

TURMOIL



NCNW Advocacy & Policy
REALITY CHECK ON TURMOIL

TURMOIL - REALITY CHECK FOR THE WEEK ENDING FEB 7

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Welcome to what NCNW will call “Turmoil - Reality Check.” With all the developments coming from the three branches of government, one can often feel they are in “a state of great disturbance, confusion, or uncertainty” = TURMOIL.

We understand you need to know what is really going on, rooted in facts and reality, so that you can be informed and ready for action. NCNW is prepared to give it to you as it happens.

Pete Hegseth, U.S. Secretary of Defense

Who is Pete Hegseth?

Pete Hegseth is a former Fox News host who was commissioned as an infantry officer in the U.S. National Guard in 2003. He has faced controversy for statements around the fitness of women for combat roles, as well as statements about Black soldiers. Hegseth also faces claims of sexual misconduct and excessive drinking. He was recently confirmed to the role of Secretary of Defense.

Hearing Highlights:

- Hegseth told the senators that his primary charge from the current president was to “bring back the warrior culture back to the Department of Defense” and that he wants the Pentagon “laser-focused on warfighting, lethality, meritocracy, standards, and readiness.”
- Hegseth was questioned by Senator Jack Reed, the ranking Democrat of the committee, about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the military and how Hegseth would ‘undo’ DEI without undermining military leadership. Hegseth replied the military, “was a forerunner in courageous racial integration in ways no other institutions were willing to do.” However, he then argued that diversity, equity, and inclusion policies divide troops and didn’t prioritize “meritocracy.”
- Despite Hegseth never reaching a high rank, the Republicans praised it. Hegseth stated, “It’s time to give someone with dust on their boots the helm.” Despite multiple prior secretaries of defense, outgoing Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin included, having combat experience and being a general.

- Hegseth was questioned about his previous comments stating that women should “straight up” not serve in combat roles and that Black soldiers may not be qualified. Hegseth in the hearing stated that, “It would be the privilege of a lifetime, if confirmed, to be the secretary of defense for all men and women in uniform. Hegseth then implied that standards have been lowered for women. He stated, “The standards need to be the same, and they need to be high,” adding that those standards have been eroded to meet diversity quotas.
- Hegseth dodged questions about an FBI background check. Senator Richard Blumenthal asked Hegseth if he’d be willing to submit to an expanded background check with interviews from former colleagues, ex-wives, “sexual assault survivors and others;” to which he replied, “I’m not in charge of FBI background checks.”

Pam Bondi, U.S. Attorney General

Who is Pam Bondi?

Pam Bondi is the newly appointed United States attorney general heading the Department of Justice. She was formerly the attorney general for Florida. Bondi, while serving as AG for Florida, sought to undo same sex marriage and led a group of Republican attorney generals in an unsuccessful attempt to overturn the Affordable Care Act in 2010. She has a relationship with the current president dating back to 2013 when he donated \$25,000 to her campaign for attorney general in Florida. Bondi was also on the current president’s legal team during his first impeachment trial and supported him during his hush money trial in which he was convicted.

Hearing Highlights:

- Bondi declined to answer questions about the current president’s election denial, as well as about his pardoning of the January 6 attackers. Bondi refused to acknowledge that the current president lost the 2020 election and was a key figure in spreading misinformation about the 2020 election outcome.
- Bondi avoided answering questions about disobeying an unlawful order from the current president. Sen. Chris Coons asked Bondi if she would drop a case if the White House told her to. She responded, “What I can tell you is my duty, if confirmed as the attorney general, will be to The Constitution and the United States of America, and the most important oath, part of that oath that I will take are the last four words, ‘So help me God.’”
- Sen. Schiff expressed skepticism over coming into conflict with the current president. He stated “You may say that you believe that conflict will never come, but every day, week, month and year of the first [current president’s] administration demonstrated that conflict would come. Jeff Sessions may not have believed it would come to him. It came to him. Bill Barr may not have believed it would come to him. It came to him. It came to everyone.”
- Bondi vowed to “restore confidence and integrity” in the DOJ after calling it a “weaponization of the justice system” to target the current president. She did not provide many details on what that would look like.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Trump’s pick for Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services:

Who is Robert F. Kennedy Jr.?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is a former 2024 presidential candidate and the son of former Attorney General and Presidential Candidate Robert F. Kennedy. For eight years, RFK, Jr. ran the Children's Health Defense, a group that pushed misinformation around child vaccinations and their efficacy. He faced many controversies including alleged animal abuse and pushing anti-vaccine narratives, including stating COVID-19 could have been "ethnically targeted" to spare Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese people. He also commented he believed that Black people should receive a different schedule of vaccines because of having stronger immune systems. This is a belief that has racist origins and has been debunked by scientists. Members of the Kennedy family have come out against RFK, Jr's nomination and have distanced themselves from him. He advanced to the full senate for a vote on Tuesday, Feb. 4 after a 14-13 vote of the Senate Finance Committee.

Hearing Highlights:

- In his hearing RFK, Jr. changed his stance about being anti-vaccines. "News reports have claimed that I am anti-vaccines or anti-industry; I am neither. I am pro safety," Senator Wyden accused Kennedy of ducking the issues raised by his past remarks. Kennedy stated he'd "do nothing as HHS Secretary that makes it difficult or discourages people from taking" the measles and polio vaccines.
- Sen. Sanders asked Kennedy about onesies he sold through his organization that stated "Unvaxxed, Unafraid" and "No Vax, No Problem". Kennedy said that he resigned from the board and holds "no power over that organization".
- On a podcast interview Kennedy openly questioned the administration of the measles and polio vaccines. Saying that he would not take the measles vaccine himself and downplayed the danger of the disease. However, he went on to state "I'll support vaccines. I support the childhood schedule."
- Sen. Cassidy described Kennedy as "financially vested in finding fault in vaccines." Cassidy stated, "Your past of undermining confidence in vaccines with unfounded or misleading arguments concerns me." Cassidy further stated, "Can I trust that that is now in the past? Can data and information change your opinion? Or will you only look for data supporting a predetermined conclusion? This is imperative." Kennedy continued to refuse to acknowledge this specifically around his belief that vaccines cause autism.
- Sen. Alsobrooks questioned Kennedy on his belief about Black people not receiving the same schedule of vaccines as other groups. Kennedy stated that he believes that Black people have stronger immune systems. Kennedy said he referenced "a series of studies" showing that "to particular antigens Black people have a much stronger reaction." Sen. Alsobrooks stated that her vote would be a no.

Russell Vought, Director of Office of Management and Budget

Who is Russell Vought?

Russell Vought is one of the architects of Project 2025 and served in the current president's first administration as deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget. Vought is a self-described "Christian Nationalist," a term often associated with white supremacy and theocracy. This belief supports the idea that America was founded on Christian values, and that the government should be infused with Christianity, despite a clear separation of church and state in The U.S. Constitution. Vought founded the Center for Renewing America, a conservative think tank, after serving in the current president's first term.

He has counseled Republicans in an effort to cut federal programs and spending. During the current president's first term, Vought pushed to reclassify federal workers as political appointees to enact mass dismissals, a move we have seen attempted recently. He was just confirmed.

Hearing Highlights:

- During his hearing Vought avoided answering Democratic senators' questions about withholding funding for Ukraine, \$3.8 billion specifically that was approved by Congress. Vought has been a proponent of "impoundment," a legal theory that suggests the president can exert more control over federal funding. The Democrats pressed that Vought's responses acknowledged him supporting the belief that the president is above the law.
- Sen. Blumenthal pressed Vought on the current president's position on spending federal funds. Vought noted that the current president ran against the 1976 law which mandates the government spending Congress approves to be spent as instructed. Vought said this would be worked through by lawyers stating, "put through a policy process." Vought indicated he believes the law should be overturned.
- Vought claimed he'd spend money as allocated by Congress. However, Sen. Gary Peters accused Vought of withholding \$214 million in aid to Ukraine in 2019. Vought responded, "I will always commit to upholding the law." Sen. Peters was not satisfied with the answer.

Until next week!