

(6) New Navy Secretary, Hung Cao, 'Grabbed on to the American Dream'

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Hung Cao (Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images)

When Hung Cao was 4 years old, the U.S. military rescued him to freedom, evacuating him and his immediate family—seven people, two suitcases—from Saigon just hours before the capital of South Vietnam fell to the communists.

What was a stroke of good fortune for Cao has worked out pretty well so far for America, too. Cao has spent a lifetime since then repaying the U.S. He graduated from the Naval Academy at Annapolis and served as a Navy diver and explosive ordnance disposal officer with deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia, retiring from active duty in 2021 as a captain. In 2024, as a candidate for U.S. Senate from Virginia, he spoke at the Republican National Convention: "My name's Hung Cao, and America saved my life. I grabbed on to the American dream ... I love this country so much."

Now, as acting secretary of the Navy, 51 years after leaving Vietnam, Cao is stepping into his highest profile role yet. His promotion may help shape a winning outcome for America in the clash with Iran, and strengthen the U.S. in future conflicts. It also adds him to a cohort of patriotic immigrants who have served in the Trump administration—including Melania Trump,

Sebastian Gorka, Elon Musk—that serve as a marked contrast to far-left foreign born Democrats such as New York mayor Zohran Mamdani, Rep. Ilhan Omar, and Rep. Pramila Jayapal.

The modern Navy secretary is more a policy and acquisition role than one with granular realtime control of ongoing military operations. Yet naval assets, including aircraft carriers, destroyers, and naval aviators, have played a large role in the U.S.-Iran conflict that itself is now largely a naval engagement. Brad Cooper, the commander of Central Command, the geographic command that includes the Middle East, is an admiral, and he has been a high-profile spokesman throughout the war.

Hours after Trump and his secretary of war, Pete Hegseth, fired the incumbent Navy secretary, John Phelan, and replaced him with Cao, Trump issued a pair of social media posts stressing seagoing U.S. military action.

“I have ordered the United States Navy to shoot and kill any boat, small boats though they may be (Their naval ships are ALL, 159 of them, at the bottom of the sea!), that is putting mines in the waters of the Strait of Hormuz. There is to be no hesitation. Additionally, our mine ‘sweepers’ are clearing the Strait right now. I am hereby ordering that activity to continue, but at a tripled up level! Thank you for your attention to this matter,” one said.

“We have total control over the Strait of Hormuz. No ship can enter or leave without the approval of the United States Navy. It is ‘Sealed up Tight,’ until such time as Iran is able to make a DEAL!!!,” another one said.

Cao’s public statements align closely with the tone and policy of [Hegseth](#). Like Hegseth, he speaks about his Christian faith. A Florida local television [feature](#) about Cao’s service in Panama City, Florida, as the commander of the Naval Diving and Salvage Training Center from 2013 to 2016 showed him talking about servant leadership in the military context. “Just like how Jesus came here to serve us, I came here to serve them. My job as a commanding officer is to serve them, to take care of their needs and to make sure they have everything they need in order to carry out the mission,” he said at the time. At his June 26, 2025, [confirmation hearing](#) to be undersecretary of the Navy, Cao said, “I would like to give praise and glory to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, without whom I would not be here today.”

Cao also stresses a military that emphasizes lethality rather than political correctness. “When you are using a drag queen to recruit for the Navy, that’s not the people we want. What we need is alpha males and alpha females who are going to rip out their own guts, eat ‘em, and ask for seconds, those are young men and women that are going to win wars,” Cao said in his 2024 U.S. Senate [debate](#) against Democrat Tim Kaine. In his confirmation hearing, he promised, “I will deliver to the combat commander the most lethal Navy and Marine Corps the world has ever seen.”

Like Hegseth, who has a master's degree from the Harvard Kennedy School but cut some War Department ties to Harvard, Cao has a Harvard Kennedy School connection. Harvard told the *Washington Free Beacon* that its records indicate Cao completed the Kennedy School’s [Senior Executive Fellows](#) program in 2021.

The endgame of the Iran conflict will be up to the Iranian people, President Trump, and Prime Minister Netanyahu, not the U.S. Navy Secretary. But if Cao has a chance to weigh in, it's likely to be in favor of a decisive victory rather than an outcome that would consign Iran, like Vietnam, to more decades of brutal dictatorship in China's orbit.

Cao's job in Iraq involved dissecting improvised explosive devices to determine where they came from; President Trump has said they were from Iran. As a congressional candidate in Virginia in 2022, Cao answered questions from an advocacy group about dealing with Iran. The advocacy group's [report](#) of the meeting says, "Mr. Cao maintains that for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, obtaining nuclear weapons is the main goal. ... Ultimately, the mullahs believe a nuclear weapon will both insulate them from attack and give them a seat at the international table at the same time." At that time, asked how to respond to the people of Iran, Cao observed, "There are two ways to take down a building. One is to bulldoze it; another is to release termites to undermine it from within ... sometimes small things can grow into big movements."

At his confirmation hearing, Cao said, "Take it from this warrior. War must be the last resort, but if war comes, let it be swift and decisive. ... To our enemies and those who mean to do us harm, you can run but you'll only die tired."

Perhaps ironically, Cao was rescued in part because of the "birthright citizenship" that some Republicans now want to roll back. His father won a Rockefeller scholarship for graduate work at Cornell University; Cao's older sister was born in the U.S. while his parents were at Cornell. As a result, the family qualified for evacuation from Saigon. As Cao put it in a 2024 book, "her American citizenship not only saved our family, but it paved the way for each of us to live our own American dream."

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