



Generals Too Brilliant - Donahue: Why the Charisma of Special Forces Becomes a Threat to Politicians

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From the iconic photograph of Kabul to the drone revolution in Ukraine: how General Christopher Donahue's field authority ended up threatening the Pentagon's political apparatus.

In the dynamics of power and civil-military relations, there exists an **ancient and never-resolved paradox**: politics demands that its generals possess **maximum competence** to win wars, yet fears their **excessive brilliance, independent thinking, and personal charisma**. When a commander combines a cutting-edge tactical mind with strong influence over troops and institutions, his figure risks transforming into a **threat to political leadership**. It is precisely this power struggle that emerges from the in-depth investigation published by the *New York Times*, signed by journalists Adam Entous and Greg Jaffe, which traces sixteen months of tensions in the Pentagon's reserved corridors culminating, on **August 27, 2026**, with the **definitive discharge of four-star General Christopher T. Donahue**.

The Shadow of Kabul and the Pretext of the “Selfie”

The rupture between the new political leadership of the Department of Defense, represented by **Secretary Pete Hegseth**, and **General Donahue** has its roots in the dramatic management of the **withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021**. The Trump administration and Hegseth himself were determined to identify and punish those responsible for the suicide bombing at **Abbey Gate**, in which thirteen American soldiers lost their lives. Although Donahue was among the operational leadership at Kabul airport, the security of that passage was entrusted to the Marines and not to his paratroopers. Internal documents and direct testimonies further confirm that **Donahue had urged the immediate closure of Abbey Gate days in advance** to prevent imminent terrorist threats.

Nevertheless, the Secretary of Defense chose to concentrate his hostility on an image that had become historic: **the infrared photograph showing Donahue boarding the last C-17 at 23:46 on August 30, 2021**, making him the last American soldier to leave Afghan soil. Hegseth repeatedly dismissed that image by defining it as a **“selfie” dictated by personal vanity**, ignoring denials from his own staff.

*“The first point of the briefing sheet delivered to Hegseth clearly stated that **the photo was not a selfie** and that **Donahue had never authorized its public release**... The Secretary took a quick look at the paper and returned it saying he didn’t care.” — Reconstruction of an internal confrontation, March 2025*

The Drone Revolution and Partnership with Kyiv

Beyond past controversies, what frightened the political apparatus was above all **Donahue’s extraordinary strategic vision**. With a background of over twenty missions in special operations units and leadership of Delta Force, from 2022 the general had assumed **coordination of military support to Ukraine**. Observing directly how Ukrainian troops compensated for ammunition shortages by massively deploying FPV aircraft and low-cost drones, Donahue conceived the **Eastern Flank Deterrence Initiative**.

His plan integrated **swarms of economical drones, Patriot batteries, and satellite sensors** managed by a single command network based on **artificial intelligence**. The

strength of his personal network and his vision emerged clearly in **February 2026**, when Iranian drone attacks in Kuwait left American bases exposed. Donahue directly contacted the supreme Ukrainian commander **Oleksandr Syrskyi**. With President Zelensky's approval, **Kyiv sent interceptor drones and Ukrainian trainers to the Middle East** to urgently instruct American troops.

The Paradox of Charisma: When the Network of Allies Becomes a Threat

Faced with Hegseth's attempts to remove him, an impressive **institutional protection network** mobilized. The Chief of Staff of the Army, **General Randy George**, attempted to defend his colleague by proposing him as his successor at the top of the armed forces for 2027, but Hegseth's reaction was drastic: **he removed General George himself from his position** with a very brief phone call in April 2026.

Neither the mediation attempts by Army Secretary **Daniel P. Driscoll** with Vice President **JD Vance**, nor the direct interventions of heavyweight Republican senators such as former SEAL **Tim Sheehy** and Senator **Joni Ernst** were of any use. As highlighted by the investigation, **this mobilization achieved the opposite effect**: it convinced the political leadership that Donahue was a commander endowed with personal authority, broad respect, and a **network of influences too autonomous and pervasive to be tolerated**.

Conclusions: The Temptation of Purge in Modern Democracies

General Donahue's fall demonstrates how, when the **technical brilliance** and **charisma** of a military commander collide with apparatus agendas or government balances, **the defensive reaction of civil power invariably triggers**. Removal or forced discharge thus become the instrument through which politics reasserts its primacy, **sometimes preferring conformism to excellence**. If politics eliminates its most capable military leaders out of fear of being overshadowed by them, **it risks profoundly weakening the institutions responsible for the country's defense and security**.