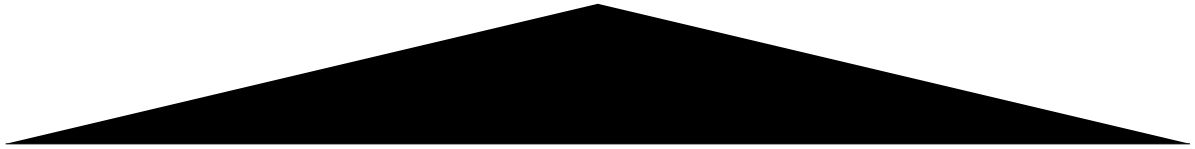
In his "State of the Force" address at Quantico, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth unveiled six initiatives: an Autonomous Warfare Command, the Project Meridian commission, FORTRESS America, a new major base, an Office of Religious Affairs, and cadet programs at five universities. While cutting 20 percent of generals and admirals, he expanded the Pentagon's footprint, raising questions about costs, conflicts of interest involving tech executives, and the cultural direction of the force.

Introduction

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's "State of the Force" address at Marine Corps Base Quantico was billed as a status report, but it was really a manifesto. Over 52 minutes, speaking to roughly 600 junior service members, Hegseth laid out six major initiatives that together amount to a blueprint for how he wants the American military to fight, recruit, organize, and understand itself. The speech fused technological ambition, institutional restructuring, and cultural argument into a single message: the U.S. armed forces must be remade for an era of autonomous weapons and great-power rivalry, and they must be remade along lines that reflect a particular set of values.

At the heart of the address sits a tension that defines Hegseth's tenure. He promises a leaner, more "warfighter-focused" Pentagon stripped of bureaucratic excess. Yet nearly every initiative he announced adds something: a new combatant command, a new commission, a new base, a new office, a new officer pipeline, and a new resilience program. This piece examines each of the six initiatives, analyzes the logic connecting them, and assesses the strategic, institutional, and political risks they carry. It also considers the case supporters make for the agenda, because the debate over Hegseth's vision is not simply a contest between reform and waste, but between competing judgments about what the military needs most.

The Six Pillars



State of the Force: the six pillars

Hegseth’s blueprint for how the U.S. military fights, organizes, recruits and sees itself.

Technology and future war

New four-star combatant command

Autonomous Warfare Command

AUTOWARCOM puts drones, robotics and AI under one authority, from development and procurement to operations. It grows out of Project Agincourt.

120-day study

Project Meridian

A future-of-warfare commission including Elon Musk, Palmer Luckey and Newt Gingrich, mapping the technologies and battlefields of coming decades.

Homeland and force posture

Bases and supply chains

FORTRESS America

Hardens bases, energy and supply chains against attack and disruption, on the premise that the homeland is no longer a sanctuary.

State-by-state competition

The Next Great American Base

Governors are invited to bid to host a new major military installation, with jobs and construction as the prize.

Culture and people

Reports to the Secretary

Office of Religious Affairs

A new office focused on morale and “spiritual resilience,” placed above the services’ existing chaplain corps.

Five universities

Cadet Corps

New officer-development programs at five universities selected as alternative pipelines to elite campuses.

Announced alongside a 20% cut to generals and admirals.

Autonomous Warfare Command (AUTOWARCOM)

The centerpiece of the speech was the creation of a new four-star combatant command devoted to drones, robotics, and artificial intelligence. AUTOWARCOM would consolidate the development, procurement, and operational integration of autonomous systems under a single authority. Hegseth described the effort as "the fastest peacetime shift in modern military history," a phrase that captures both the scale of his ambition and his impatience with the pace of change inside the department.

AUTOWARCOM grows out of Project Agincourt, an earlier initiative that paired commercial developers directly with active-duty units to speed the fielding of autonomous systems. The name itself is telling. Agincourt evokes the 1415 battle in which English longbowmen defeated a larger French force, a classic case of new technology and tactics overturning established military hierarchies. The implicit argument is that drones and AI are this century's longbow, and that the side that integrates them fastest will hold a decisive edge.

Elevating this mission to a full combatant command is a significant structural choice. Combatant commands carry budgetary weight, bureaucratic standing, and a seat at the table in operational planning. Placing autonomy at that level signals that the Pentagon no longer sees drones as an enabling capability sprinkled across the services, but as a domain of warfare in its own right, comparable to how U.S. Cyber Command and U.S. Space Command were elevated in recent years.

Project Meridian

The second initiative is a 120-day "future of warfare" study led by a commission that includes SpaceX CEO Elon Musk, defense technology entrepreneur Palmer Luckey, and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. Project Meridian will bring together government officials, academics, and private-sector leaders to identify the technologies and battlefields likely to shape conflict

decades from now.

The commission’s composition is its most discussed feature. Musk and Luckey are not neutral observers of the defense market. SpaceX and its Starlink network have become central to U.S. military communications and launch capacity, and Luckey’s Anduril Industries is one of the most prominent suppliers of autonomous systems. Critics argue that placing them at the head of a process meant to guide enormous procurement decisions creates obvious conflicts of interest. Supporters counter that the people building the most advanced systems are precisely the ones who understand where the technology is going, and that excluding them would leave the Pentagon dependent on slower, more cautious perspectives.

FORTRESS America

The third pillar, FORTRESS America (Federal Operations for Resilience, Troop Resources, Energy, Supply and Survivability), aims to harden U.S. military bases and supply chains against attack or global disruption. Its premise is that the American homeland can no longer be treated as a sanctuary. In a future conflict, adversaries might open with cyberattacks on power grids, strikes on ports and logistics hubs, or sabotage of critical supply chains, with the goal of paralyzing U.S. mobilization before forces ever reach a distant theater.

Of the six initiatives, FORTRESS America is arguably the least ideological and the most broadly endorsed in concept. Defense analysts across the political spectrum have warned for years that the Pentagon’s logistics enterprise was built for an era of uncontested movement and that energy, munitions production, and critical minerals represent serious vulnerabilities.

The Next Great American Base

Fourth, Hegseth invited governors to compete to host a new major military installation somewhere in the United States. This is a force-posture decision, but it is also an

unmistakably political one. Inviting states to bid turns base siting into something resembling a corporate headquarters competition, with jobs, construction contracts, and local economic growth as the prize.

The approach has some practical logic. Competition can encourage states to offer land, infrastructure, workforce programs, and regulatory streamlining that lower costs. But it also invites the possibility that the final choice reflects political reward rather than strategic need, an issue that has dogged base decisions for decades and which the Base Realignment and Closure process was originally designed to insulate from politics.

Office of Religious Affairs

The fifth initiative establishes a new Office of Religious Affairs reporting directly to the defense secretary. Hegseth framed it as a way to strengthen morale and "spiritual resilience." The military already maintains an extensive chaplain corps across the services, so the significance of the new office lies less in providing religious services than in its placement. By having it report directly to the secretary, Hegseth elevates religion as a policy priority at the department's highest level.

Supporters see this as a recognition that faith is a source of strength and meaning for many service members, particularly in the context of combat stress and high suicide rates. Critics raise questions about church-state boundaries, about how the office will treat service members of minority faiths or no faith, and about whether it signals institutional favoritism toward particular religious traditions.

Cadet Corps at Five Universities

Finally, Hegseth plans to create new officer-development programs at five universities he considers free of "woke" ideology. The initiative reflects his long-running argument that elite

academic institutions have grown hostile to military service and traditional values. Rather than fighting for influence inside those institutions, the plan builds alternative pipelines elsewhere.

The practical effects are uncertain. ROTC programs already operate at hundreds of campuses, and officer accessions draw heavily on the service academies and a broad range of public universities. Five new programs would not by themselves reshape the officer corps numerically. Their importance is more symbolic: they signal which institutions the department regards as aligned with its vision and which it does not.

The Paradox of Cutting and Growing

Hegseth framed the speech with his confirmation that the Pentagon will cut 20 percent of its generals and admirals, presenting the move as proof of his commitment to eliminating bureaucratic bloat. Minutes later, he announced a new four-star command, a new major base, a new office reporting to the secretary, a new cadet pipeline, and two cross-cutting projects requiring staff, funding, and oversight.

This contradiction appears to be deliberate rather than careless. The two halves of the message speak to different audiences. Cutting senior officers appeals to a public skeptical of Pentagon waste and to troops who often view top-heavy command structures as disconnected from the realities of service. New commands and bases, by contrast, appeal to lawmakers who see defense spending as a source of jobs and constituent benefit. Hegseth is offering both austerity and investment at once.

A fair reading is that Hegseth is not pursuing a smaller military so much as a redistributed one. His argument, implicitly, is that resources should move away from administrative overhead and legacy structures and toward capabilities he considers decisive in future wars. On those terms, cutting generals while creating AUTOWARCOM is not inconsistent: it is

reallocation.

The risk is that reallocation becomes accumulation. New commands rarely stay small. They require headquarters staff, liaison officers, facilities, and support contracts, and once established they develop institutional constituencies that resist later consolidation. If the savings from trimming general officer billets are modest while the costs of new structures are substantial, the net result may be a larger, not leaner, department, simply organized differently. AUTOWARCOM alone will demand significant investment in personnel, infrastructure, and procurement, even as it seeks to accelerate drone adoption to keep pace with China.

Technology, Tycoons, and the Future of War

Project Meridian embodies a broader shift in how the Pentagon relates to the commercial technology sector. For most of the Cold War, the defense industrial base was dominated by a handful of prime contractors whose business was built around government requirements. Today, much of the most consequential innovation in software, space launch, satellites, and autonomy originates in commercial firms that sell to the government but are not defined by it. Musk's companies and Anduril are emblematic of that change.

Bringing outside experts into defense planning is not new. The Packard Commission, convened under President Reagan in the mid-1980s, used private-sector expertise to recommend major acquisition reforms, and the Defense Science Board has advised the department on technology since the 1950s. What distinguishes Meridian is its reliance on individual executives whose companies may benefit directly from the recommendations they help shape. In a field like autonomous warfare, where early procurement choices can set standards and lock in suppliers for decades, the potential for regulatory capture is significant. Transparency measures, such as disclosure of financial interests, recusal rules, and public publication of findings, will largely determine whether the commission is seen as credible.

Still, the urgency behind the effort is real. China has made rapid progress in drone swarms, AI-enabled targeting, and autonomous undersea systems, and the war in Ukraine has demonstrated how quickly inexpensive drones can transform the battlefield. The Pentagon's acquisition system, built around long development timelines and exhaustive requirements, has repeatedly struggled to keep pace with that rate of change. AUTOWARCOM and Meridian are attempts to break through that inertia. The open question is whether a new command can actually overcome procurement friction and interservice rivalry, or whether it will simply become another layer that programs must navigate.

Culture in Uniform

The speech was as much about culture as capability. Hegseth returned repeatedly to criticism of "wokeness" in the ranks and in the media, positioning his initiatives as a corrective to what he regards as a military distracted by social agendas. The Office of Religious Affairs and the new cadet programs are the most direct expressions of that view, but the theme runs through the entire address.

This is consistent with his earlier speech to senior leaders, which emphasized physical fitness, readiness, and the elimination of diversity programs he described as divisive. The message to junior troops was that warfighting, not social policy, will be the institution's organizing principle.

Supporters of this approach argue that the military's unique mission requires a shared ethos grounded in merit, discipline, and lethality, and that diversity initiatives fragmented that ethos and contributed to recruiting difficulties among traditional recruiting populations. Critics argue the opposite: that inclusion efforts strengthened cohesion in an increasingly diverse force, that framing them as ideological threats alienates service members who valued them, and that politicizing military culture in either direction undermines the institution's nonpartisan character. Recruitment and retention data will be an important test,

though both sides tend to read those numbers as confirming their position.

Strategic Implications and Risks

Taken together, the initiatives represent a substantial strategic bet. AUTOWARCOM wagers that drones, AI, and unmanned systems will dominate future conflict, an assessment broadly consistent with defense planning focused on deterring China in the Indo-Pacific. FORTRESS America acknowledges that the homeland itself may be a front line. The Next Great American Base links force posture to domestic economic development.

The risks fall into three categories. The first is procurement capture: if private-sector participants shape priorities in ways that favor their own products, the department could lock itself into particular architectures at the expense of competition and flexibility. The second is cohesion: a cultural agenda pressed hard from the top could deepen internal divisions at a time when the force already faces recruitment and retention pressures. The third is fiscal: expanding commands, installations, and programs while promising efficiency could produce budget pressures that force painful trade-offs in readiness, maintenance, shipbuilding, or personnel accounts.

Congress will play a decisive role in each area. Lawmakers control funding for new commands and installations, can impose oversight requirements on Meridian, and will weigh in on base siting. The degree of bipartisan buy-in, particularly for less contested pieces such as FORTRESS America and autonomy investment, may determine which parts of the agenda endure beyond Hegseth’s tenure.

Conclusion

Pete Hegseth’s “State of the Force” address was an attempt to redefine the American

military around four ideas: leaner at the top, more technologically aggressive, more culturally traditional, and more closely tied to the domestic political economy. Some elements, especially the focus on autonomy and homeland resilience, respond to strategic challenges widely recognized across the defense community. Others, particularly the cultural initiatives and the composition of Project Meridian, are likely to remain contested.

Whether the vision succeeds will hinge on execution. AUTOWARCOM must accelerate drone and AI integration without becoming another bureaucratic layer. Project Meridian must produce actionable insights while guarding against capture by private interests. The cultural agenda must strengthen cohesion rather than fracture it. And the department must show that new structures are funded by genuine reallocation rather than simple growth.

What is clear is that Hegseth wants more: more commands, more commissions, more bases, and more influence over the direction of American defense. The central question for Congress, the services, and the public is whether that adds up to more of what the military needs to deter and win future wars, or more of what one secretary’s vision demands.