



US Defense: Pete Hegseth Removes Chaplain Ranks from Army Combat Uniforms – A Historical and Operational Error

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The United States Army Department has just initiated a 90-day countdown: three months for all military chaplains to remove rank insignia from the chest of their Army Combat Uniforms (ACU), replacing them with religious symbols on the collars. The move, strongly advocated by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and translated into guidelines by Army Secretary Dan Driscoll, aims at a theoretically noble goal: to reaffirm that a minister in camouflage is *"first and foremost a chaplain and only secondarily an officer"*.

However, looking at the centuries-old American military tradition and the concrete dynamics of unit life, it is difficult not to view this transition with deep skepticism. More than a return to spiritual purity, the measure risks becoming a bureaucratic mess that ignores the functioning of the chain of command and the effectiveness of ministry in the field.

A Historical Bond Broken with a Stroke of the Pen

The combination of faith and military rank in the U.S. Army is not a recent invention of modernism or Pentagon bureaucracy; it is a foundational element of the identity of the [Chaplain Corps](#), established in 1775 by George Washington.

Historically, assigning an official rank to chaplains has never served to "secularize" their role, but rather to **protect and legitimize it**. Granting a pastor, rabbi, or imam the status (and insignia) of captain, major, or colonel has always meant one specific thing: giving them the authority to communicate directly with the command to defend the soldiers' well-being, without being filtered or intimidated by non-commissioned officers or middle management. Visually removing that rank means, symbolically and psychologically, weakening that protective barrier.



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The Camouflage Factor and the Optical Illusion

The new directive specifically applies to combat uniforms and cold-weather gear (leaving formal ceremonial uniforms unchanged). This is where the strongest contradiction lies.

On the battlefield or during operational training, the uniform serves to instantly identify the role and responsibility of the person in front of you. A twenty-year-old soldier, perhaps under severe emotional or traumatic stress, needs to recognize their points of reference with a glance in a split second. The rank insignia on the chest are standardized, visible, universal. Replacing them with religious symbols on the collar (reduced by the Pentagon to only 5 admitted faiths: Latin

cross, Jewish tablets, Islamic crescent, Buddhist wheel, and Hindu Om) risks creating visual confusion in contexts where clarity is everything.

Furthermore, the drastic reduction of religious affiliation codes from over 200 to just 31, combined with the removal of ranks, seems to betray an attempt at "normalization" from above that clashes with the complex and varied confessional reality of today's troops.

An Ideological Rather Than Practical Transition

The rhetoric of **Secretary Hegseth is based on the idea that military rank contaminates the chaplain's spiritual mission**. But the reality is that U.S. Army chaplains have known for over two centuries how to balance the two identities. They do not exercise weapon command (they cannot order an attack), but they use the rank to move fluidly within the complex military machine.

Visually depriving an officer of their rank in a fully hierarchical environment like the army risks producing the opposite effect of what is hoped for: not greater spiritual authority, but progressive institutional marginalization. The risk is that, deprived of their insignia in the field, the chaplain will be perceived less as a strategic support officer and more as an "external" element to the harsh reality of military life.

The 90 days granted to complete the "strip" from the uniforms will pass quickly. It remains to be seen whether, once the eagles, oak leaves, or silver bars are removed from the chaplains' chests, the Army will have truly obtained spiritual leaders closer to the troops, or if it will have simply deprived its soldiers of an authoritative ally in the chain of command. History suggests that caution, in these cases, is a must. And skepticism too.