



The Office of the

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Donald Trump's "Department of War" name change is mostly political theatre



*In early September, President Trump issued an executive order directing that the US Department of Defense would again be known as the "Department of War". **Jonny Hall** writes that the move aligns with the Trump administration's campaign against perceived 'wokeness' in the US military and is an attempt to reaffirm the US as a "winner". He argues that while the implications of the policy remain to be seen, the renaming is symbolic of the continued reduction of America's soft power capabilities.*

President Donald Trump called his 200th executive order on September 5th, a "big one", as he directed the Department of Defense to return to its original title of the Department of War, which it was last known as in 1947. Given the potential requirements of rebranding the Defense Department across more than 700,000 facilities, one can easily wonder – **as former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta did** – "why the president is doing this".

The political motives behind the name change

The move has two main political logics. First, it aligns with the Trump administration's broader campaign against perceived 'wokeness' in the US military. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has championed this cause, **arguing** that American armed forces in the Department of War would prioritise "maximum lethality", as opposed to "tepid legality" and being "politically correct". Most remarkably, Trump **claimed** that after World War II, "we decided to go woke and we changed the name to Department of Defense".

Secondly and relatedly, the Department of War title supports Trump's ongoing efforts to reaffirm US identity as a "winner" in global affairs. The lack of "winning" was a central theme of Trump's first presidential campaign, and his first term in the White House was marked by **controversial claims**

that the US should withdraw from warzones because the Trump administration had “won” against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.



Department of War Plaques Change by PO2 Aiko Bongolan. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

“Winning” serves less as an accurate description of these warzones or an attempt to **legitimate specific foreign policies**, but more so an attempt to evoke idealised memories of American exceptionalism. As Trump **claimed** in November 2019, if the US was “forced” to go to war, ““we will win like—the old days.” Almost six years later, Trump continues to invoke the US’s **winning culture**, as demonstrated in his **announcement** of the name change:

really it has to do with winning. We should have won every war. We could have won every war, but we really chose to be a very politically correct or wokey ...

This is a very important change, because it's an attitude, and we know how to win. We've been winning and we're going to win like you've never seen.

The Department of War title exemplifies the strength and exceptionalism that the MAGA movement cherishes and attempts to regain. It also resolves the apparent contradiction between Trump’s portrayal of himself as deserving of the **Nobel Peace Prize** and the renaming of the Department of Defense, as the **‘Jacksonian’** foreign policy tradition that Trump appeals to suggests that the US should stay out of world affairs until it needs to dominate a particular situation. Florida Republican Senator Rick Scott perfectly captured this philosophy when introducing legislation to formalise the name change, **positing** that the “Department of War reflects our true purpose: to dominate wars, not merely respond after being provoked”.

What the name change may mean for US foreign policy

Congress could have an important role to play in the future of the Department of Defense/War, as although Trump whimsically **claimed** that he didn’t “think we even need[ed]” congressional approval,

all previous name alterations have been approved by the legislative branch. Similarly, whilst the president expressed confidence that “Congress will go along”, some Republicans – such as Senator Mitch McConnell – have already **voiced** their disapproval for a “rebranding” exercise. Trump’s **executive order** gives Hegseth 60 days to recommend “legislative and executive actions necessary to accomplish this renaming”, but any congressional pathways could face hurdles given the laborious and costly task at hand.

Though primarily a political manoeuvre, the name change could have some meaningful effects. Supporters **argue** that it might better emphasise the costs of war while refocusing the military on combat rather than nation-building missions like those in Afghanistan and Iraq. A Department of War could potentially help reverse the **dangerous militarisation of US foreign policy**.

More likely, however, is that this executive order personifies **the continued reduction of America’s soft power capabilities** that has marked both Trump presidencies. Although the renaming **follows China’s unveiling** of a wide range of new military technologies, it reinforces into Chinese and Russian critiques of the US as a **disrupter of international order**. Additionally, although Trump **asserts** the name change highlights how the US has the capability to go “on the offensive”, a more narrowly-defined Department of War (as **those in favour** point to) overlooks the **likely importance of complex deterrence** dynamics in today’s great power competition.

As is so often with the case with Trump, whilst the rhetoric represents perfect political theatre, the potentially meaningful impact remains to be seen.

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