IF YOU CAN'T STAND THE HYPOTHETICALS, GET OUT OF THE CABINET

Pete "Don't Ask Me Any Hypotheticals" Hegseth, nominee to be Secretary of Defense

First it was Pete Hegseth who said it, followed 24 hours later by Pam Bondi. In the days ahead, I am sure we will hear the same from Tusli Gabbard, Robert Kennedy Jr., Marco Rubio, Kash Patel . . . et cetera, et cetera. et f-ing cetera: "Senator, I am not going to talk about a hypothetical." Implied in the body language and tone of voice is the unstated addition ". . . and how dare you ask me about mythical future possibilities, rather than focus on the here and now." Though to be fair, sometimes, as with Bondi's exchange with Adam Schiff, that "how dare you" is spoken out loud.

But here's the thing: **the job description of every member of the Cabinet, and every senior leader of a federal agency, is centered on hypotheticals.**

The Department of Defense is certainly focused on hypotheticals. The senior leadership – the

Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs, the various regional commanders, and a host of others – spend a huge amount of energy imagining hypothetical situations, and then planning on how to address those situations. "What would we do, if Iran successfully lobs a bomb at Israel?" or "How would we react to China sending a fleet up and down the coast of New Zealand, at the same time that they run 'war games' around Taiwan?" or "How would we respond to a North Korean missile that appears headed to strike Japan?" Senior DOD folks fear one thing above all: something happens that they never even imagined would happen.

The State Department and the Intelligence agencies operate with much the same fear. Every one of them dwells on hypotheticals every day, both reactive ("What do we do if they do X?") and also proactive ("How might we game out a path to Z, knowing how others would react to our actions?") None of these national security leaders want to have to face the question "How could you have missed this?" Lower level staffers put together voluminous briefing books for senior leaders, trying to prepare them for all the hypothetical situations they might encounter on a foreign trip, or when meeting with a foreign counterpart here in the US.

Lawyers – like the Attorney General – play with hypotheticals all the time as they plot out investigative paths, map the steps toward indictments, and game out strategy for trials. "If they say X, how do we respond? . . . If we want a judge to grant us a search warrant, what do we need to show, without fully tipping our hand for all the world to see? . . . If we want the jury to agree with us, how to we move them in that direction?" The legal cliche "Never ask a question you don't know the answer to" is the logical advice that emerges in a profession that thrives on hypotheticals.

If Pete Hegseth and Pam Bondi hate talking about hypotheticals, they are angling for the wrong jobs. The jobs for which they are nominated

require that they embrace hypotheticals, not reject them.

But it's not just these national security positions. Look at a department as benign as the Department of Transportation. How many times has Pete Buttigieg's day been turned upside down by a bridge collapse, a railroad derailment, or a computer glitch that screws up the aviation industry? The Department of Transportation has all kinds of folks who spend their days imagining hypotheticals and preparing for how to react if they come to be, or (even better) how to prevent them from taking place in the first place. If you can't imagine something happening, you can't imagine how to prevent it or react to it.

Or think of the Department of Agriculture. What would the Department do, if a hot dry summer kills off crops across the Great Plains? What if a hard freeze hits the entire southeast, killing off the citrus industry? What would the Department do, if an epidemic of bird flu hits chicken producers and processors, and then appears in the dairy industry?

Oh, wait. That last one isn't a hypothetical.

Then, of course, there are agencies like the CDC, NIH, and FDA. Their whole reason for being, at the top of a public health system that goes down to local health departments, is to get ahead of diseases. Two questions drive every bit of their work: (1) How can we slow and stop a disease from spreading? and (2) How can we prevent an outbreak from starting in the first place? Both of those questions require imagining hypotheticals, so that hypothetical strategies can be developed. When folks in the early 20th century asked "Are there actions that can be taken to reduce the spread of disease?" they realized that things like public sanitation matter. Get clean water into every home. Keep trash from piling up in the streets, and thus keep rats and other disease-spreaders at bay. At the same time, researchers looked at strategies aimed at individuals, like improved nutrition,

vaccines, and therapies of all kinds. Good research scientists ask “what if . . . ” every day of their professional lives, and those who support and guide these scientists do the same.

The more these Trump nominees express their refusal to examine hypotheticals, the more some Senator needs to point out that the jobs they are selling their souls for are filled with these things they hate.