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Issue Brief

Civil-Military Relations under Strain in the US

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S*ummary*

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Introduction

President Donald Trump and Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth dismissed or forced the retirement of more than a dozen senior commanders across the US military since 2025. The purge included Army Chief of Staff Gen. Randy A. George, Army training commander Gen. David Hodne, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Lisa Franchetti, the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Kruse, Maj Gen William Green of the Army’s Chaplain Corps, and even the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. C.Q. Brown Jr.¹

Reports suggested that Hegseth wanted leaders who would fully implement the administration’s vision and reject diversity and inclusion programmes.² At the same time, it is argued that officers were punished for warning that war plans were flawed or for refusing to remove Black and female officers from promotion lists.³ The scale and timing of the purge are almost unprecedented in US history. Prior wartime removals targeted individual commanders for insubordination rather than restructuring the entire senior leadership. This brief examines how the purge compares with earlier removals, explores the demographic and religious composition of the US armed forces, and explains why DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) programmes are vital for military readiness and strong civil–military relations.

In a democratic country like the US, elected leaders set national policy, while uniformed professionals plan and execute operations. As the war with Iran expanded in 2025–26, the Trump administration dismissed senior officers as highlighted above. Political appointees argued that commanders who opposed the war plan or defended DEI policies were obstructing victory. The purge has raised questions about the balance between civilian authority and professional military advice, the role of DEI initiatives in force readiness, and the health of civil–military relations.

Historical Context: Firings vs Purges

Purges in the name of curbing corruption, along with investigations against top military leaders, are frequent in China. However, it is not a regular occurrence in the

¹ [“Hegseth Ousts Army Chief of Staff Gen. Randy George”](#), *CBS News*, 2 April 2026.

² *Ibid.*

³ [“‘Singularly Unqualified’ Hegseth Executes Purge of Top Military Brass as Iran War Spirals Out of Control”](#), *Common Dreams*, 3 April 2026.

US military, and even less so in the middle of a war. There are only a few considerable instances in the past where military leadership was removed.

During the Korean War, Gen. Douglas MacArthur proposed bombing China and publicly criticised President Harry Truman’s policy of limited war. Truman relieved MacArthur, arguing that MacArthur could not give “full support” to the US and UN policies.⁴ The decision affirmed that military leaders must adhere to civilian strategy, though it sparked public controversy.

More recently, General David McKiernan was removed from command of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan in 2009 by then US Defense Secretary Robert Gates because the US required a shift from a relatively conventional, force-protection-oriented approach to a more aggressive counter-insurgency and special-operations-driven strategy against the Taliban.⁵ In Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal and his aides disparaged senior civilian leaders in a *Rolling Stone* article. President Barack Obama accepted McChrystal’s resignation, emphasising that the dismissal stemmed from conduct undermining civilian control rather than policy differences.⁶

These examples highlight targeted dismissals based on insubordination or unacceptable conduct, as well as strategy-driven reasons. The recent purge differs both in scale and motivation. Unlike the removals of MacArthur, McKiernan and McChrystal, the recent purge swept away an entire upper command echelon across services. It replaced them with officers who share the administration’s ideological alignment. Past firings were about preserving civilian supremacy; the current purge, according to multiple officials familiar with the decisions, is driven by ideological grievance, personal rivalry, and an unrelenting demand for political loyalty.⁷

Political Climate and Warrior Ethos

Domestically, the war against Iran has coincided with President Trump’s second term and Hegseth’s push to end DEI programmes. Hegseth argued that these initiatives distracted from combat readiness and cultivated “wokeness”. Critics countered that the programmes promoted cohesion and morale for minority troops. This ideological

⁴ Christopher Klein, “[MacArthur vs. Truman: When Generals and Presidents Clash](#)”, *History*, 13 October 2016.

⁵ “[US Replaces Afghan Conflict Commander](#)”, *Financial Times*, 11 May 2009.

⁶ “[President Accepts McChrystal’s Resignation, Nominates Petraeus](#)”, U.S. Army, 24 June 2010.

⁷ Ajish P. Joy, “[Hegseth’s Purge: Senior Army Commanders Ousted Amidst Iran War Escalation](#)”, *The Week*, 3 April 2026.

divide formed the backdrop for decisions about promotions and leadership assignments. When some generals resisted the removal of Black and female officers from promotion lists, conflict escalated.⁸ The purge thus served ideological and operational goals: to enforce loyalty to the administration’s vision and remove perceived obstacles to a more aggressive war plan.

The 2025–26 purge encompassed two distinct categories of dismissals. A small number of removals stemmed from professional disagreements over assessments or strategy; for example, Defense Intelligence Agency director Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Kruse was fired after his agency reported that US strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities only set the programme back a few months, contradicting President Trump’s claims of destruction.⁹

In other cases, however, the rationale appeared to revolve around diversity and inclusion. Air Force General C.Q. Brown Jr., the second Black chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was ousted amid an agenda to purge “woke” generals—Senator Jack Reed warned that firing uniformed leaders for “reasons relating to diversity and gender” erodes trust and professionalism.¹⁰ *Reuters* noted that Secretary Hegseth sought to eliminate DEI initiatives and even questioned whether Brown’s race was not a factor in his appointment.¹¹ Navy Vice Admiral Shoshana Chatfield, the US representative to NATO’s Military Committee, was dismissed in April 2025. Sources told *Reuters* the motive may have been linked to the Pentagon’s crackdown on DEI initiatives, and Hegseth simultaneously ended observances such as Black History Month and Women’s History Month.¹²

For other sackings—such as Army Chief of Staff Gen. Randy George, training commander Gen. David Hodne and Chief of Chaplains Maj. Gen. William Green Jr.—the Pentagon gave no official reasons.¹³ Distinguishing between dismissals rooted in professional differences, which fall within the Secretary’s purview, and those that appear to target officers for supporting diversity programmes is essential to a fair assessment of the administration’s actions.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ [“US General Whose Report on Iran Nuclear Sites Angered Trump Fired”](#), *Aljazeera*, 23 August 2025.

¹⁰ [“Trump Fires Top US General in Unprecedented Pentagon Shakeup”](#), *Reuters*, 23 February 2025.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² [“US Admiral at NATO Fired in Expanding National Security Purge”](#), *Reuters*, 8 April 2025.

¹³ [“US Army Chief of Staff Fired by Hegseth, Sources Say”](#), *Reuters*, 3 April 2026.

DEI and the US Military

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) has become important in the US military because it reflects the country’s increasingly diverse society and helps attract the best talent from all sections. A diverse and inclusive force enhances operational effectiveness, decision-making and cohesion in complex modern battlefields. Moreover, DEI ensures fairness and equal opportunity, strengthening trust between the military and the society it serves. Below are a few reasons that necessitate DEI.

Demographics and Religious Diversity

The US armed forces draw from a demographically diverse population. According to a 2022 DoD demographic profile, roughly 68.8 per cent of active-duty service members identify as white, while 31.2 per cent identify as racial minorities; about 18.4 per cent identify as Hispanic or Latino, and women make up 17.5 per cent of the force.¹⁴ Army-specific figures mirror this pattern: 53.7 per cent of soldiers are white (non-Hispanic), 20.2 per cent Black, 17.5 per cent Hispanic, 6.9 per cent Asian or Pacific Islander, 0.9 per cent American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.8 per cent other or unknown.¹⁵

Religious affiliation is equally diverse. A 2019 DoD study found that roughly approximately 70 per cent of Active-Duty Military reported being Christian (about 32 per cent no denomination, 20 per cent Catholic, 18 per cent Protestant, 1 per cent Mormon), 2 per cent as Atheist or Agnostic, 1 per cent as affiliated with an Eastern religion, 0.4 per cent each as Jewish or Muslim, and the remainder (about 24 per cent) were reported as “other/unclassified/unknown”.¹⁶

This diversity is only expected to deepen further. Demographers project that by around 2042, white Americans will form less than half of the US population while remaining the largest single group. Pew Research Centre experts predict that the US population in 2065 will increase by 117 million, reaching 441 million, with 88 per cent of this increase due to immigrants and their children.¹⁷

Department of Defence Strategic Plan 2022–2023

The Department of Defense’s Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA) strategic plan emphasises that America’s strategic advantage stems from its diverse

¹⁴ [“Department of Defense 2022 Demographic Profile”](#), *USNI News*, 29 November 2023.

¹⁵ [“Active Component Demographics: Data as of 30 September 2022”](#), U.S. Army, 2022.

¹⁶ [“The Diversity of Our Service Members”](#), *Soldiers’ Angel*, 29 February 2024.

¹⁷ [“Cultural Pluralism on the Example of National Minorities in the United States of America”](#), ResearchGate, June 2020.

population. The plan notes that harnessing talent from all backgrounds and perspectives allows the military to outthink and outfight adversaries and that DEIA is not about checking a box but about building a Total Force necessary to secure the nation for years to come.¹⁸ It also mentions that DEI accomplishes three significant goals. First, it narrows the demographic gaps between DoD and the US population.

Over the past decade, the US population has grown more racially/ethnically diverse. During the same period, representation of all underserved populations (e.g., people of colour, women) within historically exclusionary spaces has grown exponentially. The Department must attract, develop and retain a similarly dynamic force to ensure that the best and brightest want to serve. DoD must make military and civilian service more appealing to and supportive of all demographic groups to attract and retain an exceptional workforce.

Second, a more diverse, equitable, inclusive and accessible force can ensure that the benefits of teams comprised of individuals with a broad range of backgrounds and experiences—such as improved problem-solving and critical thinking—accrue to DoD. Finally, by building a force that reflects our nation’s strategic strength and diversity of perspective and experience, the Department harnesses the explicit benefits that a diverse force provides to the nation’s security.¹⁹

Demerits of Excluding DEI Programmes

Abandoning DEI initiatives in a diverse, all-volunteer force would carry high costs. Neglecting the experiences of minority and female service members can alienate them, undermining morale and retention. Without deliberate efforts to remove barriers and ensure fair promotion, historical patterns of discrimination may re-emerge. Eliminating DEI would also shrink the recruiting pool by signalling to communities of colour, immigrants and religious minorities that their service is unwelcome. It could slow innovation by narrowing the range of perspectives considered in planning and problem-solving and weaken unit cohesion by allowing bias and harassment to persist.

DEI as a Stabilising Force in Civil–Military Relations

Healthy civil–military relations rest on firm civilian control under the Constitution and an apolitical, professional military. An open letter by former defence secretaries

¹⁸ [“A Message from the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness”](#), Department of Defense Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Strategic Plan—Fiscal Years 2022–2023, p. 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairmen emphasised that civilian control operates within a constitutional framework; civilians and soldiers swear to uphold the Constitution, not individuals.²⁰ Civilian control is shared across branches of government, with deliberative processes that allow military leaders to offer candid advice while obeying lawful orders. Mutual trust, respect for non-partisanship and adherence to rules that limit public partisan activity are essential to this relationship. DEI reinforce these norms by making the force more representative of the nation and less vulnerable to factionalism. By fostering a diverse and equitable force, DEI initiatives help maintain an apolitical military whose members respect civilian authority and see themselves as part of a broad national community.

Impact of Purges on Civil–Military Relations

Purges of senior officers—particularly when driven by ideological loyalty rather than competence—have historically undermined military effectiveness and strained civil–military relations. Politically motivated purges weaken armies, undermine national security and can even lead to battlefield defeat.²¹ Examples such as Saddam Hussein’s and Nouri al-Maliki’s purges show that replacing competent commanders with loyalists eroded operational capability and contributed to the collapse.²²

When governments dismiss high-performing generals because they challenge political orthodoxy, they send a message that loyalty matters more than professionalism; this undermines morale, encourages self-censorship and groupthink, and discourages minority and female officers who fear that promotion depends on politics. Removing seasoned leaders also disrupts the accumulation of institutional knowledge and weakens command continuity. Such purges erode trust between the military and society and create perceptions of politicised armed forces.

While this brief focuses on the United States as a case study, the lessons apply globally. Many democracies confront challenges similar to those in the US: maintaining civilian control, preserving apolitical norms and building forces that reflect diverse societies. In the UK, debates over diversity targets reveal tension between inclusion and perceived merit.²³ Autocratic examples such as Maliki’s Iraq

²⁰ [“Let’s Stop Being Cavalier About Civilian Control of the Military”](#), *Lawfare*, 13 September 2022.

²¹ [“Don’t Purge the Generals”](#), *The Bulwark*, 22 February 2025.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ [“Removing Barriers to Diversity and Inclusion in the Military”](#), RAND, 29 August 2022.

demonstrate that politicised purges undermine readiness and can lead to state failure.²⁴ Countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America have seen militaries weakened by ethnic or ideological purges. Thus, principles of merit-based promotion, apolitical service and representative forces are universal.

As societies grow more pluralistic, armed forces must update recruitment, training and promotion practices. This does not mean lowering standards, rather, it means ensuring that all qualified citizens can serve and advance. Education about the military’s non-partisan ethos should extend to civilians as well, ensuring that politicians do not use the armed forces as partisan tools. Legislatures, civil society and the media must remain vigilant against politicisation.

Conclusion

The recent purge of US military leadership during the war against Iran is both unprecedented and consequential. Unlike historical firings aimed at disciplining individual commanders for insubordination, the current purge reflects a deliberate effort to reshape the officer corps along ideological lines. Key leaders were removed for refusing to strike Black and female officers from promotion lists, for offering candid assessments of war plans. This purge risks undermining morale, politicising promotions, suppressing dissent and destabilising civil–military relations.

To safeguard the military’s long-term effectiveness, policymakers should strengthen oversight, reaffirm apolitical norms, protect dissent and ensure promotions remain merit-based. The military’s strength is always derived from professionalism, diversity and adherence to constitutional principles. Preserving those values amid wartime pressures is essential to win conflicts and maintain democratic civil–military relations. DEI programmes are not a distraction but a strategic necessity; they strengthen cohesion, widen the talent pool and underscore that service is valued regardless of race or gender. An inclusive, apolitical military, guided by the rule of law, is essential for military effectiveness and democratic legitimacy.

²⁴ [“Inside the Collapse of the Iraqi Army’s 2nd Division”](#), *War on the Rocks*, 1 July 2014.

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