Opinion

NCR Voices



Members of the military wait for the U.S. President Donald Trump speech, as they attend a meeting convened by U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, at Marine Corps Base Quantico in Virginia Sept. 30, 2025. In an unprecedented gathering, almost 800 generals, admirals and their senior enlisted leaders were ordered into one location from around the world on short notice. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)



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Nothing like a speech from President Donald "Bone Spur" Trump to lift the spirits of America's generals and admirals. The hastily called meeting of top military brass, summoned from posts around the world to the Marine Corps base in Quantico, Virginia, was one of the clearest clashes of culture in a world dominated by such clashes. That fact was lost on the blowhard-in-chief.

The president's speech has rightly been lambasted for, among other things, his suggestion that the military should confront "the enemy within" and that America's cities be used as "training grounds" for the military. Does he have any idea how soldiers are trained?

At certain moments in our national history, the president has deployed the National Guard to enforce the law. Trump, however, seems interested in something different. He wants to punish political enemies. The military leaders gathered at Quantico want nothing to do with that. They are trained to respect civilian control of the military, and they take their oaths to the Constitution very seriously. It is not clear where they will draw the line, but we all have to hope they will draw it when confronted with any order that is clearly illegal.

The president gave a brief history lesson to explain his decision to change the name of the Department of Defense to Department of War.



U.S. President Donald Trump gestures after speaking during a meeting of senior military leaders convened by U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, at Marine Corps Base Quantico in Virginia Sept. 30, 2025. In an unprecedented gathering, almost 800 generals, admirals and their senior enlisted leaders were ordered into one location from around the world on short notice. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

"So we won the First World War. We won the Second World War. We won everything in between and everything before that. We only won," the president said. "And then we went, in a way, woke. That was probably the first sign of wokeness and we changed it to defense instead of war."

Unless there are hidden archives, I do not think Harry Truman has ever been called "woke." It was Truman who merged the Departments of War and of the Navy into the new Department of Defense in 1947, the same year he announced the Truman Doctrine, pledging the U.S. would support democracies around the world with military means if necessary. So woke!

My principal problem however was the way the president began his remarks, commenting on how silent the room was and telling the military leaders to relax.

"You know what, just have a good time. And if you want to applaud, you applaud. And if you want to do anything you want — you can do anything you want," Trump said. "And if you don't like what I'm saying, you can leave the room. Of course, there goes your rank, there goes your future, but you just feel nice and loose, OK, because we're all on the same team."

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In the military, men and women are always conscious of rank. They are aware of the work and discipline it takes to rise through the ranks of the military. They know that they are to follow the orders of those who rank above them and expect their orders to those who rank below to be followed. Such discipline, horrific in civilian life, is essential in the military. To casually threaten to upend that discipline because someone might not like what a political leader is saying must have been appalling to all. The Washington Post noted that his comments provoked "uncomfortable laughter from some." I am sure they did.

The newly minted Secretary of War Pete Hegseth pulled off the impossible: He made Trump look good, at least by comparison. Hegseth is a caricature of a military leader, not the authentic article. He said, "We unleash overwhelming and punishing violence on the enemy. We also don't fight with stupid rules of engagement. We untie the hands of our warfighters to intimidate, demoralize, hunt and kill the enemies of our country. No more politically correct and overbearing rules of engagement."



U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth speaks to senior military leaders at Marine Corps Base Quantico in Virginia Sept. 30, 2025. In an unprecedented gathering, almost 800 generals, admirals and their senior enlisted leaders have been ordered into one location from around the world on short notice. (OSV News/Reuters/Andrew Harnik, pool)

Who is the "we"? In the history of the U.S. military, the rules of engagement are standards of decency, such as limiting the danger to innocent civilians a particular military action entails. They have been updated through the centuries because of changes in technology, not changes in morality. This is all lost on Hegseth. He is to the military what professional wrestling is to Olympic wrestling: a crude imposture, a bastardization, a fraud.

It was difficult to watch the spectacle in Quantico, but I came away heartened by the stone-faced reaction of the generals and admirals. Raised on codes of honor, what could they make of Trump and Hegseth? Next to the Chief Justice of the United States and his fellow justices, these military leaders are the most important stumbling block any putative authoritarian faces. Last week, their silence spoke very

loudly.

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