

September 16, 2026

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of War
Office of the Secretary of War
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Hegseth:

The NAACP, the nation's oldest, largest, and most widely recognized grassroots civil rights organization, the National Women's Law Center (NWLC), a national advocacy organization that has worked for over 50 years to advance and protect women's equality and opportunity, and the undersigned 31 organizations committed to civil rights and equal opportunity are deeply concerned about reports indicating that you have personally blocked the promotions of African Americans and women serving in our nation's military, without any explanation and seemingly without cause. Your unprecedented interference corresponds with a drop in the percentage of women nominated for high-ranking promotions, which is now at its lowest level in over two decades, and many qualified Black candidates have seen their opportunities blocked.¹ We call on you to comply with congressional requests for oversight. The American public deserves to know whether their Secretary of Defense is making decisions in compliance with our laws and based on the skills and experiences of our service members or if his decisions are driven by racial and gender stereotypes.

As you are well aware, Congress has enacted laws establishing a military promotions process designed to safeguard against political interference and personal biases. As part of this process, promotion selection boards carefully vet each officer based on their military records to ensure a promotion list of highly qualified candidates. Yet despite this rigorous selection process, you have reportedly blocked at least 40 senior officers—approximately half of whom were women or people of color—from promotions.² According to reports cited here, you have taken the following actions:

- In the Navy, you reportedly blocked nine officers, three of whom were women and two of whom were Black men, from becoming one-star admirals³ and seven officers, including five women or people of color, from a promotion list for two-star admiral rank.⁴ As a result, no active-duty women were included for promotion to admiral-rank,

¹ C.J Robinson, *Women's Share of Top Military Promotions Falls as Hegseth Blocks Nominees*, The New York Times, Aug. 6, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/08/06/upshot/military-promotions-women-hegseth.html?partner=slack&smid=sl-share>.

² Greg Jaffe & Kate Kelly, *Secret Vetting and Blocked Promotions Inside Hegseth's War on Diversity*, The New York Times, June 19, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/06/19/us/politics/hegseth-navy-blocked-promotions-diversity.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>.

³ Greg Jaffe & Kate Kelly, *Hegseth Strikes Female and Black Navy Officers From Promotion List*, The New York Times, June 1, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/06/01/us/politics/hegseth-navy-promotion-list.html>.

⁴ Greg Jaffe, *Opportunities Narrow for Women as Hegseth Blocks More Promotions*, The New York Times, July 14, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/07/14/us/hegseth-blocks-navy-promotions.html>.

even though women represent roughly 21 percent of the Navy active-duty force,⁵ and reportedly only two people of color are on the one-star promotion list,⁶ even though roughly 38 percent of active-duty Navy members identify with “Racial Minority.”⁷

- In the Army, you reportedly removed the names of two Black and two women officers from a promotion list for one-star generals after Army Secretary Driscoll reportedly refused your order to do so.⁸ Recently, you blocked the promotions of seven officers to be two-star generals, including two women and two Black officers.⁹
- In the Marine Corps, you reportedly removed the names of two officers from a promotion list: the only Black person and the only woman.¹⁰
- In the Air Force, you reportedly blocked the promotions of nine Air Force colonels, leaving only one woman and no Black officers on the remaining list.¹¹
- In the promotions of three-star and four-star admirals and generals, where you legally may exercise more discretion, you abused your power by targeting women and Black leaders, including failing to advance the promotions of Admiral Sara Joyner and Rear Admiral Stephen D. Barnett, both of whom received exemplary recommendations but who had actively recruited women and people of color, respectively, to serve.¹²

In addition, according to Senator Jack Reed, Ranking Member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, women and Black officers represent almost 60 percent of the senior officers you have “fired or sidelined.”¹³ These actions, along with your reported intervention to seek the promotion of an unqualified individual, are in stark contrast to your stated commitment to high standards and instead clearly demonstrate your disinterest in merit and qualifications.¹⁴

⁵ Greg Jaffe & Kate Kelly, *supra* note 3; Greg Jaffe, *supra* note 4.

⁶ Greg Jaffe & Kate Kelly, *supra* note 3.

⁷ 2024 Demographics Profile of the Military Community, Department of Defense, <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/data-research-and-statistics/military-community-demographics/2024-demographics-profile/> (infographic for Navy active-duty members); *see also* Greg Jaffe & Kate Kelly, *supra* note 3.; Bruce Golding, Pete Hegseth blocks promotions of Black and women military officers in latest anti-DEI push, *Independent*, June 1, 2026, <https://www.the-independent.com/news/world/americas/us-politics/hegseth-military-dei-promotions-black-women-b2987520.html>.

⁸ Greg Jaffe & Kate Kelly, *supra* note 2.

⁹ Greg Jaffe, Helene Cooper, and Eric Schmitt, *Hegseth Targets 7 More Officers as His Frustrated Army Secretary Quits*, *The New York Times*, September 1, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/09/01/us/hegseth-purge-army-officers.html>.

¹⁰ Greg Jaffe & Kate Kelly, *supra* note 2.

¹¹ Filip Timotija, *Pete Hegseth's blocks on promotions rankle former military leaders*, *The Hill*, June 11, 2026, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/5918902-hegseth-navy-air-force-blocked-promotions/>

¹² Greg Jaffe & Kate Kelly, *supra* note 2.

¹³ Senator Reed, Press Release, “Reed Condemns Hegseth Blockade of Military Promotions Across Navy and Air Force,” June 2, 2026, <https://www.reed.senate.gov/news/releases/reed-condemns-hegseth-blockade-of-military-promotions-across-navy-and-air-force>; *see also* Greg Jaffe & Kate Kelly, *supra* note 3.

¹⁴ Greg Jaffe & Kate Kelly, *supra* note 3.

These actions are deeply concerning on their own, but especially so in the context of your past statements denigrating women and people of color who serve in our military. In your 2024 book *The War on Warriors*, you wrote, “When I think about my career in uniform, in almost every instance where there has been poor leadership or people in positions they’re not qualified for, it was based on either the reality or the perception of a ‘diversity hire.’”¹⁵ You stated that you believed that Black troops, “at all levels” would be “promoted simply based on their race”¹⁶ and questioned whether Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr. had been named Chairman of the Joint Chiefs because of his race.¹⁷ At a meeting of senior military leaders in September 2025, you suggested that women are less capable than men, stating that you wanted to enact new training standards in the armed services, and that “[i]f that means no women qualify for some combat jobs, so be it.”¹⁸ This statement ignores the fact that for years women in all occupational career fields have successfully met the same gender-neutral occupational standards as men—standards that are based on the actual realities of the job.

Our military and national security are harmed by disregarding the qualifications of any servicemember—including women and people of color—and blocking their ability to serve in military leadership. A strong military draws from the diverse talent within our nation to build an agile, innovative, and effective military. We are stronger and safer as a nation when officers’ qualifications, skills, and achievements are the focus of personnel and leadership decisions. And, of course, the Constitution requires that these decisions be made without invidious discrimination against people of color or women.

Your reported interference in promotions across the armed services, however, is a grave abuse of power at the expense of women and officers of color. Transparency is needed to better understand your actions, given that your vetting process has been “shrouded in secrecy.”¹⁹ The undersigned groups call on the Department of Defense to comply with its Constitutional obligation to respond to oversight requests²⁰ and to operate on a nondiscriminatory basis.

Sincerely,

NAACP
National Women’s Law Center

¹⁵ Greg Jaffe & Kate Kelly, *supra* note 2.

¹⁶ Kia Hamadanchy & Hina Shamsi, *Where Defense Secretary Nominee Pete Hegseth Stands on Civil Liberties*, Dec. 26, 2024, <https://www.aclu.org/news/civil-liberties/who-is-pete-hegseth>.

¹⁷ *Trump Fires Black Joint Chiefs Chair Hegseth Accused of Promoting Diversity*, The Guardian, Feb 21, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/21/trump-hegseth-joint-chiefs-cq-brown-jr>; *see also* Kia Hamadanchy & Hina Shamsi, *Where Defense Secretary Nominee Pete Hegseth Stands on Civil Liberties*, Dec. 26, 2024, <https://www.aclu.org/news/civil-liberties/who-is-pete-hegseth>.

¹⁸ Graig Graziosi, *‘It could have been an email’: Viewers stunned by Hegseth and Trump’s bizarre Quantico speeches to military chiefs*, Independent, September 30, 2025, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-hegseth-military-speeches-reaction-b2836907.html>.

¹⁹ Greg Jaffe & Kate Kelly, *supra* note 2.

²⁰ *See, e.g.*, Letter from U.S. Senators (requesting “information regarding your decision-making process and rationale for removing qualified Officers from promotion consideration.”), July 6, 2026, https://www.slotkin.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/26.07.06_SECDEF-Letter_Officer-Promotions.pdf.

American Civil Liberties Union
Black Veterans Project
CommonDefense.us
Equal Rights Advocates
Human Rights Campaign
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
The Legal Defense Fund
Legal Momentum, the Women's Legal Defense & Education Fund
Minority Veterans of America
National Action Network
National Institute for Workers' Rights
National Organization for Women
National Partnership for Women & Families
National Security Leaders for America (NSL4A)
National Workrights Institute
Not In My Marine Corps
The Pink Berets
Protect Democracy
Protect our Defenders Foundation
Reproductive Freedom for All
Secure Families Initiative
Service Women's Action Network (SWAN)
The Sikh Coalition
SisterReach, Inc. and SisterReach Illinois
Southern Poverty Law Center
SPARTA
The Steady State
Vet Voice Foundation
Women in the Service Coalition (WiSCI)
Zoomies Against Sexual Assault (ZASA)