

Hegseth's plan to livestream an execution and the fascist barbarism of the ruling class

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The announcement by Secretary of War Pete Hegseth that the Pentagon will livestream the firing squad execution of Nidal Hasan, the former Army psychiatrist who killed 13 people at Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009, marks a new stage in the descent of the American state into fascistic barbarism. The plan has provoked revulsion around the world.

Hasan is to be shot on December 3 by a squad of soldiers. It would be the first execution by the US military since 1961 and the first in the United States broadcast to the public. In an interview on the far-right outlet Real America's Voice, Hegseth vowed to "make sure that people are able to watch it," because "people need to understand that there's serious consequences for these types of things." The UN human rights office has said the broadcast would violate the absolute prohibition of torture.

Hegseth's interviewer was Jack Posobiec, a fascist propagandist involved in the January 6 coup attempt, who opened the 2024 Conservative Political Action Conference by declaring, "Welcome to the end of democracy. We are here to overthrow it completely."

With Trump's approval, Hegseth chose the unorthodox killing method of the firing squad, stating, "Well I kind of like the mentality we had in World War II." The US Army of that war hanged most of the soldiers it executed, many of them at the hands of a single Army hangman, and rarely used the firing squad. Hitler's Wehrmacht relied on the firing squad to enforce obedience, shooting over 18,000 of its own soldiers, while the Nazi occupiers carried out mass public hangings across Poland and the Soviet Union, photographed and circulated as warnings. That is the "mentality" Hegseth admires and seeks to emulate.

What purpose does this spectacle serve?

It is staged, first, for the most backward and degraded layers of American society, whom Trump cultivates at rallies that have sunk to new lows, if that were possible. Speaking in San Antonio on Wednesday, Trump boasted to the crowd that "we are going to deliver final justice to an evil killer." Its broader purpose is to brutalize the population and implicate it in state killing.

The man staging the public execution is a sadist. Hegseth belongs to a church network co-founded by the self-described Christian nationalist Doug Wilson. His tattoos include the neo-fascist slogan "Deus Vult," Latin for "God wills it," the battle cry of the medieval Crusades against the Muslim world. At a livestreamed Pentagon prayer service in March, he asked God for "overwhelming violence of action against those who deserve no mercy." Hegseth would have been at home in the Nazi battalions that machine-gunned partisans and Jews across occupied Eastern Europe, and he would have relished the work. But Hegseth is no isolated psychopath. He is the Secretary of War, chosen by Trump and confirmed by the Senate.

Hegseth is modeling himself on Heinrich Himmler, with Trump as his Führer. The Nazis built Himmler's Waffen-SS as a party army outside the Wehrmacht, sworn personally to Hitler and selected for ideological reliability. Hegseth's search for such men did not begin at the Pentagon. In 2019, as a Fox News host, he lobbied Trump to pardon soldiers accused or convicted of war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, insisting they were "not war criminals, they're warriors." Trump obliged. As Secretary of War, Hegseth has made a "warrior ethos" the watchword of his tenure and purged generals and the military's top lawyers.

Hegseth is a product of the all-volunteer military, a force increasingly insulated from the civilian population, and he aims to widen that divide. His firing squad will be made up not of a professional executioner but of ordinary soldiers, ordered to shoot a paralyzed man before a mass audience. The aim is to bind the soldiers to the regime through complicity and to select and cultivate within the military a layer prepared to carry out such work.

Trump, Hegseth, Stephen Miller, and others in the regime are fascists who aspire to copy Hitler, but they are not yet in a position to do so. They confront mass opposition to their policies and their wars. Trump's approval rating has fallen to 32 percent, the lowest of either of his terms, and fewer than three in ten approve of his war on Iran. It is precisely because the administration lacks popular support that it is

turning to the armed forces.

Above all, the livestreamed execution is a message to the military. At Quantico last September, Trump told the assembled generals to use “some of these dangerous cities as training grounds.” When six Democratic lawmakers reminded troops last November that they may refuse illegal orders, Trump denounced the video as “SEDITIONARY BEHAVIOR, punishable by DEATH!”

Regimes resort to exemplary executions when their armies begin to break. Hegseth gave his interview aboard the carrier USS Abraham Lincoln as it returned from a 321-day deployment in the war against Iran, a tour he had twice extended. Eight sailors in the Lincoln’s strike group attempted suicide, one by going overboard, yet Hegseth dismissed reports of conditions aboard as “completely misrepresented,” and Trump declared the deployment “not nearly long enough.” An administration preparing to turn the military against the population is showing every soldier what awaits those who refuse its orders, and the population what awaits those who oppose its fascistic policies.

Even the one American soldier shot for desertion in World War II, Private Eddie Slovik, was executed in secret. A firing squad from his own regiment killed him in France on January 31, 1945, after General Dwight Eisenhower approved the sentence amid the Battle of the Bulge. The Army told Slovik’s wife only that he had died in the European theater, and the truth emerged with William Bradford Huie’s 1954 book, made into a film in 1974. The Army of 1945, whose soldiers believed they were fighting fascism, kept the killing hidden. Hegseth, who models himself on Himmler, wants the world to watch.

The men overseeing Hasan’s execution are unindicted war criminals. Since September 2025, on Hegseth’s orders, the military has blown up boats in the Caribbean, killing more than 200 people without trial. In the first attack, after Hegseth reportedly ordered that no one survive, a second missile killed two men clinging to the burning wreckage. The war on Iran is a war of aggression, what the Nuremberg tribunal identified as “the supreme international crime.” Trump’s repeated threats to annihilate Iran’s civilian population are also war crimes.

The execution of Hasan also draws on the darkest traditions of the American Jim Crow South. The last public execution in the United States, the 1936 hanging of Rainey Bethea, a 22-year-old Black man, in Owensboro, Kentucky, drew up to 20,000 spectators. In Waco, some 60 miles from Fort Hood, a mob of over 10,000 tortured and burned alive Jesse Washington, a 17-year-old Black farmhand, on May 15, 1916. A local photographer sold pictures of the burning as postcards. Hegseth’s livestream is the lynching postcard of the internet age, with the state itself behind the camera.

Hasan’s killing of 13 people, 12 of them soldiers, was a reactionary crime. But as the World Socialist Web Site explained in 2009, the massacre was collateral damage from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which directly killed nearly a million people. The state that waged those wars now makes the deaths of its own soldiers the pretext for a public killing, amid a frenzy of executions across the country. Last week, Tennessee injected Christa Pike with two lethal doses of pentobarbital, which failed to kill her and left her arms burned and blistered.

The plan to livestream Hasan’s execution has met with broad popular revulsion and been denounced across social media. Support for the death penalty itself has fallen to 52 percent, near its lowest level in half a century. This sentiment has compelled sections of the political establishment to speak out. Republican and Democratic lawmakers, a former Army judge advocate, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, and even a Fort Hood survivor have criticized the livestream, and Vice President JD Vance has suggested it may not happen. Their concern is for the reputation of the military and the stability of the state, and nearly all of them defend the death penalty.

As of this writing, Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Zohran Mamdani have said nothing on the planned execution. True to form, they will wait until enough right-wing figures have made opposition respectable before adding their voices to it.

The firing squad at Fort Hood captures the reactionary essence of the American ruling oligarchy, whose counterparts from Germany to Chile are cultivating the same fascistic forces. Its turn to such methods expresses the historic crisis of world capitalism, which can no longer reconcile the wealth of a handful of billionaires with democratic forms of rule.

Only the working class, in the United States and internationally, acting independently of every capitalist party, can halt the descent into fascist barbarism. The struggle against war, dictatorship, and state killing is inseparable from the fight for world socialism, which will end the subordination of human life to private profit and lay the foundations for a new and higher culture. This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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