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Defense secretary nominee Pete Hegseth speaks with the media as he departs a meeting on Capitol Hill Nov. 21 in Washington. (OSV News/Reuters/Nathan Howard)

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Pope Leo XIV expressed concern about rhetoric used by President Donald Trump and Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth shortly after their Sept. 30 meeting with top U.S. military officials.

Hegseth called a rare, last-minute gathering at the Quantico base in Virginia, calling in senior U.S. military officials stationed all over the globe.

During the meeting, Hegseth — who uses the moniker "secretary of war" since Trump signed an executive order on Sept. 5 adding the "Department of War" as a secondary, ceremonial title for the Department of Defense — said, "The only mission of the newly restored Department of War is this: warfighting, preparing for war and preparing to win, unrelenting and uncompromising in that pursuit."

"To ensure peace, we must prepare for war," Hegseth said.

In comments to reporters at Castel Gandolfo, Leo said, "This way of speaking is worrying because it shows an increase in tension, and also this vocabulary of changing the Minister of Defense to the Minister of War. Let's hope it's just a way of speaking."

Msgr. Stuart Swetland, a canon lawyer and former U.S. Navy officer who is president of Donnelly College in Kansas City, Kansas, told OSV News that while the president and the defense secretary had "the right to call all the leaders together," he questioned whether it was a "prudent use of resources, of both time and expense."

Swetland also stressed that to actually change the name of the Department of Defense outright would require an act of Congress.

The department, which oversees U.S. armed forces, was originally established by President George Washington in 1789 as the Department of War, but has been reshaped and renamed over the course of U.S. history, and was named the Department of Defense soon after World War II.

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"I personally think the Department of Defense is the better name for it," Swetland said, adding the name was changed after World War II "to show the world the United States was interested in defending freedom from aggression, but we were not going to be an aggressive power ourselves."

During their comments to the military officials, Trump also said he wanted to use the military to quell "the enemy within."

"San Francisco, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, they're very unsafe places and we're gonna straighten them out one by one," Trump said.

Swetland said he thought that suggestion from Trump is likely also why the pope found the event's rhetoric "worrying."

"Under law and tradition (in the U.S.), there's been a very limited use of the military domestically," Swetland said, "in instances of national disaster, or you need the military's capacity to rescue people."

"But the talk about using the military broadly, domestically ... that is problematic," he said. "We would want to be very judicious with the use of the military."

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