

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 17, 2024

Susan Wiles
The Honorable Donald J. Trump
P.O. Box 509
Arlington, VA 22216

Dear Ms. Wiles:

We write to express deep concerns about whether Pete Hegseth's attitudes toward women, including allegations of sexual assault and harassment, disqualify him to be the next Secretary of Defense.¹

Women serving in the military are critical to U.S. national security. The most recent Department of Defense data shows 18 percent of active-duty service members are women,² serving "infantry, cavalry, armor and field artillery roles"³ and as operational and intelligence experts.⁴ Experts tell us that meeting current recruiting goals and building the cutting edge force we need for the future requires recruiting more women to the force.⁵ If women are treated as second-class citizens and barred from competing for the same opportunities for promotions and leadership as men, the military will lose the talent it has and be unable to recruit the talent it needs, and that will undermine our ability to keep Americans safe.

Serving as the Secretary of Defense is a position of enormous trust and leadership. The Secretary is called on to exercise the judgment needed to protect U.S. national security and to recruit and inspire the service members who will agree to put their lives on the line for their country. Under past and current leadership, the Defense Department continues to report unacceptably high levels of sexual harassment and assault in the military ranks, and it struggles to meet annual military recruiting goals.⁶ As Secretary, Mr. Hegseth will set the tone for how women are treated

¹ New York Times, "What to Know About Pete Hegseth, Trump's Pick for Defense Secretary," Helene Cooper, November 16, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/13/us/politics/trump-defense-pete-hegseth.html>.

² Department of Defense, "Defense Department Report Shows Decline in Armed Forces Population While Percentage of Military Women Rises Slightly," November 6, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3580676/defense-department-report-shows-decline-in-armed-forces-population-while-percen/>.

³ Military.com, "Thousands of Women Service in Combat Roles. Pentagon Nominee Hegseth Says They Shouldn't," Steven Beynon, Drew F. Lawrence, and Konstantin Toropin, November 18 2024, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2024/11/18/thousands-of-women-serve-combat-roles-pentagon-nominee-hegseth-says-they-shouldnt.html>.

⁴ Military.com, "'We Need You': Defense Secretary Stands Up for Women in Combat Jobs amid Hegseth Nomination," Konstantin Toropin, November 20, 2024, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2024/11/20/we-need-you-defense-secretary-stands-women-combat-jobs-amid-hegseth-nomination.html>.

⁵ Military Times, "Experts, data point to women as best military recruiting pool," Meghann Myers, January 26, 2023, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2023/01/26/experts-data-point-to-women-as-best-military-recruiting-pool/>.

throughout the military and whether women have enough confidence in him to join or remain in the military.

The early signs are concerning. Mr. Hegseth's opposition to women in combat roles is causing "mounting concern" among female active duty service members about whether they will continue to serve their country under his leadership.⁷ Mr. Hegseth has consistently downplayed the role of women in the Department of Defense. As recently as November 7th Mr. Hegseth stated: "I'm straight up just saying we should not have women in combat roles. It hasn't made us more effective. Hasn't made us more lethal. Has made fighting more complicated."⁸ Mr. Hegseth's ill-informed views ignore the significant role women have played in combat roles for the United States of America. His dismissal of women as warfighters drives away both potential recruits and women who are already serving in the armed forces.⁹ At a time when DOD is struggling to build up military enlistments, Mr. Hegseth's comments disqualify him to serve as the Secretary of Defense.

Mr. Hegseth's alleged history of sexual assault and harassment compounds our concerns about his fitness for leading the Department of Defense. Last month, according to press reports, the Trump transition team received a memo alleging that Mr. Hegseth "raped [a] then-30-year-old conservative group staffer in his room after drinking at a hotel bar"¹⁰ on October 8, 2017.¹¹ Both Mr. Hegseth and the woman, identified as "Jane Doe" in the memo, participated in the California Federation of American Women conference, where Jane Doe was responsible for making sure Mr. Hegseth "made it back to his room and left in time the next morning for the 90-minute drive to the airport."¹² After she responded to a text message from two women at the bar that Hegseth was "getting pushy about his interest in taking them upstairs to his room," she came down to the bar.¹³

After the two women left, the memo reportedly indicates that Jane Doe couldn't remember "anything until she was in Hegseth's hotel room and then stumbling to find her hotel room," where she returned to her children and husband, who had been searching for her.¹⁴ The next day,

⁶ Associated Press, "Military recruiting rebounds after several tough years, but challenges remain," Lolita C. Baldor, September 26, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/military-recruiting-army-shortfalls-enlist-1611ea378b32826cc4615dc3731f3f70>.

⁷ Politico, "Female officials at Pentagon wary of Hegseth pick, senator-elect says," Greta Reich, November 17, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/11/17/hegseth-pentagon-female-officials-elissa-slotkin-00190038>.

⁸ AP News, "Should women be allowed to fight on the front lines? Trump's defense pick reignites the debate," Lolita C. Baldor, November 18, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/military-women-defense-hegseth-combat-916d50a7b465ccfea1aeb13bb91064b3>.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Washington Post, "Defense pick Hegseth paid accuser but denies sexual assault, attorney says," Michael Kranish, Josh Dawsey, and Jonathan O'Connell, November 16, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/11/16/pete-hegseth-sexual-assault-accuser-paid/>.

¹¹ CNN, "Trump's defense secretary nominee paid accuser but denies sexual assault, attorney says," Kaanita Iyer, Zachary Cohen and Kaitlan Collins, November 17, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/11/17/politics/pete-hegseth-sexual-assault-settlement-agreement/index.html>.

¹² Washington Post, "Defense pick Hegseth paid accuser but denies sexual assault, attorney says," Michael Kranish, Josh Dawsey, and Jonathan O'Connell, November 16, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/11/16/pete-hegseth-sexual-assault-accuser-paid/>.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

according to reports, she “had a moment of hazy memory of being raped the night before, and had a panic attack” and went to the emergency room, where she “told a hospital nurse that she ‘was not sure, but believes that something may have been slipped into her drink,’”¹⁵ and “received a rape-kit examination that ‘was positive for semen.’”¹⁶ She filed a police complaint three days later,¹⁷ alleging Hegseth “physically blocked her from leaving a hotel room, took her phone, and then sexually assaulted her,” despite “saying ‘no’ a lot.”¹⁸ The Monterey police department found “contusions to [her] right thigh”¹⁹ and conducted an investigation into whether he had committed sexual assault that did not result in criminal charges.²⁰

Mr. Hegseth does not deny that the event occurred, but he claims that the incident was consensual, and he notes that the Monterey Police did not press charges. However, when Jane Doe threatened to sue Mr. Hegseth, he reportedly paid her off and required her to sign a nondisclosure agreement in 2020 due to concerns that publicly airing the assault “would result in his immediate termination from Fox.”²¹ Unsurprisingly, a Republican Senator has said that this allegation may now sink Mr. Hegseth’s nomination.²²

It appears that this was not an isolated incident. When he served as president of Concerned Veterans of America (CVA), a whistleblower report alleges Hegseth and his management team “sexually pursued the organization’s female staffers”²³ and “ignored serious accusations of impropriety, including an allegation made by a female employee that another employee on Hegseth’s staff had attempted to sexually assault her”²⁴ at a strip club. In this environment the whistleblower alleged that “fear of reprisal loom[ed] over every woman associated with the

¹⁵ CNN, “Police report reveals new details from sexual assault allegation against Trump’s defense secretary nominee,” Casey Tolan, Scott Glover, and Sara Murray, November 21, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/11/21/politics/pete-hegseth-police-report-defense-secretary-trump>.

¹⁶ Washington Post, “Defense pick Hegseth paid accuser but denies sexual assault, attorney says,” Michael Kranish, Josh Dawsey, and Jonathan O’Connell, November 16, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/11/16/pete-hegseth-sexual-assault-accuser-paid/>.

¹⁷ USA Today, “Trump defense pick Pete Hegseth paid settlement to woman who accused him of sexual assault, denies allegation,” Zac Anderson, November 17, 2024, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2024/11/17/trump-defense-hegseth-sexual-assault-settlement/76383768007/>.

¹⁸ CNN, “Police report reveals new details from sexual assault allegation against Trump’s defense secretary nominee,” Casey Tolan, Scott Glover, and Sara Murray, November 21, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/11/21/politics/pete-hegseth-police-report-defense-secretary-trump>.

¹⁹ CNN, “Trump’s defense secretary nominee paid accuser but denies sexual assault, attorney says,” Kaanita Iyer, Zachary Cohen and Kaitlan Collins, November 17, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/11/17/politics/pete-hegseth-sexual-assault-settlement-agreement/index.html>.

²⁰ USA Today, “Trump defense pick Pete Hegseth paid settlement to woman who accused him of sexual assault, denies allegation,” Zac Anderson, November 17, 2024, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2024/11/17/trump-defense-hegseth-sexual-assault-settlement/76383768007/>.

²¹ Washington Post, “Defense pick Hegseth paid accuser but denies sexual assault, attorney says,” Michael Kranish, Josh Dawsey, and Jonathan O’Connell, November 16, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/11/16/pete-hegseth-sexual-assault-accuser-paid/>.

²² Newsweek, “Republican Senator Says New Reports ‘Could’ Sink Pete Hegseth’s Nomination,” Jason Lemon, November 17, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/markwayne-mullin-new-reports-could-sink-pete-hegseth-nomination-1987079>.

²³ New Yorker, “Pete Hegseth’s Secret History,” Jane Mayer, December 1, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/pete-hegseths-secret-history>.

²⁴ *Id.*

organization”²⁵ as Hegseth was “using CVA events as little more than opportunities to ‘hook up’ with women on the road.”²⁶ A volunteer for CVA “was so concerned about the rampant promiscuity and sexism that she sent an e-mail to C.V.A.’s headquarters complaining about a lack of professionalism, an unhealthy workplace, and an atmosphere in which women were unfairly treated.”²⁷

The allegation that Mr. Hegseth sexually assaulted a woman and personally contributed to creating a hostile work environment for female employees raises severe concerns about his ability to address the Department of Defense’s problems with sexual assault. The most recent Pentagon statistics found about 29,000 active-duty troops, 6.8 percent of female service members and 1.5 percent of male service members, experienced unwanted sexual contact in 2023.²⁸ A Brown University study estimates that the actual rates are two to four times higher.²⁹ DoD has also reported that “less than half of women in the military trust their chain of command to properly handle reports of sexual assault.”³⁰ A 2020 Government Accountability Office study found women left the military at a higher rate, in large part due to concerns about sexism and sexual assault.³¹

Given our concerns about Mr. Hegseth’s attitudes towards women and how those attitudes would impact his fitness to serve as the Secretary of Defense, we ask that the Trump Transition answer the following questions no later than December 30:

1. Will it be Trump Administration policy that women should not serve in active duty combat roles? If not, and if Mr. Hegseth is nominated and confirmed, how will the administration reconcile the difference between its views on this policy and the clearly stated opposition of its own Secretary of Defense?
2. Does the Transition Team have any formal policy regarding how to investigate reports of sexual assault by nominees, or whether nominees with credible allegations of sexual assault or misbehavior are able to effectively serve in office? If so, will you share those policies with the Senate?
3. Will the Transition Team provide the Senate a copy of the memo describing Mr. Hegseth’s alleged sexual assault?

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ Military Times, “Military sexual assault totals down, but trust among women remains low,” Leo Shane, May 16, 2024, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2024/05/16/military-sexual-assault-totals-down-but-trust-among-women-remains-low/>.

²⁹ NBC News, “U.S. military sexual assault rates 2 to 4 times higher than govt estimates, study says,” Phil Helsel and Courtney Kube, August 14, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/investigations/us-military-sexual-assault-rates-2-4-higher-govt-estimates-study-says-rcna166490>.

³⁰ Military Times, “Military sexual assault totals down, but trust among women remains low,” Leo Shane, May 16, 2024, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2024/05/16/military-sexual-assault-totals-down-but-trust-among-women-remains-low/>.

³¹ Government Accountability Office, “Female Active-Duty Personnel: Guidance and Plans Needed for Recruitment and Retention Efforts,” May 19, 2020, pp. 11, 29, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-20-61.pdf>.

4. Has the Transition Team conducted an independent investigation of the allegations of sexual assault or inappropriate sexual activities? If so, who conducted the investigation and what did those investigations find?
5. Is the Transition Team aware of any other incidents where Mr. Hegseth was accused of sexual assault or inappropriate sexual activities? If so, what was the nature of these incidents?
6. Mr. Hegseth’s attorney has stated that the confidentiality agreement with “Jane Doe” is no longer in effect.³² Will the Transition Team, prior to any committee hearings on his nomination, ensure that Mr. Hegseth releases any women who accused him of sexual harassment or assault or had knowledge of such allegations from nondisclosure agreements?
7. Will the Transition Team provide the Senate the whistleblower reports concerning Hegseth’s conduct while president of Concerned Veterans of America?
8. Will the Transition Team provide the Senate any police reports or investigative documents regarding his conduct?
9. Mr. Hegseth’s attorney has threatened to sue “Jane Doe.”³³ Has Mr. Hegseth, his attorneys, or any members of the transition team sent any letters or issued other warnings to anyone else who might accuse him of sexual harassment, assault, or fostering a hostile work environment?

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

³² ABC News, “Hegseth’s attorney threatens to sue sex assault accuser if she repeats ‘false’ claims and he’s not confirmed,” Oren Oppenheim, Peter Charalambous, and Ivan Pereira, December 6, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/hegseths-attorney-threatens-sue-sex-assault-accuser-repeats/story?id=116531786>.

³³ ABC News, “Hegseth’s attorney threatens to sue sex assault accuser if she repeats ‘false’ claims and he’s not confirmed,” Oren Oppenheim, Peter Charalambous, and Ivan Pereira, December 6, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/hegseths-attorney-threatens-sue-sex-assault-accuser-repeats/story?id=116531786>.

Mazie K. Hirono

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United States Senator

Kirsten Gillibrand

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United States Senator

Jacky Rosen

Jacky Rosen
United States Senator

Tammy Duckworth

Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

Tim Kaine

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United States Senator