Trump, Hegseth purge Pentagon leadership to prepare for war and mass repression

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US President Donald Trump fired the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Charles Q. Brown, and five other top military officers, in a purge suddenly announced late Friday. The other five include Admiral Lisa Franchetti, chief of naval operations and a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; General James Slife, vice chief of the Air Force; and the chief military lawyers for the Army, Navy and Air Force, known as judge adjutant generals, or JAGs.

Trump said he would replace Brown with a recently retired Air Force general, Dan Caine, who spent the last three years as the top military liaison at the CIA after a career focused on commanding Special Operations forces, the assassination and covert wing of the military. Caine retired as a three-star general rather than a four-star, and might need a congressional waiver of the qualifications required to become chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

The statements from Trump and his recently confirmed Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth thanked Brown, Franchetti and Slife for their "service and dedication to our country," but Hegseth had attacked Brown and Franchetti as "DEI hires" in a book published last year, claiming he did not know whether they had been promoted because of their race and gender or actual military skills.

Hegseth was certainly the driving force in the removal of the three JAGs, as he has been a ferocious opponent of any effort to hold soldiers and officers accountable for war crimes. Only a handful of cases have been brought by the military legal system, which is run by the JAGs, but Hegseth used his position as a Fox News host during Trump's first term to lobby for the quashing of legal proceedings or the issuance of outright pardons for soldiers who committed acts of murder, in some cases so flagrant that their own units turned them in for prosecution.

In his announcement on Truth Social of the selection of General Caine to be the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Trump cited Caine's role in the final stages of the US war with ISIS during his first term. He claimed that during a presidential visit to US forces in Iraq, Caine had promised victory in a week rather than years and had donned a MAGA hat—assertions disputed by other officials on that visit.

The *New York Time*s reported Sunday night:

> Mr. Trump revealed another reason for his unconventional choice. He said that General Caine had been passed over for promotion by President Joseph R. Biden Jr., a claim that Biden officials said on Sunday they could not address. Aides say that in Mr. Trump's mind, that perceived snub was a great endorsement, proof that General Caine has no specific loyalty to the previous administration.

Whatever the details, it is clear that the principal goal of the purging of the Pentagon leadership is to strengthen Trump's personal control over the military apparatus. It follows the swearing in of his political toady Hegseth, a former Army captain with deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan and the Guantanamo Bay torture center, but with no higher command experience, as secretary of defense. As the WSWS wrote at the time of Hegseth's confirmation hearing:

> Of all Trump's nominees, Hegseth's politics are perhaps the most overtly fascist. He has openly defended war crimes and advocated the use of the military against domestic political opponents. The nomination of Hegseth is a demonstration of Trump's complete contempt for any constitutional check on his use of military force, either at home or abroad.

Trump is reshaping the Pentagon command on the basis of two critical episodes in the final year of his first term: the mass protests that followed the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020, and the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol.

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In the first case, Trump came into conflict with then-Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and General Mark Milley, Brown's predecessor as chairman of the Joint Chiefs, over his threat to invoke the Insurrection Act of 1807 and deploy Army troops against the George Floyd protests. Esper and Milley opposed this use of the military, and as the *Times* reported Sunday night, "it rankled Mr. Trump that the general swore allegiance to the Constitution, not to him. Their relationship was never the same."

Brown issued his own statement on the George Floyd protests in a video message to the troops he commanded, expressing sympathy for African American victims of police violence and reflecting on his own experiences of discrimination, including in the military. The *Times* reported that Trump advisers cited that video as a reason for Trump's distrust of the general's political loyalty.

In relation to January 6, while Trump was able to delay the deployment of National Guard troops to the Capitol for more than three hours, thanks to the efforts of loyalists at the Pentagon such as acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller and his chief aide Kash Patel, now sworn in as FBI director, he undoubtedly felt that General Milley and others, perhaps including General Brown, then Air Force chief of staff, had opposed his coup attempt.

Milley later confirmed that he had been concerned throughout the transition from Biden's electoral victory in November 2020 to the inauguration in January 2021 that Trump might attempt to stay in power by force.

General Brown was carrying out Trump's instructions on the militarization of the US-Mexico border and was actually in El Paso, Texas, inspecting troop deployments when Hegseth phoned to tell him he was fired. But Trump was clearly determined to prepare the US military to be used as a force for mass repression at home, in violation of the Posse Comitatus Act, which forbids the use of troops in a domestic police role.

The firings at the Pentagon evoked criticism from congressional Democrats and sections of the corporate media, but this was largely focused on Trump's attack on DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) policies, not on the broader threat to democratic rights arising from the use of the military within the United States.

Senator Jack Reed, the top Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, made his criticism entirely in that context, issuing a statement that read:

> Firing uniformed leaders as a type of political loyalty test, or for reasons relating to diversity and gender that have nothing to do with performance, erodes the trust and professionalism that our service members require to achieve their missions.

Representative Adam Smith of Washington, the senior Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, called the firing of Brown "completely unjustified," in a statement on X/Twitter. "Smart, competent leader to be replaced by a retired 3 star? More weakening of America."

Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia, Hillary Clinton's vice presidential running mate in 2016, called the firings "without cause out of pure pettiness." He continued:

> Instead of focusing on steps to ensure our military remains the most lethal in the world in the face of global threats, including from China, President Trump and Secretary Hegseth are taking steps that make Americans less safe.

In relation to the overseas operations of the American military, Hegseth's firing of the top three uniformed military lawyers, Lt. Gen. Joseph B. Berger III, Air Force Lt. Gen. Charles Plummer and Rear Adm. Lia M. Reynolds, is particularly ominous. Media reports said that Hegseth had no contact with these officers since he was sworn in, and that their superiors had been given no advance warning that they were to be removed.

Firing the lawyers who draft guidelines for what is permissible in warfare, based on US and international law, is a declaration that these guidelines, even though presently largely ignored, will be ripped up entirely. As Hegseth said during his confirmation hearing when asked if the Geneva Conventions would apply to US military operations:

> An America First national security policy is not going to hand its prerogatives over to international bodies that make decisions about how our men and women make decisions on the battlefield.

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