



THE WAR ON WARRIORS



BEHIND THE BETRAYAL OF
THE MEN WHO KEEP US FREE

PETE



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THE MEN WHO KEEP US FREE

PETE HEGSETH



Dedication

For the American fighting man—past, present, and future

Epigraph

*Proclaim this among the nations:
Consecrate for war;
stir up the mighty men.
Let all the men of war draw near;
let them come up.
Beat your plowshares into swords,
and your pruning hooks into spears;
let the weak say, "I am a warrior."*

—JOEL 3: 9–10 (ESV)

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Introduction

Then They Came for the Camouflaged Class

I joined the Army in 2001 because I wanted to serve my country. Extremists attacked us on 9/11, and we went to war. I became an infantry officer in 2003. I guarded terrorists at Guantanamo Bay in 2004. I led men in combat in Iraq in 2005. I pulled bodies out of burning vehicles in Afghanistan in 2012. I held a riot shield outside the White House in 2020.

And, in 2021, I was deemed an “extremist” by that very same Army.

Yes, you read that right.

Twenty years . . . and the military I loved, I fought for, I revered . . . spit me out. While writing this book, I separated from an Army that didn’t want me anymore. The feeling was mutual—I didn’t want *this* Army anymore either.

I could have stayed in, which would have required renewing my top secret security clearance—and an extensive background check. I’ve done it many times before. No sweat. I have nothing to hide. But, to put it plainly, I don’t trust this government, this commander in chief, or this Pentagon. That’s not to say the situation is permanent—hence this book—but my trust, for this Army, is irrevocably broken.

Over the last two decades, I lived the story of this book. Saw it and fought it—firsthand. And will share some of those stories with you.

I’m a civilian now, but my fight continues. Starting with this book.

The War on Warriors is written for my sons—and yours. Future soldiers, maybe. They will either save, or surrender, our Republic.

* * *

Given what I wrote above, you'll be surprised by the next sentence. Now is not the time to retreat from our military. If we secede from our military branches—and service writ large—then we're handing the keys of our Republic over to people who *loathe* the sort of men vital to defending us.

Our “elites” are like the feckless drug-addled businessmen at Nakatomi Plaza, looking down on Bruce Willis's John McClane in *Die Hard*. But there will come a day when they realize they need John McClane—that in fact their ability to live in peace and prosperity has always depended on guys like him being honorable, powerful, and deadly.

The military has long been a place for turning mere boys into fighting men not just by teaching them honor and sacrifice but by channeling daring, building strength, and accumulating skills. The so-called elites directing the military today aren't just lowering standards and focusing on the wrong enemy; they are overtly working to rid the military of this specific (essential) type of young patriot. They believe power is bad, merit is unfair, ideology is more important than industriousness, white people are yesterday, and *safety!* is better than risk-taking.

However, our enemies still understand that a soldier needs to be powerful, skilled, and courageous. Sometime soon, a real conflict will break out, and red-blooded American men will have to save their elite candy-asses. You may not want your sons or grandsons to enlist right now, but teach them to be powerful, skillful, and brave; when war comes—and it will, abroad or at home—that's what will win it for us. The only way we can fight back against the Left's antiwarrior radicalism is to recover a true vision of the value of strong men, the importance of normality, and a true sense of honor.

It would be easy to lose faith. But looking at the sweep of American history shows this isn't the first time that the military has been undermined

by feckless civilian leaders and foolish brass. Generals have always chosen certain groups to discriminate against. Over the years, the identity of the disfavored class of soldiers has shifted from one group to another. Positive change happens when those disfavored soldiers commit to serving even in an imperfect force.

No matter how bad things are for the American military—and things are really bad—I believe I will not be the last Hegseth to wear the uniform I love.

This book is a clarion call to charge ahead with everything we have into the breach. Retreating now means we will definitely lose. Charging ahead means we have a fighting chance.

The military is where our country needs—desperately—patriotic, faith-filled, and brave young Americans to step up and take the long view. At a basic level, do we really want only the woke “diverse” recruits that the Biden administration is curating to be the ones with the guns and the guidons?

But more than that, we want those diverse recruits—pumped full of vaccines and even more poisonous ideologies—to be sharing a basic training bunk with sane Americans. If elite universities are where underprivileged kids learn how to hobnob with the elites, then the military should be where potential Antifa members learn what it really means to use force for just and honorable reasons. The American military is one of the great deradicalization machines for aimless young men—but only if it’s working correctly.

The United States military was designed to act as the immune system of America’s sovereignty. The reflexive snap to repel harm. The tireless sentry for threat. The promise of consequence against foes of freedom. Always has been, always should be. Yet America, and her military, are going quietly into the night. Powerful leftists have leveraged their disdain for America to systematically confuse, neuter, and weaken the greatest fighting force for good this world has ever seen. It happened, and is still happening, rapidly.

Don’t just take my word for it, here are the folks who wrote the book on it. Each year, the Heritage Foundation publishes its *Index of U.S. Military Strength*. Think of it as a 650-page report card for every branch of the U.S.

military. Its 2024 report is blunt, “as currently postured, the U.S. military is at significant risk of not being able to defend America’s vital national interests.” For the second year in a row, our military is rated as “weak” relative to the force needed to defend national interests.

Weak . . . two years in a row. The authors of this exhaustive report are patriots. Most are former military. They love our troops. And they are brutally honest. Things must change, and quickly—for the sake of our country and our warfighters.

* * *

The failure to acknowledge the sacrifice and goodness of the American fighting man is nothing new. As soldiers often say, “Shit rolls downhill”—and has since gunpowder was invented. The failures of civilian leadership often fall on the shoulders of our nation’s warfighters—not only minimizing their valor but marginalizing their sacrifice in pursuit of postwar political priorities. The Afghanistan retreat debacle is the most obvious contemporary example, but this trade-off is not unique to my generation.

The veterans of Bataan and the Death March of 1942 returned home after years of torture and abuse in Japanese POW camps, some already bitter that their own government left them in the Philippines without any resources or hope of rescue. In the 1950s, the United States government concluded a treaty with Japan that included a secret clause prohibiting the Death March survivors from suing any of the Japanese companies that used them as slave labor during the war. In return, the Japanese turned over all their chemical and bacteriological weapons research, some of which was based on experiments with the very same Allied POWs who were now unable to ever receive compensation for abuse they suffered.

That breach of trust destroyed those men’s faith. One Bataan survivor said, “I love my country. It’s the government I can’t stand.”

The troop surge in Iraq put Sunni tribes and American infantry shoulder to shoulder to fight Al Qaeda and Iranian-backed militias; just one year

before, Sunnis and Americans were shooting at each other. It was a temporary marriage of mutual interest and a moment of confusion for many ordinary American soldiers. Yet amid even the most confusing and unbearable moments on the battlefield, we at least believed our military leadership had the best interest of our men and their mission at the center of their intent, and in their hearts.

Today, this is clearly not the case.

When confronted with the warped, woke, and caustic policies of our current military—which this book will outline—political leaders and general officers (aka politicians in camo) espouse clever obfuscations about the purpose of our military (“Diversity Is Our Biggest Strength” being the absolutely dumbest of them all). They seem to think that somehow “Be All That You Can Be”—the long-touted and recently revived Army recruiting slogan—is more about personal growth, levels of diversity, and self-expression than deterring and, if need be, defeating the enemies of America. We’ve become a “You Be You” military.

Civilian leadership and military discipline are foundational to who we are. But what we really seek, what we need—and what we crave—is military leadership that fiercely preserves the core purpose of the military *and . . .* political leaders who don’t treat the 101st Airborne like Harvard University. Our troops are fighters, not gender studies freshmen. They could have enrolled in college if they wanted more indoctrination, but instead they serve. This is more than simply a misunderstanding, or a difference of priorities—it’s a fundamentally different view of the purpose of warriors.

I reserve my greatest scorn not for politicians because, well, they’re politicians. Radical leftist leaders will push radical leftist prerogatives, consequences be damned. The real blame falls on the military itself. The question of this book is not: How did the military go woke? The real question is: *How did the military allow itself to go woke?*

You see, this time is different. We all know America is experiencing a massive and dangerous cultural and political change. In the past few decades—after nearly one hundred years of spade work—radical leftists have

captured nearly every American institution: universities, corporations, media, Hollywood, social media, K–12 public schools, the federal bureaucracy, and even most mainline churches. Their goal was stated very clearly by Barack Obama: fundamentally transform America. You don't "fundamentally transform" something or someone you love; you transform something you disdain. As Mark Levin recently documented, the Democrat Party really does hate America. Our Constitution, our flag, our faith, and our creeds.

Now, they have come for our camouflaged class. The exact same thing is happening to the United States military, only at a *much* faster pace. For decades, the military remained mostly insulated from cultural capture—courageous men took their oath to the Constitution seriously and didn't allow fundamentally unserious and unconstitutional ideas to infiltrate the ranks. Then, at first slowly but then quickly, that dam broke. New military leaders, at best, uncritically parroted the bad ideas of civilian leadership; at worst, they sold out our military.

It's one thing when a corporation or university goes "woke." It's an entirely different thing for the United States military to go woke. It's *fucking* scary, and I've had a front-row seat—along with a generation of warriors, most of whom are now getting out *and* not encouraging their kids to join. Where does that end? How does it end? Not well, that's for sure—unless we do something about it.

* * *

The winnowing fork of the military has always existed, serving to separate the wheat from the chaff—those able, ready, and willing must earn their spot, their rank, their reputation. For most of American history, this culling was based on a soldier's eagerness and willingness to demonstrate technical proficiency, obey lawful orders, and lead or follow with courage. (The label "soldier" will often be used in the book, and—unless specifically referred to

as an “Army soldier”—represents all service members. My apologies in advance to all the Sailors, Marines, and Airmen who will feign outrage!)

What we have today, and what we cannot accept, is a military *intentionally* enacting policies that repel, repulse, and remove eager and willing troops. Our military cannot survive a long-term infection of radical left-wing social justice policies designed to isolate, resegregate, and stigmatize certain troops based on a specific racial, gender, or political philosophy. Our military cannot survive the intentional cratering of “good order and discipline” in the name of “equity.” Standards ignored, at every level and in every realm.

The military was the first large, national institution to be successfully racially integrated (despite the interference of racist presidents like Woodrow Wilson). Yet today’s troops are being harassed by obligatory training—and eventually “standards”—grounded in Critical Race Theory, radical sex theories, gender policies, and “domestic extremism” that are designed to neuter our fighting forces. In the name of going forward, we are going backward, destroying our military from within. And, yes, it’s intentional. Just ask all the perfectly healthy, young troops the Pentagon kicked out because they wouldn’t take an experimental vaccine with unknown side effects. (And now the Pentagon wants them back—because recruitment is plummeting. Most have given Uncle Sam an unvaccinated middle finger.) The Left must control everything—and, today, they are obsessed with controlling, and neutering, our military.

The military cannot be organized like a Harvard fraternity, catering to ever more obscure constituencies. Our key constituency is normal men, looking to be heroes and not victims. Ordinary men, willing to be extraordinary—or die trying; for God, country, and their brothers. We aren’t a collection of aggrieved tribes. Equality is our bedrock, lethality our trademark. There is no black and white in our ranks. We are all green. Our strength is *not* in our diversity, but in our unity and in our love for each other, our families, and, most of all, our nation. We have standards, and we enforce them—with consequences. This is a truth I have lived firsthand.

It is with this understanding that I share the warning of this book and stand with all veterans to serve and protect the Constitution of the United States of America—against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

I fought to defend freedom, but it's become impossible to defend *this*. If our military, and our Republic, ever truly usurped my constitutional oath and bowed fully to the tyranny of the Left, then—to use a historical example—I would leave the British Army of 1775. I would stand and fight, and advise my kids to find a bridge in Lexington and Concord to stand their ground with me. What does that look like in a world of F-35s and hypersonic missiles? I don't know. This is why *The War on Warriors* (the working title of this book was “Battle for the American Military”) is so closely tied to my previous book, *Battle for the American Mind*—because if we don't stay free, then we're just another country with a flag. I won't fight for just any flag, and I hope my kids would not either.

* * *

This book is personal to me because I let all this happen. My generation fought foreign wars—overemphasizing their importance—while leftists crept into our domestic culture and institutions, and are now doing the same to our combat units.

This humble soldier—who loves God, his family, and his country—won't now sit on the sidelines and simply bemoan the state of our country and military. We are awake to their woke; and our battle begins anew, here at home. Make no mistake about it: the Left wants to destroy the one institution standing between them and total control—the United States military.

In *The War on Warriors*, I describe how we got here, what the threat is, the Left's mode of attack, and how we can take back the high ground to save our military. Like the issue of education, if we fail, we fail all future generations of America. It's one thing to lose our classroom; it's another to lose the ability to execute close-air support or deter communist China. If we

lose our military, the world's last best hope is toast. And then freedom is toast—because that military, eventually, will be turned on us.

You don't need any more explanations of why our enemies hate us. We can all turn on MSNBC if we want to hear that. We need more reminders that America is good, young American men can be brave, and that there's a damn good reason why people flee their shithole countries to reach our shores. Those seeking America know what the Left wants us to forget: that our country is not a systemically racist colonizer state, but a systemically free constitutional state.

If we can keep it.

If we want to live free, we'd better be willing to die trying.

The American fighting man gives our country the prime of their lives, slamming headlong into combat, without any concern for what tomorrow will bring. Unlike our enemies, we don't fight because we hate what's in front of us, we fight because we love what's behind us. We fight so our kids may inherit that which can only be purchased with blood: our God-given constitutional freedoms and rights.

John Stuart Mill once said, "War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things: the decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth a war, is much worse."

The minute we believe our freedoms "inevitable and immutable," we cease to live in history, and have soured the soldier's sacrifice. Our freedoms—purchased on the battlefield—are "worthy of war."

As odd as this sounds, I don't want you to "enjoy" reading this book. There are some fights that we can win, and there are other fights that we cannot afford to lose.

The War on Warriors is that fight. We cannot lose.

Chapter 1

The War We Missed

Confidence in the American military has reached the lowest level in two decades. Military recruiting numbers have plummeted, across all services—and continue to sink. Army bases I served at—and millions of warriors trained at and deployed from—have been given benign new names like “Fort Liberty.” Our generals are hunting for racists in our ranks that *they know* do not exist. Meanwhile, affirmative action promotions have skyrocketed, with “firsts” being the most important factor in filling new commanders. *We will not stop until trans-lesbian black females run everything!* The Afghanistan failure reverberated worse than anyone expected, with not a single leader responsible held accountable. Headlines like “China Wins in Central America” are commonplace, a pardon was granted to an American soldier who walked off his base into enemy hands, and the secretary of defense decided to be AWOL for a week, and not tell anyone.

This is just the beginning, but for me—and my generation—it’s personal. How in the world did we get here?

* * *

After fighting against an external radical Islamist ideology for twenty years, America’s veterans (generally speaking) were exhausted—and our ranks

thinned and confused—by fighting a war on two fronts. On the one side, many of us fought in a foreign war, making temporary allegiance with neoconservatives who, in the moment, defended a war we believed in. But, on the home front, the Left never stopped. Then-senator Obama’s defeat of Senator John McCain in 2008 left many of us feeling deflated—the wars were doomed, and a young, untested leftist was in charge. That election didn’t cause us to give up, as much as it created paralysis and confusion in our ranks. We were on the outside, not sure what our country just voted for. Like a disgruntled spouse, we hoped a cooling-off period would help. Some of us even supported Obama’s “surge” in Afghanistan—putting politics aside for the warriors still fighting. I even visited the Obama White House in 2009 to offer my support for the Afghanistan surge. And later volunteered to serve in Afghanistan for a year. I wanted to defeat the enemy for Team America. *How quaint of me.*

Having seen *real* enemies on the battlefield, we naively hoped it would be apparent to reasonable people that America—despite our mistakes—was the best thing going. If you’ve seen Baghdad, even Baltimore looks like Beverly Hills.

We could not have been more wrong.

While the post-9/11 generation of patriots spent two decades fighting enemies abroad, we allowed America’s domestic enemies at home to gobble up cultural, political, and spiritual territory. Overextended, our rear guard was exposed—and the enemy pounced. (Republicans and conservatives at home did a really shitty job holding down the home front, to say the least.)

What we eventually discovered is that just like an enemy at war, the radical Left never stops moving and planning. They do not respect cease-fires, do not abide by the rules of warfare, and do not respect anything except total defeat of their enemy—and then total control. They consistently attack without regard for reciprocity or fairness. They are willing to fight by any means necessary, which includes destroying the very Constitution that cloaks their treason. The radical Left never takes a day off and uses every avenue—political, cultural, and educational—to push its agenda.

Antifa, BLM, now Hamas supporters and other progressive storm troopers have done their best to create little Samarras (the Iraqi town I was deployed in) in the center of cities like Portland, Chicago, Minneapolis, Seattle, New York, and San Francisco. Places where police must respect the indigenous populations of street addicts and operate under a bizarre set of rules of engagement that effectively cede the territory (neighborhood) to the enemy (criminals). People who offer no resistance to their political ideology are steamrolled—as the fundamental transformation is afoot. The modern progressive Left shows no shame when they trash our laws, nor do they pretend to uphold their own constitutional oaths of office.

They are the law, the police, the prosecutor, the judge, the jury, and executioner. And it happened fast, while America's best warriors were wearing camouflage and fighting halfway across the world. The Left didn't fight the wars. They stayed home and wrecked our house. America-wreckers, all of them. These domestic extremists are the real American "Jody"—ask a veteran; they'll tell you.

The Left's audacity and hubris allow them to ignore the laws they don't like and then prosecute the people they don't like. Legislation doesn't matter, and former presidents are their targets. They do so while we sleep, while soldiers return to the safety of our civilian lifestyles, and while we seek to earn a living and raise our children under the liberties guaranteed by the very Constitution we fought for. All of this is allowed by the creation of a new (un)holy writ, by abrogation of the Constitution and through a social justice filter that our progressive institutions have taught for years to a generation of kids—who are now incapable of seeing Truth, or loving their country.

* * *

Real Truth doesn't change. Not "your truth" or mine, but *the* Truth. Inside a Republic, the first-line countermeasure to revisionist meddling is understanding and defending the American institutions that were designed to be our True North. The best defense against the lies of the enemy is a