

Wyoming Green Beret, Navy Vet Columnist Spar Over Hegseth's Anti-Woke Mission

When Sheridan-based Navy veteran Gail Symons sat down to watch a recording of U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's address to an assembly of military leaders last week, she couldn't believe what she heard.

Hegseth had traveled to Quantico, Virginia where he delivered remarks on the department's goals amid what he called a growing "moment of urgency" for the United States. That urgency came from what he described as a need to redefine the "nature" of the Department of Defense after being made into the "woke department" by Washington D.C. political leaders.

"The topic today is about the nature of ourselves, because no plan, no program, no reform, no formation will ultimately succeed unless we have the right people and the right culture at the War Department," a Department of Defense transcription of Hegseth's remarks reads.

He calls his agency the "War Department" in reference to a Sept. 5 order by President Donald Trump [adding that name](#) as a secondary title.

"For too long, we've promoted too many uniformed leaders for the wrong reasons, based on their race, based on gender quotas, based on historic so-called firsts," Hegseth added.

He went on to condemn diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) practices, "dudes in dresses," and out-of-shape officers, which he claimed are among several major culture issues facing the military. During that address, he announced the introduction of new directives which he said would reintroduce "standards" to the military.

Symons, who served for 17 years from 1980 to 1997 and now writes a regular column for Cowboy State Daily, said listening to those words felt like having her record of service spat upon.

"So this literally is the most senior officers and most senior enlisted from all over the world," she told Cowboy State Daily in a phone conversation. "I wanted to hear what it was that that he had to say. There were a lot of times when I'm like 'oh no, he didn't just say that,' and I would back up and listen to it again."

Though Symons was incredulous, an Army veteran who served as a Green Beret and now lives in Pinedale told Cowboy State Daily he appreciated Hegseth's comments, and feels the U.S. military is now being led by someone who understands how far meritless standards have derailed it.

Breaking Barriers

Symons attended the Navy Supply Corps School, formerly located in Athens, Georgia, where she was among some of the first women to graduate from the Naval Academy. That experience proved incredibly difficult for Symons and her roughly 20 female classmates due to the high expectations placed on them through becoming a part of the previously all-male institution, she said.

"They were mean," she said of her male colleagues at the school. "Just think about an all-male institution that got forced to add women and the resentment and the anger and the ugliness that they had to go through. And these women took it all and they graduated with honor and they

graduated, most of them towards the top of their classes.”

Upon graduation, Symons petitioned hard to go to sea, despite women only being allowed on ships as recently as 1978. Her argument was “if we wanted shore duty, we would have gotten commissioned in the Air Force or the Army.”

When she was eventually placed on a ship, Symons was one of three female officers on board. All remaining sailors were men, none of whom had ever served with female officers before, she said.

“There was no way that I wasn't going to perform at the absolute best, because I knew that if I didn't, I wasn't going to go anywhere,” she said. “I had the ship store, which generates funds for Morale, Welfare and Recreation, and I had the highest generation of those funds for literally decades.”

Symons said that during her time in the Navy, more and more women got the opportunity to serve while pushing through adversity, progress which she said Hegseth's comments potentially jeopardized.

“There never have been any quotas, that's bulls--- and it's a lie,” she said. “So the minute I heard quota, I knew that I had to go back and look at everything he said and check it against the reality.”

After listening to Hegseth, Symons penned a column for Cowboy State Daily titled “[What The Heck Did Pete Hegseth Just Say?](#)” in which she characterized Hegseth's message as “If you're a woman or a person of color in uniform today, your achievements are suspect...you were just a number to check a box.”

“The Navy didn't promote me because of some quota,” she wrote. “I earned every rank I achieved.”

“This wasn't just an offensive speech,” she added. “It was a betrayal of every service member who has worked, sacrificed, and succeeded within the standards of a lawful, accountable, and lethal military. It cast doubt on every female officer, every minority commander, and every leader who earned their position through grit and competence. That includes me. And I won't stay silent while someone tries to turn my service, and the service of so many others, into a political stunt.”

Everything Is Earned

Symons's column caught the attention of Pinedale-based Army veteran Heath Harrower. Harrower too had paid attention to Hegseth's address, but came away with different conclusions.

Harrower served for 29 years in the Army from 1996 to 2024, during which time he rose to the rank of Colonel and became a Green Beret. He was deployed 13 times to locations like Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

One of Harrower's duties involved serving as a deputy commander to a two-star general. In that role, Harrower would “do everything that [the general] doesn't want to do.”

That included overseeing DEI initiatives, which Harrower said began with good intentions but did not appear to deliver on their promises.

“From my experience, the military and senior leaders liked to couch diversity, equity and inclusion in terms of diversity of thought,” he told Cowboy State Daily via phone. “Diversity of thought, you know, is good in terms of solving, approaching different endeavors, and that's welcome, and that makes sense.”

“But you know, from what I saw, the things we did didn't focus on diversity of thought,” he added. “It focused on diversity of skin color, and those two aren't necessarily the same.”

Harrower said he often saw these differing ideas of diversity conflict with one another when executed by the military. This made the outcome of DEI into something it was never intended to be.

“I don't believe there was ever a real understanding that propagated from the office of secretary of defense down into the formations in terms of a real, coherent and very well understood reasoning behind DEI,” he said.

DEI programs in the military also focus heavily on the equity component, Harrower said. While he supports giving all members of the military equal opportunities, Harrower added this often came with an expectation of equal outcomes.

This Is War

War fighting, which Harrower said is the primary objective of the military, is not equitable in its impact on soldiers. The military must therefore hold its members to the highest standards or lose its standing as the most dominant fighting force in the world, he said.

“I think what gets lost is we focused on equitable outcomes within war,” he said. It’s more important to seek and foster grit, endurance and perseverance in the face of adversarial weather and circumstances, Harrower said.

“We need to tease that out a little bit before war actually occurs, because our enemies have no care about equitable outcomes, and it's going to advantage those who are most highly trained, who are most adaptive and who have the most grit to survive, to defeat their enemy and to lead troops under very, very adverse conditions where we can't depend on different standards and equitable outcomes,” he added. “Those things don't exist in war.”

When Harrower heard Hegseth’s address in Quantico, he said he felt as though there was finally someone in charge who understood his concerns. In Harrower’s view, Hegseth was shunning the faulty premise of equal outcomes.

“Nobody is guaranteed equality in terms of outcome, what you're guaranteed is an equal opportunity to perform within set standards that should be equal across the board,” he said.

After reading Symons’s column on Hegseth’s remarks, Harrower penned his own rebuttal in a Cowboy State Daily letter to the editor titled “[What The Heck Did Gail Symons Just Say?](#)”

In that piece, Harrower characterized Symons’s response as being “based overwhelmingly on opinion and personal emotion, not fact.”

“There is no question the military applied different standards to achieve equal outcomes between genders and that the military considered race and gender within such service level processes as promotions and command selection,” he wrote. “While these processes were well intended, they unfortunately create a backdrop of suspicion relating to measuring and comparing achievements. And this is not fair to anyone involved.”

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