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U.S. soldiers pay their respects in front of fallen soldier memorials following a memorial ceremony

U.S. soldiers pay their respects in front of fallen soldier memorials following a memorial ceremony held at Fort Hood, Texas, Nov. 10, 2009, for victims of the Nov. 5, 2009, shooting at the Fort Hood Army post. (OSV News/Reuters/Jessica Rinaldi)



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In a remarkable leap backwards into medieval barbarity, the secretary of defense has [announced](#) his department intends to livestream the execution by firing squad of Nidal Malik Hasan Dec. 3.

"We'll make sure that people are able to watch it. That it's public," Pete Hegseth told the TV outlet Real America's Voice News Oct. 8, "Because people need to understand that there's serious consequences for these types of things."

This is the same Hegseth who calls himself a devoted Christian. The same Hegseth who, earlier this month, [created](#) a Pentagon Office of Religious Affairs that reports directly to him. And the same Hegseth who initiated worship services at the Pentagon, where he once [prayed](#) for "overwhelming violence of action against those who deserve no mercy."

Another devout Christian takes issue with this approach. On April 2, the same day that the Trump administration authorized firing squads as one of the federal government's approved methods of execution, Pope Leo XIV [issued](#) a prerecorded video where he once again condemned the death penalty — including for the worst among us.

It is hard to defend Hasan, the former U.S. Army psychiatrist who opened fire at Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009 as soldiers were preparing to leave for Afghanistan, and Hegseth knows this. Thirteen people died and 32 others were injured. And yet, Leo reminds us, "the dignity of the person is not lost even after very serious crimes are committed."

According to the Death Penalty Information Center, Hasan will be the first soldier to die by [firing squad](#) since 1945. Hegseth thinks that's a plus, [saying](#), "Well, I kind of like the mentality we had in World War II, which was win."

Like most death penalty advocates, Hegseth no doubt believes that livestreaming this execution will act as a deterrent to other would-be terrorists, and as a celebrated moment of moral righteousness for America.

But images are funny things. They often don't pay off as one expects they will. This livestreamed depravity is more likely to disgust many Americans, perhaps even many of the evangelical Christians and conservative Catholics who form an important part of Trump's base. (Tim Busch, head of the traditionalist Catholic Napa Institute, last year [called](#) the Trump administration "the most Christian I have ever seen." Perhaps Dec. 3 will change his assessment.)

The execution is also not likely to intimidate Islamist extremists but will instead further inflame hatred and anger. With Israel, Iran, Sudan, Qatar and Saudi Arabia all engulfed in a conflict Trump started seven months ago, there is already plenty of fury to go around.

[Related: Religious and political leaders object to Hegseth's proposal to livestream execution](#)

Nonetheless, Hegseth's plan may bring the final, irreversible step in a march that began 25 years ago. When the Sept. 11 attacks happened, Americans rallied around each other, certain that the terrorists were trying to destroy more than buildings, but our way of life. Americans watched in horror as Al Qaeda radicals released

[videos](#) of beheadings and hangings. We told ourselves that, if we followed down that same path, the terrorists would win — they would destroy who we are.

On Sept. 21, 2001, just 10 days after the attacks, the Chicago-born Fr. Robert Prevost, newly elected prior general of the Augustinians, presided over a Mass in Rome. He prayed for the lives lost on Sept. 11, but also [issued](#) this caution to his order. "While many seek revenge, Augustinians must bear witness to the Gospel and to its values of unity, dialogue, peace, and reconciliation."

But then came the scandals of [Abu Ghraib](#) and [Guantanamo](#), where prisoners were tortured and humiliated, held without formal charges, and given no way out. Those images were horrifying, yet Americans held fast that this did not represent who we are, that we still retained our moral core.

As late as 2009, in his final press conference as president, George W. Bush [asserted](#): "I strongly disagree with the assessment that our moral standing has been damaged" by these scandals. "It may be damaged amongst some of the elite, but people still understand America stands for freedom, that America as a country provides such great hope."

Dec. 3 will be the next test of our ethical and noble self-image and aspirations. Will we, decades later, fully descend to the level of the radicals who hung corpses in the streets of Baghdad, and proudly sent out barbaric execution videos day after day?

Pete Hegseth would like you to watch. If you think you might, consider this: Nidal Malik Hassan was himself shot during his attack at Fort Hood. He is paralyzed. A man in a wheelchair will be brought to sit in front of a firing squad of U.S soldiers.

Many choices will be made that day. A camera operator might determine the best angle. Someone might decide there should be extra lighting. Perhaps a special microphone will be utilized to ensure every sound, down to the slightest, is captured.

Americans have a choice, too. To protest. To yell. To march. Or to watch. These choices will tell us just how far we have fallen, and who we really are.

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