular model of civilian control of the military: a model in which the President decides and the Secretary executes, with no daylight between them. That model has costs as

well as benefits, and the book tries to acknowledge both. But the author believes that it is the model the Constitution envisions, and that it produced results that more conventional arrangements had failed to produce.

Finally, this book is written by a veteran, for readers who care about the men and women who serve. The author served in the Army during the Vietnam era and has spent much of his later life working with veterans. He has seen what happens when the military loses its way, and what happens when it finds its way again. He believes that the period covered by this book is one in which the military found its way again, under a President who demanded strength and a Secretary of War who delivered it.

Readers will judge for themselves. The author asks only that they read the whole record before they do.

Author's Note

This book is an appreciation. It is written to record, in one place, the work Pete Hegseth has performed as Secretary of Defense and, from September 2025, Secretary of War, on behalf of President Donald J. Trump. It is also written to keep one fact in front of the reader on every page: the President is the boss. The Constitution makes him Commander-in-Chief, the voters gave him the mandate, and every major priority described in these chapters began with him. Secretary Hegseth's distinction lies in how faithfully, how quickly, and how energetically he carried those priorities into the largest organization on earth.

The period covered runs from the nomination in November 2024 through late November 2026. Where this book reports numbers, such as recruiting totals, border apprehensions, targets struck in Iran, or vessels destroyed in the Caribbean, it relies on figures published by the Department of War, the military services, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the White House, and contemporaneous press reporting. Where the figures are official claims rather than independently settled facts, the text says so. An appreciation does not require exaggeration; the record is strong enough to be told plainly.

The book does not pretend that the Secretary's tenure has been free of controversy. Few tenures at the Pentagon ever have been, and his was designed from the start to disrupt. A chapter near the end sets out the principal criticisms in fair terms, together with the answers his defenders give, so that readers can weigh both. The author's view is clear from the title page, but the reader deserves to see the whole field.

Robert Miller
Washington, D.C.
November 2026

Part One

The Commander and His Choice

Chapter One

The Boss

Every account of Pete Hegseth's service must begin with Donald J. Trump, because that is where the Secretary himself has always begun. In speeches, at press briefings, in interviews, and in the formal guidance he issued to the force, Hegseth has framed his role in the same way: the President sets the direction, and the Secretary executes it. That framing is not modesty for its own sake. It reflects the constitutional order, it reflects the political reality of a second-term President who returned to office with a clear agenda, and it reflects a personal conviction that Hegseth carried with him from his years as an infantry officer. A good officer takes the commander's intent and turns it into action. He does not substitute his own.

The Doctrine Before the Man

President Trump's view of military power had been settled long before he chose his second Secretary of Defense. He summarized it in three words that he repeated through two campaigns and two terms: peace through strength. The phrase belonged to Ronald Reagan before it belonged to Trump, but Trump gave it his own meaning. In his telling, the United States had spent a generation fighting wars it did not intend to win, nation-building in places that did not want to be rebuilt, and lecturing its own soldiers about social theory while adversaries grew stronger. Strength, as Trump understood it, meant a military so plainly dominant that adversaries would think twice before testing it, and a Commander-in-Chief willing to use that military decisively when they did.

From that conviction flowed a set of priorities that Trump articulated publicly and repeatedly during the 2024 campaign. The southern border would be treated as a national security matter, not merely a law enforcement problem. Iran would never be permitted to obtain a nuclear weapon. Drug cartels that killed tens of thousands of Americans each year with fentanyl would be treated as the terrorist organizations they were. The military would be rebuilt around merit, readiness, and lethality, and the diversity bureaucracy that had grown up inside it would be dismantled. Allies would pay their fair share. China would be deterred by visible strength rather than by communiqués. The defense industrial base, hollowed out by decades of consolidation and offshoring, would be revived.

None of those priorities originated in the Pentagon. All of them originated with the President. That is the first fact a reader needs in order to understand the Hegseth years.

What Trump Wanted in a Secretary

Trump's first term had taught him hard lessons about the Pentagon. He had appointed men of conventional distinction, decorated generals and experienced executives, and he came to believe that several of them had treated his directives as suggestions to be managed rather than orders to be carried out. Troop withdrawals he ordered were slowed. Policy changes he announced were litigated internally for months. Senior officers spoke publicly in ways he regarded as undermining his authority. Whatever one thinks of those episodes, they left the President with a clear idea of what he did not want the second time: a Secretary whose first loyalty ran to the institution rather than to the elected Commander-in-Chief.

What he wanted instead was someone who shared his diagnosis of what had gone wrong, who had the energy to push change through a resistant bureaucracy, who could defend the administration's policies on television with conviction, and who understood the military from the inside as a soldier rather than as a general. He wanted, in short, an executor. He found one in a combat veteran and television host from Minnesota.

The Chain of Command Made Visible

Throughout the period this book covers, the relationship between President and Secretary was not merely hierarchical in theory. It was hierarchical in practice, and both men made a point of showing it. When the President ordered strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities in June 2025, he announced them himself from the White House, and Hegseth briefed the details afterward. When the President decided to rename the Department of Defense as the Department of War, he signed the executive order, and Hegseth implemented it. When the Secretary addressed hundreds of generals and admirals at Quantico in September 2025, the President came and spoke as well, so that no one in the room could mistake whose agenda was being delivered. When Operation Absolute Resolve captured Nicolás Maduro in January 2026, it was the President who gave the final order and the President who stood at the podium to announce it.

The same pattern held in moments of difficulty. When critics demanded Hegseth's removal, the decision was the President's, and the President declined to make it. After the November 2026 midterm elections, when reporters asked whether he would replace his Secretary of War, Trump answered that he thought Hegseth was doing a very good job. When a Republican congressman forced an impeachment effort to the floor of the House a week later, and the Secretary defended himself at the Pentagon podium, the President graded the performance in his own words on social media, awarding Hegseth an "A PLUS PLUS PLUS." The grade was the President's to give. That, too, is the point.

Why the Hierarchy Matters

Some commentators have treated Hegseth's deference to the President as a weakness, as though a Secretary of Defense ought to act as an independent power center balancing the President's wishes against the institution's preferences. That view has a long pedigree in Washington, but it is not the view of the Constitution. Article II vests the executive power in a President and makes him Commander-in-Chief. The Secretary of Defense, a creation of statute, exists to help the President exercise that power. Civilian control of the military means control by the elected civilian at the top of the chain, not control by the permanent establishment.

Hegseth understood this from the beginning, and his tenure is best read as a sustained demonstration of what it looks like when a cabinet secretary takes it seriously. He did not set his own grand strategy. He did not freelance foreign policy. He did not leak against the White House or cultivate a separate constituency in the press. He took the President's priorities, translated them into orders and memoranda, pushed them through a bureaucracy that resisted many of them, and defended them in public. When those priorities produced controversy, he absorbed the criticism. When they produced success, he credited the President.

The Shape of This Book

The chapters that follow trace that work from beginning to end. Part One describes the man and the choice: Hegseth's formation as a soldier, his years as a veterans' advocate and broadcaster, the argument he made in his book The War on Warriors that brought him to the President's attention, and the confirmation fight that ended with a tie-breaking vote by Vice President JD Vance. Part Two covers the first wave of domestic implementation: the leadership changes of early 2025, the end of diversity programs, the restoration of base names, the reinstatement of service members discharged over the COVID-19 vaccine, and the military's role in securing the southern border. Part Three turns abroad, to the strikes against the Houthis and Iran, the push for allied burden sharing, the redesignation of the Department of War, the Quantico address, the campaign against narco-terrorists at sea, the capture of Maduro, and Operation Epic Fury. Part Four examines the rebuilding of the force itself: recruiting, care for service members and veterans, acquisition reform, missile defense, space, drones, the reduction of the general officer corps, and the transformation of each service. Part Five describes the strategy, the partners, and the team: the hemisphere doctrine, the Middle East, the national anniversaries, the President's national security team, the Secretary's work before Congress, and his style of leadership. Part Six takes up the storms of 2025 and 2026, the midterm elections, the impeachment effort, the legal questions, and the critics' case. Part Seven offers an assessment of the arrangement as a whole.

Through all of it runs the same theme. The President decided. The Secretary delivered.

The Constitutional Foundation

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the constitutional foundation of the relationship this book describes, because it is often misunderstood. Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution provides that the President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the militia of the several states when called into the actual service of the United States. The framers placed command of the armed forces in a single civilian, elected by the people and accountable to them, precisely so that the military would never become an independent power in the republic.

The office of Secretary of War, created by Congress in 1789, and its successor, the Secretary of Defense, created in 1947, exist to assist the President in exercising that command. The statute that governs the modern office provides that the Secretary is the principal assistant to the President in all matters relating to the Department, and that the Secretary exercises authority, direction, and control over the Department subject to the direction of the President. The words subject to the direction of the President are the key. The Secretary's authority is derivative. It flows from the President and is exercised on his behalf.

This structure has a democratic logic. The President is elected by the whole nation. The Secretary is not elected at all. When a Secretary substitutes his own preferences for the President's, he substitutes the judgment of an appointed official for the judgment of the voters. When a Secretary faithfully executes the President's direction, he carries the voters' choice into the institution that most needs to answer to it. Pete Hegseth understood this logic and lived by it.

The Voters' Mandate

The mandate the President carried into his second term was not an abstraction. In November 2024 he won the presidency, carried every one of the battleground states, and won the national popular vote. Republicans won control of both houses of Congress. Exit polls showed that voters were deeply concerned about the border, about the economy, and about the direction of the country. The President had campaigned openly on his military agenda: securing the border with the help of the armed forces, ending DEI in the ranks, restoring standards, firing generals he regarded as having failed, and rebuilding American strength. The voters who elected him knew what he intended.

That mandate gave the President, and through him his Secretary, a legitimacy that critics often overlooked. The changes described in this book were not imposed by a faction acting in secret. They were promised in public, ratified at the ballot box, and carried out by officials the President appointed and the Senate confirmed. Whatever one thinks of them, they were the product of the democratic process working as designed.

How the Secretary Spoke of the President

A final note on the theme of this opening chapter. Throughout his tenure, Hegseth's public remarks returned again and again to the President. He described operations as having been carried out at the direction of the President. He described policies as the President's policies. He credited the President's courage for the decision to strike Iran and the President's vision for the rebuilding of the force. When he declared victory in Operation Epic Fury, he said the President had made history.

Some critics mocked this habit as flattery. That reading misses the point. The Secretary was describing the chain of command as it actually operated. The decisions were the President's, and the

Secretary said so. In an era when cabinet officials often seek to build their own reputations at the expense of the Presidents they serve, a Secretary who consistently gave the credit to his boss was unusual. It was also, in the author's view, admirable.

CONTINUE READING

The President’s Choice

Portraits of the people who served
President Donald J. Trump.

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