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THE CURIOUS CASE OF SLIFE THE KNIFE: FIRING GENERALS IS NOTHING NEW, BUT CANCELLING THEM IS AN INTERESTING INNOVATION





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The Curious Case of Slife the Knife: Firing Generals Is Nothing New, But Cancelling Them Is An Interesting Innovation

I.

After the election but before inauguration, there was a piece in the New York Post which made waves in military circles but would have been meaninglessly banal to everyone else. It discussed a list of senior officers. A blacklist.



An anti-Leftist opposition group called American Accountability Foundation (AAF) decided, based on evidence not provided and publicly inscrutable, that certain officers had flown too close to wokery. They had to be cancelled. AAF sent Pete Hegseth a letter with the blacklist, urging immolation of these public servants, which would be nothing more than he had promised in prior remarks.

Never mind the AAF or how wrong they are to blacklist military officers without showing and allowing to be challenged the evidence they rely upon. The reason I mention the article is that it's the first moment I knew we were in deep shit.

Not because it was written or published, though both are ridiculous facts. But that's what happened. It's what didn't happen that mortifies me.

Flag officers of the United States Air Force were maligned by a partisan dark



money group in a national media outlet. It was suggested, without foundation, that they had behaved dishonorably. Acted in contravention to the oaths they swore and the values to which they pledged commitment.

And no one in the United States Air Force said a word in protest. Not the Chief of Staff. Not Public Affairs. Not the superiors to which they reported.

Not a dueling partisan dark money group. Not the Avon Lady.

No one defended them. They were permitted to just sit there and burn.

Now let's put aside for a moment the fact that the people who made this disgrace happen spent a decade lecturing us all on how people shouldn't be cancelled over differences of opinion. Sure, they were mainly trying to protect assholes, but the principle was still correct. We should not cancel people over differences of opinion.

Let's also put aside the fact the officers involved, to the extent they had anything to do with military diversity programs, were following orders in the same way the current administration expects them to follow the inverse set of orders it now commands.

Hell, let's even put aside the ambient self-selectiveness of the article, specifically the fact that anyone who would buy into it would need 1/3 more brain to be at 2/3 the capacity of an amoeba with brain worms that had recently been struck by lightning after being kicked by a mule.

Even all that considered, an article attempting to piss on flag officers, generals of America's air service, must not earn tacit acknowledgement via cowardly silence.

They have earned the right to be free of piss. Unless and until there is evidence to the contrary. Not innuendo. Not speculation. Not bald accusation via anonymous shitbags. Evidence.

II.

Generals of the Air Force are there because the Air Force put them there. If they don't belong there, then they fooled the Air Force or the Air Force fooled them. If they don't belong there, the Air Force's processes failed many times over.

If they do belong there, then they are entitled to have their sixes guarded by wingmen.



Such as other generals.

Want to instantly persuade every airman they've committed to a fake value system and wear a uniform not worthy of its own heritage?

Show them generals who won't take risk to protect each other, much less anyone else. Gen. Dave Allvin, whose backbone I've questioned on other grounds, sat this one out. Pathetic, predictable, par for the course.

And totally unacceptable.

And like I said, an early warning that we were headed for a bad place. We're now in that bad place, and along the way, there have been other signs.



Let's talk about one of them.

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Top military officials Lisa Franchetti, James Slife, and CQ Brown dismissed under Donald Trump's administration

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US President [Donald Trump](#)'s administration has undertaken a sweeping overhaul of military leadership, dismissing key senior officials in a move that has sent shockwaves through the Pentagon.

On Friday, US secretary of defence [Pete Hegseth](#) announced the removal of Admiral Lisa Franchetti as Chief of Naval Operations, marking an abrupt



III.

General Jim Slife was fired by Pete Hegseth in February as part of a purge. He was Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force and had previously commanded Air Force Special Operations Command. Across 36 years, Slife recorded a career of exceptional achievement in combat, on staffs, and in senior roles. None of this is disputed.

No reason has been given for his sacking. No reason is required. Officers in 3 and 4 star roles are nominated by and serve at the pleasure of the President.

Not commonly grasped within or beyond military circles is that senior officers are more politician than leader. If they are perceived to be out of alignment with an administration's defense platform, they've traditionally been marginalized and eased into retirement.

Over the past 20 years, firing for political convenience has been normalized. The Trump Administration is simply continuing in an established direction of travel.

The hastening of this tendency has been noticed by the services. Two organizational pathologies have developed as a result.

First, generals who want to survive in shifting political tides have concluded they must be willing to reverse their views, change what they talk about and emphasize, and engage in various shows of force to mollify their civilian masters.

The really smart and pragmatic ones have developed the skill of talking about nothing at all, so they can't be pinned down by either side.

If you want a live example, Google Gen. Dave Allvin, the Air Force Chief of Staff. See if you can find one statement he's ever made in his entire career where he risked official disapproval or future controversy. See if you can locate moments where he's leaned into what he thinks or believes is right. One moment where he took a strident position without a 15-knot political tailwind. Good luck.

We'll come back to "Foxhole Norman" in a bit.

The second pathology is institutional. If a service wants to thrive in budget competition and be robustly represented in combatant commands, the interagency environment, and in senior joint positions, it needs to develop officers who can thrive in a politically charged environment.



Officers who can walk between the raindrops. Officers skilled in perception management, adept at kicking inconvenient issues into the tall weeds, and able to appear serious and credible while deploying politburo-styled tactics to delay and deny government accountability. Military-industrial glad-handers who are right at home in back room environments where un-elected shit merchants trade nest feathers while licking each others coats.

Not leaders.

And if the game is developing politicians, not leaders, then you start testing for political skill early. You elevate those who show the most promise, defined as the most convincing ability to scrub away personal or professional convictions and embrace Washington nihilism while representing themselves to the contrary.

This explains why leadership has been less often glimpsed atop the services in recent times. Few leaders are surviving the flaming hoop jump to make the big time. Indeed, most strong leaders are self-eliminating early, as the stench of politics thickens and they comprehend their predicament.

It's why you've heard me shouting that we need different generals.

Actually it's more like wish casting. Unless Robin Olds is resurrected and appointed Chief of Staff with total reform latitude, we're going to keep screwing our Air Force into the ground.

Which brings us back to Slife.

While no official reason was given, we know why he got canned. He was vocal on the Air Force's diversity initiatives. He proposed that the military was guilty of institutional racism. He reconsidered whether he himself had been inclusive-minded enough. He openly reconsidered his stance on shaving waivers, acknowledging their association with bias settling, particularly upon black men. [AFSOC Unfiltered Ep3](#)

At best this would have made him a fashion mug preening for head pats by clutching ascendant talking points.

What it made him in today's America is something like a woke spokesman in the eyes of many. Or a "wokesman," if you will.



This made his firing about as difficult to predict as Biff picking World Series winners with his sports almanac from the future. Even Slife himself would have found it too predictable to be interesting, his office knick-knacks undoubtedly packed into a collapsible moving box before the Senate recorder's ink dried on Hegseth's 51st eye.

What is interesting is that DEI is what brought Slife down. He's carried a bad reputation for a long time, earning the pejorative "Slife the Knife" from his own tribe in Air Force special ops.

Intransigent, given to bullying and toxicity, a prick with a needlessly prickly demeanor. These are the themes of Jim Slife.

None of which slowed his ascendancy. Until recently, these traits made him officially popular. Exactly what the Air Force was looking for. He was known to be tough. Uncompromising. Most of all, willing to weaponize whatever quasi-philosophical chatter might emerge from the pecking congregation of nabobs in the E-ring and jam it down the throats of airmen while poking their ribs with a bayonet. Fair or unfair, this was Slife's brand. And when you're a 4-star, unfair no longer really exists.

It seems unlikely Slife would deny or forsake being known as a hardcore authoritarian who gets things done. Not a blocker or a decoy, but a ball carrier who can do the hard yards. Albeit leaving a ditch full of corpses behind.

He also has supporters. But they've been conditioned to refrain from saying politically incorrect things, and right now that definition includes any expression of support for Slife, regardless of facts or truths or even the quaint concept of honor.

Which brings us to my main concern. It's not that Slife was fired, or even that he was fired for the sin of publicly disagreeing with his boss before his boss was even his boss. You don't have to be able to read Ulysses to decode all that.

What concerns me is the salting of the Earth he walked upon, what that salting says about the Air Force's institutional health, and what it means for future generals and the airmen they command.

IV. Salting the Earth

There is a normal course of events when a 4-star general retires. A medal is pinned. Thanks are given on behalf of a grateful nation. The family is recognized. The



officer, no matter how unpopular, is appropriately regaled for dedicating their whole adult life to public service. The Chief of Staff says nice things, sometimes in a short article or a press release. The official biography of the retiree becomes part of the service's story, with a retirement date added to signify their passage from the present into the past.

None of this happened in Jim Slife's case.

Hegseth issued a boilerplate firing statement. And that was that.



Someone mentioned a curious fact in an online forum, so I checked for myself.

Sure enough, Gen. Slife's biography is no longer available on the Air Force's official website. You can find it on Wikipedia, with a footnote to the source material still listed as a vestigial dead link.

5. ^ "JAMES C. "JIM" SLIFE" [↗](#). *Air Force*. Retrieved 8 January 2024. ^{[[dead link](#)]}

I sent the bio folk an email, which they promptly recovered from their spam filter and electronically round-filed before immolating the server, melting the ashes in an acid bath, and pouring the resulting slurry into an urban storm drain. This is how my emails are generally handled.

All I can say, echoing the immortal words of the anonymous police sergeant from *Christmas Vacation*, is "that's pretty low."





I was able to confirm only one other retired general's bio being omitted. Art Lichte retired as a 4-star in 2010, but was subsequently demoted to 2-star in retirement after a complaint of sexual misconduct was substantiated.

Now if you ask me, which no one has or will, the Air Force should have had the stones to recall Lichte to active duty and court-martial him if his conduct was serious enough for retroactive demotion.

But given the decision to demote Lichte to 2-star, the service is stipulating he served honorably for more than 30 years and retired honorably in a senior grade. His bio should public as part of the service's story.

You might disagree, which would be reasonable. In that case, here are some other officers whose bios are publicly available, but which perhaps ought not be given their misconduct and the disrepute they've brought upon the Air Force.

Maj. Gen. Mike Keltz, who remarked during a disciplinary hearing that an officer looked "drunker than 10,000 Indians" in a photo.

Maj. Gen. Phil Stewart, who was court-martialed for various shenanigans and has two federal convictions on his record. He's asked President Trump for a pardon, blaming his fate on a vast woke conspiracy.

Stewart shares a special podium with William Cooley, the only other Air Force general court-martialed. Cooley was busted to O-6 after his convictions. If you ask me, which no one has or will, both of these schlubs should be setting pins in a bowling alley and never again commanding anyone to do anything. I wouldn't buy an apple from either one of them.

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Brig. Gen. Christopher Finnerty, who lost a star but still retired honorably after an IG investigation substantiated several inappropriate and adulterous sexual relationships, including one with an enlisted airman, one with the wife of a junior officer, and three with women who worked on Capitol Hill while he was serving as the service's legislative liaison. It's not clear how Finnerty had time or energy to actually do his job, but he retains his laurels in the service's official story.

Maj. Gen. Mike Carey, who was reprimanded after a bout of drunken revelry during a nuclear inspection visit to Russia riled his hosts and created a diplomatic crisis.

Maj. Gen. John Dallager, who lost a star after the Air Force determined he had fallen short of his duty as Superintendent of the Academy during a scandal arising from cases of sexual assault in which the victims were punished while the perpetrators walked away unscathed.

Brig. Gen. Taco Gilbert, who was Commandant of the Academy during that same scandal and removed from his position, yet continued his career unscathed.



Maj. Gen. Craig Franklin, who lost a star after overturning a sexual assault conviction in a case he reviewed. This is widely regarded as the first huge stumble in the Air Force chain of command losing the authority to prosecute such cases.

Now, to be clear, I'm not asserting any of these bios should be removed. The story is the story. Each of these men played a role. They served. They made mistakes. Some failed to uphold standards. Some committed crimes. Some were just dicks.

But they retired honorably with stars on their shoulder. By this standard, they should be included in the service's public-facing story, as should Arthur Lichte, warts and all.

As should Jim Slife, who fell afoul of no standard, committed no crime, engaged in no misconduct, and lost no stars, yet is getting buried deeper than any of the assholes listed above.

Inconsistency is a master caution of unprincipled behavior. The Air Force has an integrity problem on many levels. Not least its transparent and pathetic attempts to manicure a narrative.

Less than 18 months before Slife's sacking, Gen. Allvin presided over his ascension, approving or at least refraining from objection as Slife was made deputy of the whole Air Force. His silence while that deputy was dragged into a fresh green pasture and put down like livestock is deafening.

He was lying then or he's lying now. Meanwhile, he allows the Earth where his deputy roamed to be tilled, burned, and salted, seemingly oblivious that dignity denied one of us is denied us all.

V. What This Says About the Air Force

It says we've finally passed abeam the line separating "almost screwed" from "moral oblivion" and we're picking up speed.

It says Ron Fogleman's commitment to integrity, his modeling of integrity, and his demand that honesty be a requirement for leadership in a blue uniform is dead. Not



one general or senior executive service member said anything nice about Jim Slife or his family. Not one who had misgivings about his removal had the balls to say so out loud, finding their own skin too precious.

There is no greater principle in the Air Force than backing your wingman. If you won't guard the six of the person who fights with and for you then you are truly nothing.

For Gen. David "Foxhole Norman" Allvin to be silent as his deputy was shit-canned is not acceptable. For him to preside over the omission of Slife's story from the service's official online archive makes him complicit in a dishonor. Unless he didn't know about it, which would constitute felonious ineptitude.

I know Allvin will be rationalizing to himself that he needs to keep his job so he can shepherd the service's budget into fruition. So he can deliver the modernization he believes and perhaps even thinks is necessary.

But people with principles don't need to rationalize. They hold to principle even when it's inconvenient. They don't make decisions about engaging their teams based on what's politically faddish. Allvin has appeared in a video talking to airmen about dress and appearance. He's joined the collective, fraudulent bleat about physical fitness in response to the Hegseth dog whistle. He's sent people out to the field to make sure DEI is properly cancelled, and showered troops with memos about beards and nail polish. And of course, he's talked about the budget, which is his main concern as a jumped up finance officer garbed in leader camouflage.

These are all undercurrents in the political flow. They don't inspire. They don't recognize or motivate. They don't dignify or affirm. They're just a continuation of corporate PR. Tasteless word salads served extra oily, extra bland, with not even a granule of pepper.

VI. What This Means for Future Generals

It means they'll be poor.

Because no one signs up for a job where you can't be honest. Where you'll be cancelled for disagreement. Where decades of public service will be instantly meaningless if you offend Caesar. Or have offended Caesar before he became Caesar.



Where a junior-brained ingenue with low experience and less humility can become your boss, calmly apply his clown makeup, and then end you without being questioned, much less challenged.

A job where your family's sacrifices are cheapened and silently mocked. Where you don't even get to rest on a warm piece of the sidewalk before going to Dog Heaven. Where you can build an Everest-sized mountain of goodness one rock at a time only to have the whole world pretend it's a few measly pebbles of imperfection that matter.

A world where your swan song is a perp-walk despite committing no crime.

The Air Force will get the generals it deserves. Picking from a bushel basket of reject, worm-infested, grubby apples means a rotten bunch of leaders is the best you're going to do. That's the future to which these chuckleheads are consigning our air service. Being king of clowns means you're still a clown, and anyone with a brain knows that.

VII.

The evidence doesn't say Jim Slife was below par. It says he was out of alignment with politics before they became the politics. If he had continued to espouse old views under new politics, he could have been fired for disagreement. As it stands, he's been fired for saying words the new regime didn't like before they were in charge.

There's no evidence he positively discriminated or took any actions on the basis of hollow philosophies in which he likely wasn't invested. While I personally believe Slife and others were way too far out over their skis on DEI, I wouldn't want them cancelled for disagreement any more than I'd expect to be cancelled for saying what I just said.

Slife wasn't bucking for sainthood. I do find that the emphasis on DEI strayed into looney tunes territory. But if you believe, as I do, that officers like Matt Lohmeier should not have been fired for exercising his right to free expression, then you shouldn't be pissing on Slife's grave. At least not for this reason.

Remember, this is all happening in an infinite game. When government policies or actions prevent free expression before it can even happen, we're in prior restraint territory. We're off the free speech paved surface.



Those watching Slife get walked off the plank will be less likely to communicate openly in the future. Instead of us knowing who they are and what they're about, we'll have ambiguity. Instead of a hearty debate on the merits of dueling ideas, we'll have legions of Foxhole Normans keeping their heads down until they know politics is on their side.

Take a look around and tell me we're not there already.

VIII.

We should be firing people for being too willing to change their stripes, or for painting over their stripes altogether. Not for having the guts to be themselves.

Real leaders are capable of disagreeing with the entrenched philosophy while committing to the law and enforcing the rules.

We have to be mature enough to tolerate disagreement. Not only because the best operations we've ever fought have arisen from deep disagreements over how to solve a combat problem, but because there is nothing more American than working in unison with someone you don't like. One might say the whole fucking point of military service, culturally speaking, is that we find unison in a higher purpose, and everything else melts away.

We laugh about our differences. We make nicknames out of them. None of that works when partisan muck-raking infects military life in a vain and dumbass attempt to cultivate a brainless, gutless borg. Assimilation has its narrow place in boot camp. Out in the fleet, we argue. If we're too thin-skinned and pussified to argue about social issues without dissembling, how in the world are we going to stand up to a real enemy?

There are probably good reasons why Jim Slife could have been fired. Someone on social media said "a kill is a kill," rationalizing that he's so bad it's a victory to see him off no matter why.

That's fun, perhaps. But it ignores the serious knock-on effects. Today a guy you don't like is in the frag pattern. Tomorrow it's a different guy. Then everyone becomes even more tame and cowardly to avoid frag patterns. Those who won't tame themselves bail. Leaders go from rare to extinct.

And that's when we get sucker punched.



The dictates of responsibility don't allow us to allow this. Something foreseeable must be acted upon. We have a duty to get unstuck from stupid.

That duty starts at the top.

I reckon the top of this shitpile is Dave Allvin's throne. If the role of Chief of Staff doesn't include explaining why 4-star officers are fired, dignifying their service, and recognizing their families after decades of honorable service and risk in the nation's defense, then the role doesn't meaningfully exist.

Which means the wrong individual is in the role. If he were to resign and explain he's doing so out of principle, it would be a hell of a lot more constructive than modeling how to dance in clown shoes for the Gods of military-industrial wallet-sniffing.

IX.

The best argument for why Presidents and their minions should be permitted to fire for political convenience is that they deserve the best military advice from people they can work with effectively.

That argument gets undermined when someone is fired but not back-filled. Slife's seat remains empty. Are we really better off with no Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force than a guy with the "wrong views" on one subject?

That argument also gets undermined when someone doesn't give military advice. By imitating a houseplant in public, Gen. Allvin makes it fair to question whether he's exercising any real influence behind the scenes.

If not, he has the "wrong views" on leading in a blue uniform.

And if we're looking for a decent reason to jettison a senior officer, being feckless enough to watch your wingman bleed out seems a good place to start.

There's always a point in any great mob saga where the gangsters start killing off their own lawyers, usually because they know too much but sometimes just for sport.

As an audience, we don't give it much thought. After all, they're lawyers. Certainly they deserve it for any number of reasons.



What we don't think about is that in that same world, the next generation of gangsters ends up with shitty lawyers. Because no one wants to get killed for simply doing your job.

I don't have the answers. But I think we need to ask more questions.



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