



January 10, 2025

Senator Roger Wicker  
Chairman  
U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services  
Russell Senate Building, Room 228  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Wicker and Members of the Committee,

We are [Count Every Hero](#), a nonpartisan initiative of former secretaries of the Army, Navy, and Air Force and retired four-star admirals and generals. Our members have served under each President from John F. Kennedy to Joseph R. Biden, Jr.

One of our organization's guiding principles is that strong and healthy civil-military relations are vital to both a properly functioning democracy and our military's readiness to defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. Our national security depends on mutual trust and respect between civilian and military leaders based on clear expectations and frank and honest communication.

We are writing to urge you to keep the health of our nation's civil-military relations in mind as you provide advice and consent on the nomination of Peter Hegseth to be Secretary of Defense.

We are concerned about a [reported](#) draft executive order that would establish a board outside of existing promotion and performance review procedures to review three- and four-star officers and recommend the removal of any deemed unfit. The idea of such a board is both unnecessary and threatens to fundamentally undermine the apolitical culture of the military.

This proposed board might sound similar to Gen. George C. Marshall's "plucking board," in which a board of retired officers chaired by his predecessor, Gen. Malin Craig, reviewed and recommended the removal of senior military leaders, but the "plucking board" is a poor analogy for the body outlined in this draft executive order. Gen. Marshall's board was approved by Congress to address problems associated with the then-existing seniority-based military promotion model, which, in the face of an impending war, had allowed long-tenured officers to remain in their rank and position nearly indefinitely and prevented more energetic, combat-ready leaders from rising through the ranks. The current leaders of our military have served multiple tours and led in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan for two decades. They already are the warriors we seek.

Establishing a review board outside of existing procedures is simply unnecessary. The military accepts the principle of civilian control over the military. It follows the policy directives of our civilian leaders. With the change of administrations, the civilian leadership of the Department of Defense will change. The new Defense leadership will directly oversee the selection of three- and four-stars for promotion and recommend them to the President for approval and to Congress for confirmation. They will also dictate the policies for the military to execute. The President does not need a new review board to change the direction of the department.

This external review board threatens to undermine the apolitical culture of our military, especially if it involves reviewing three- and four-stars already confirmed by Congress. The threat of a separate, White House-directed and appointed review board will be seen in the military as a loyalty oath to the sitting President rather than to the Constitution. Senior military leaders, knowing they could be judged by the new board, might be more eager to curry favor with their civilian leaders than to tell them the hard truths that civilians need to hear from the military to make effective national security decisions. The message to the force will be, "If you want to get ahead, don't disagree with the political leadership." This would politicize national security decisionmaking and weaken national security.

We urge you to use the opportunity presented by Mr. Hegseth's confirmation process to better understand the incoming administration's reported plans to review and remove military leaders outside of existing performance evaluation procedures. As Secretary of Defense, Mr. Hegseth would presumably be in charge of standing up and staffing this board. Our service members and the American people deserve to know if and how he plans to execute this policy proposal and what he will do to mitigate its many risks to our nation's military and national security.

Thank you for considering our views.

Signed,

**Co-chairs, Count Every Hero**

Adm. Steve Abbot, USN (ret.), former Acting Homeland Security Advisor to the President

Adm. Thad Allen, USCG (ret.), 23rd Commandant of the US Coast Guard

Secretary Louis Caldera, 17th Secretary of the Army

Gen. George Casey, USA (ret.), 36th Chief of Staff of the US Army

Secretary Debbie Lee James, 23rd Secretary of the Air Force

Gen. Craig McKinley, USAF (ret.), 26th Chief of the National Guard Bureau

Secretary Sean O'Keefe, 69th Secretary of the Navy

Count Every Hero is a nonpartisan initiative of retired admirals and generals and former service secretaries of the U.S. Armed Forces who have served under both Democratic and Republican administrations. Count Every Hero has three primary focus areas: promoting the understanding of the importance of a strong democracy to our national security; promoting civic literacy and civic participation; and protecting the voting rights of our active-duty servicemembers, our veterans, and their families.