COMMENTARY

Signalgate is a consequence of anti-DEI hysteria

White mediocrity has become a national security risk

By RANN MILLER

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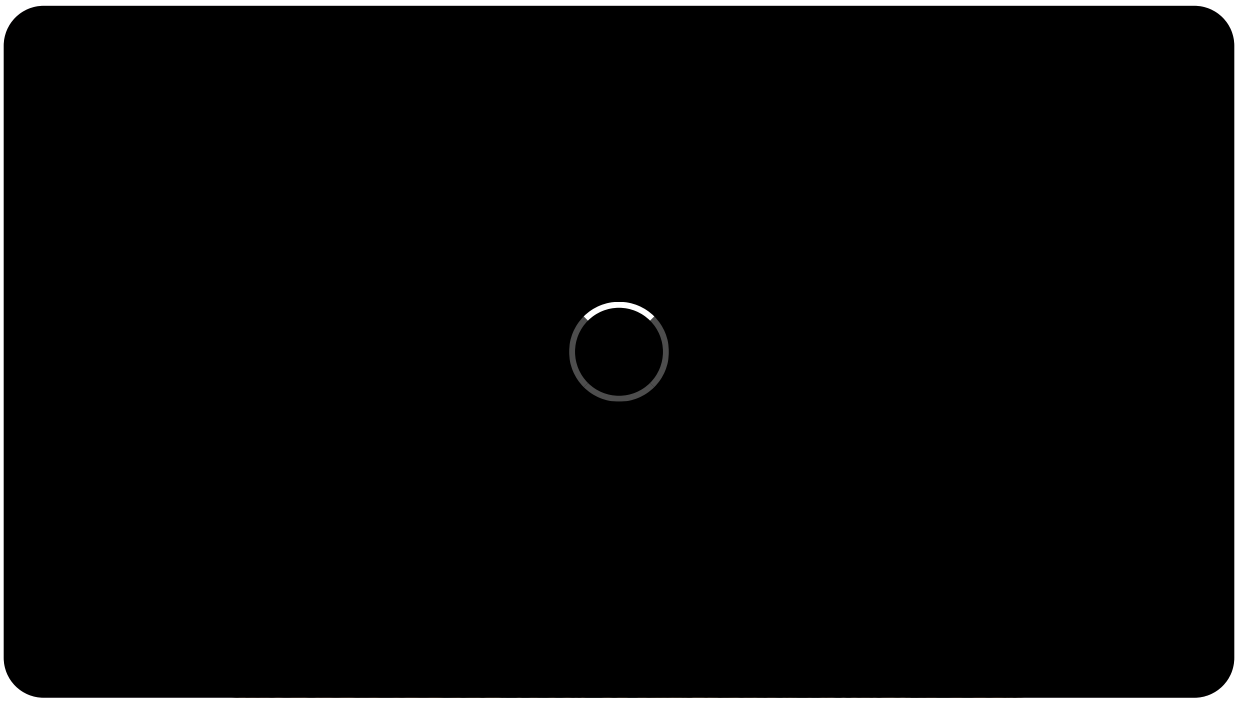
Secretary of Defense nominee Pete Hegseth leaves a meeting with Republican Senators at the Capitol in Washington, DC, on November 21, 2024. (Allison Robbert for The Washington Post via Getty Images)

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Lloyd Austin, the former defense secretary and a four-star general with 40 years of military experience, was nonetheless labeled a DEI hire of the Biden administration. Pete Hegseth, the current secretary of defense, lacks adequate expertise and experience, on top of the fact that he's had allegations of sexual assault and is known as an excessive drinker. A former National Security Council member and a Senate member deemed Hegseth unqualified for the position. However, according to Donald Trump, Hegseth had a tremendous track record that qualified him for the position.

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The MAGA crowd called for Austin to resign because he failed to share that he had an emergency medical procedure, yet they explain away Hegseth's failure to keep the details of a war plan confidential. Clearly, the ability to keep a secret wasn't a qualification for Hegseth to get the job as defense secretary. What Signalgate, the recent scandal involving the Trump administration discussing war plans in a text thread with a journalist mistakenly added to the conversation, made abundantly clear is that the only qualification for Hegseth is that he was what Mishel Williams calls WEI: white, entitled and incompetent.

This scandal is a microcosm of where we stand as a country. Believing that whiteness will save America has put the nation at risk.

The rationale of white people who've accepted privilege in exchange for power in solidarity, what W.E.B. DuBois coined the racial bribe — the deliberate and strategic method of the planter elite class to extend special privileges to poor whites to drive a wedge between them and enslaved African people — is that a Black person in a position of power and authority is unqualified. Specifically, it is the belief that affirmative action and diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives are merely a euphemism, implying that a Black person, or a person of color, was hired for a position or selected to attend a prestigious institution solely to fulfill a quota. Rather than accept that affirmative action and DEI initiatives address the systemic racist practices and policies of the

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past that prevent African Americans and other historically oppressed and underrepresented groups from gaining access to positions they are qualified for, many white individuals believe that only they are capable of holding positions and occupying spaces of power, privilege and authority.

What this scandal shows is that the practice of hiring unqualified and mediocre white people — and calling it making America great — can, and has, compromised national security. And yet, many white people are so convinced that Black people and other people of color are wholly unqualified to lead, specifically those who don't think like or act like them.

Donald Trump has reinforced that belief, proving Lyndon B. Johnson right when Johnson said, "If you can convince the lowest white man he's better than the best colored man, he won't notice you're picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you." I guess you can call Donald Trump the pick-pocketing pied piper… say that three times fast.

The Trump administration's removal of all DEI initiatives through executive orders will undoubtedly keep people uninformed and restrict others from attaining positions and places of power and influence. But it's important to understand that a driving reason for these executive orders is to appease the racism he has fomented among his voter base. The consequence of this is the perpetuation of white mediocrity.

Historically, the cause of racial justice has needed to align with the agenda of white people. Legal scholar Derrick Bell referred to this as interest-convergence. According to Bell, racial progress for marginalized groups only occurs when the aims of racial justice converge with the goals of the dominant oppressor — in this case, white people — or if those aims are beneficial to them. An example is the Brown decision. The doctrine of "separate but equal," established in Plessy, was overturned by the Supreme Court in Brown, in part due to the executive branch's efforts to win the trust and allegiance of Black and brown nations around the world during the Cold War by granting African Americans rights. A more recent example was the Trump administration and the GOP supporting prison reform to reduce federal spending on inmates, aligning with advocates against mass incarceration.

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It's likely that before anything changes for the better in a second Trump administration, white people, particularly the MAGA base, will need to experience some discomfort. With cuts to federal jobs, reductions in funding for federal agencies like the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services, and tampering with Social Security, there's pain to be felt by all… including white people. Perhaps then, things will begin to change. It shouldn't have to come to that, but these individuals are too accustomed to having their pockets picked versus being outright robbed. It's why a convicted felon was elected president and why his incompetent advisors are permitted to stay in their roles.

And as conservatives determine their fate, those on the side of justice can't wait to act. We must continue to highlight injustice and resist it. However, we cannot operate business as usual. The goal shouldn't be a return to what America was before Donald Trump. The goal must be to construct the America our collective humanity deserves. That means finding new leaders to champion the cause of human rights; we can't afford to follow those who are too afraid to fight or those who go on tour, acknowledging our anger only to lead us back to those who are too afraid to fight or the oligarchy being criticized.

This scandal is a microcosm of where we stand as a country. Believing that whiteness will save America has put the nation at risk, and the pain stemming from the mistakes of white mediocrity will be, in the words of el Hajj Malik el Shabazz, the chickens coming home to roost. Expect to see and hear more chickens roosting in the next four years.

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