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Analysis



Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth speaks to reporters at the Pentagon, July 16, 2025, in Washington. (AP/Julia Demaree Nikhinson, File)

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The day activist Charlie Kirk was shot and killed at a campus event in Utah, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth paused while speaking to troops to say a short prayer for the felled conservative figure. Hegseth quickly published the full prayer to his official X account, but it was what he posted the next week — a heavily edited clip drawn from footage — that got the attention of his critics.

In the edited clip, Hegseth — who prefers the title "Secretary of War" — is briefly seen reciting the Lord's Prayer as dramatic music swells. The Defense secretary's prayer then continues as a voice over and a montage begins: the screen is filled with images of fighter jets and missiles flying, paratroopers tumbling from planes, a waving American flag and finally Hegseth standing and saluting alongside President Donald Trump.

Hegseth was even more explicit about his religious leanings at Kirk's memorial the next day, when he declared that the U.S. is in the midst of a "spiritual war" and urged the roughly 60,000 in the audience and the millions watching at home to embrace Christ. "My charge to all of you: live worthy of Charlie Kirk's sacrifice, and put Christ at the center of your life as he advocated for giving his," Hegseth said.

Since narrowly being confirmed to his post in January, Hegseth has placed this kind of religious expression firmly at the heart of his leadership of the U.S. military. In addition to organizing a new worship service at the Pentagon, Hegseth's religious fervor has taken hold at a Defense Department that has pushed social media messages that mix war preparations with Bible verses as well as official statements that forward a disputed, faith-focused version of U.S. history. All the while, in speeches and other appearances, Hegseth has said he hopes all Americans share his faith.

Even in an administration that has made defending religion a core concern, Hegseth has stood out by publicly advocating his own brand of conservative Christianity — one tied to Idaho pastor and avowed Christian nationalist Doug Wilson.

Critics are now raising concerns that Hegseth, by linking his religion to the most powerful fighting force on the planet, may be running afoul of the U.S. Constitution. "This is more the behavior of someone who is running an ultra-conservative Christian, Seven Mountain Mandate, muscular Christianity, spiritual warfare group," said Rachel Laser, head of the group Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, referring to the Christian nationalist movement to gain control over seven key sectors of society — the "seven mountains"— including government.

The new Pentagon worship service was among the first indications that Hegseth planned to inject religion into his profile as secretary. The gathering has taken place in the middle of the workday and is billed as Hegseth's personal project: A sign that appears to have been posted in the Pentagon earlier in September described the event as "SecWar's Prayer Service," inscribing the words over a painting of St. Stephen being stoned to death.Hegseth kicked off the first edition of the service, convened in May, by making clear his desire for a Christian country. "This is precisely where I need to be," Hegseth told attendees at the gathering, which was livestreamed from the Pentagon's auditorium. "And, I think, precisely where we need to be as a nation at this moment: in prayer, on bended knee, recognizing the providence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."



People participate in a prayer service hosted by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, May 21, 2025, at the Pentagon. (Video screen grab)

Under his leadership, the Department of Defense — which, like Hegseth, has rebranded as the Department of War, a secondary name — has also shared at least three faith-themed videos. Like the Lord's Prayer clip, two of the videos featured a montage of images of the U.S. military. But instead of a voiceover, the clips slowly overlaid the footage with two Bible verses from the Bible's 18th Psalm and the Book of Joshua. One of the videos was captioned: "We Are One Nation Under God."

(The Defense Department is not the only Trump admin department to be putting out religious tweets: The Department of Homeland Security has its own recruiting videos that mix Bible verses and warlike images.)

Asked by Religion News Service earlier this year about the videos, Pentagon Press Secretary Kingsley Wilson said the clips were meant to celebrate what she described as the "Christian heritage from our great nation," adding that Hegseth, as "a proud Christian," is "among those who embrace it."

Laser said it's inappropriate for a government official to express a preference for any single religion while acting in their formal capacity. Hegseth, she argued, goes further by inviting his personal pastor, Brooks Potteiger, a Reformed evangelical Christian who leads Pilgrim Hill Reformed Fellowship in Tennessee, to lead the service.

The secretary, Laser said, is "implicitly coercing his staff or his direct reports" to "follow a religion that's not their own."

Hegseth, who bears tattoos of the Crusaders' Latin phrase "Deus Vult" ("God wills it') and "kafir" (an Arabic word often translated as "infidel"), belongs to the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches, a small denomination with a short and controversial history. Its co-founder, Doug Wilson, is a rising star on the right who advocates for a society in which non-Christians and even liberal Christians are barred from holding office. His writings have also been criticized as denigrating LGBTQ+ people and downplaying the atrocities of slavery, and he recently alleged "millions" of Muslim immigrants lack any "commitment to, or mechanism of, assimilation" into U.S. society.

In August, the secretary reposted a CNN interview with Wilson on his personal X account, which carries a Secretary of War badge. (The segment featured one of Wilson's co-pastors saying he opposed women voting, causing the Defense

Department to have to clarify that Hegseth supports women's right to vote.) When Wilson established a new branch of his own church in Washington this summer, Hegseth was on hand at the inaugural service and has continued to attend.

In an email interview, Wilson called Hegseth's efforts, using biblical language for governing authorities, "a magistrate favoring faith over unbelief," but not "implicitly coercive." Wilson recounted a personal anecdote from boot camp when an officer told soldiers to bow their heads and pray, then added, "and you atheists need to study your shoe shine." A Navy veteran, Wilson said of Hegseth's religious appeals: "If I were still in the service, I would welcome it."

According to a 2019 congressional report, about 70% of active duty service members consider themselves Christian, with about 20% identifying as Catholic, 18% Protestant and the rest claiming no specific denominational affiliation. About 24% listed no religious affiliation, slightly more than 2% said they were atheists or agnostics, 1.3% identified as Mormon and slightly less than 2% ascribed to Judaism, Islam and other religious traditions, according to the report.

Micah Schwartzman, a University of Virginia Law School professor who specializes in the religious exercise guarantees in the U.S. Constitution, said in an email interview that it is "disturbing that the military is being led under a banner of Christian nationalism." A military leader organizing worship services outside the context of military chaplaincies, he added, "should raise concerns about religious coercion."

"The Establishment Clause was meant to protect against this kind of pressure to demonstrate religious conformity," he wrote.

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Other religious services are already available to Pentagon staffers, most of them organized by the Army chaplains assigned to the building. The chaplains hold regular services in the building's chapel, and, according to a publicly available guide to the building, the chaplain's office offers "opportunities for worship, pastoral care and counseling, faith-based Family Life Chaplain programs and support groups, small group religious studies, and ceremony support."

A spokesperson for the Catholic Archdiocese for the Military Services told RNS that Mass has long been celebrated at the Pentagon five times a week.

Only the first of Hegseth's Pentagon services, which are touted as monthly events, was livestreamed, and only one further service, led by evangelical pastor and former football player Jack Brewer, has been publicly announced.

Wilson, the Pentagon press secretary, did not answer questions about how many services have been convened or who led them but sent a statement saying that the services were voluntary. The statement described them as "an opportunity for Believers to appeal to Heaven on behalf of our great nation and its warfighters."

Marie Griffith, a religion professor and former director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, said the language of the statement is noteworthy — particularly its capitalizing of the words believers and heaven. While the statement may be mimicking President Donald Trump's proclivity for errant capitalization, she said, it could also be taken as a clear preference for Christianity.

"Believers is now a proper noun — and it means Christian believers, essentially," Griffith said, referring to the statement. "It is this way of really highlighting that kind of Christian sense of what we're doing here in these worship services."In correspondence, the Pentagon press secretary has repeatedly insisted Hegseth's religious moves are in keeping with a long American tradition established by George Washington, who she says "prayed for our cause at Valley Forge," a story Hegseth also referred to in his speech at the inaugural Pentagon worship service.But characterizing the United States as formed by a particular Christian heritage, critics say, is itself a hallmark of many proponents of Christian nationalism — especially since historians doubt the specific story of Washington praying at Valley Forge often forwarded by those who advocate for a Christian U.S.

Thomas A. Tweed, a professor of American studies and history at the University of Notre Dame and past president of the American Academy of Religion, said in an email that the prayer story was a "fabrication" by Mason Locke Weems, an early biographer of George Washington.

Similarly, Lindsay M. Chervinsky, executive director of the George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon, said in an email that the account was further popularized by a painting of Washington praying in the woods. "There is no evidence that the specific event depicted in that painting ever occurred," said Chervinsky, who noted that Weems "regularly fabricated facts to spin a good story."

Some of Hegseth's critics admitted the current Supreme Court hasn't been receptive to the kind of Establishment Clause concerns raised by the defense secretary's detractors. In an email, Elizabeth Platt, head of the Law, Rights & Religion Project at Union Seminary in New York, linked Hegseth to Christian nationalism but said the current conservative-leaning slate of justices are unlikely to side with those who find Hegseth's faith activity unconstitutional.

"I think the reality is we're not going to litigate our way out of the administration's commitment to Christian Nationalism and violent religious rhetoric using the Establishment Clause," Platt wrote in an email.

Hegseth, for his part, appears determined to continue leading the armed forces with Bible in hand, according to images tweeted out by conservative podcast host Mike Watkins, who attended the service earlier this month.

Watkins added a quote, which he attributed to Hegseth: "We are on the verge of a spiritual renaissance."

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.