

# The Cosplay Cabinet

The president's appointees often appear to be acting out a made-for-television version of their jobs rather than actually doing them.

By [Ashley Parker](#)

In Donald Trump's administration, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem rotates through various costumes—firefighting gear for drills with the United States Coast Guard, a cowboy hat and horse for a jaunt with Border Patrol agents in Texas, a bulletproof ICE vest for a dawn raid in New York City. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth posts photos of himself doing snowy push-ups with U.S. troops in Poland and deadlifting with them in predawn Germany. And FBI Deputy Director Dan Bongino spars with agents on the wrestling mats of Quantico.

In Bongino's case, his run-in with a skilled jiu-jitsu instructor left him with [a swollen right elbow](#). But such are the risks of Trump's Cosplay Cabinet, in which his underlings perform near-daily tone poems to a certain type of MAGA masculinity, publicly pantomiming their professional responsibilities.

[Jonathan Chait: What does Dan Bongino believe?](#)

Noem, who has earned herself several dismissive, Mattel-inspired nicknames—"Border Control Barbie," "ICE Barbie"—is perhaps the most conspicuous offender. She has been photographed behind the controls of both a Coast Guard boat and a Coast Guard plane, donned a helmet and Border Patrol fatigues for an ATV tour along the southern border, and posed in cargo pants and an ICE vest. In a social-media video, she wielded [a tricked-out automatic rifle](#), the M4 muzzle disconcertingly pointed at the head of the agent directly to her left.

"I'm old school, but I don't think our Cabinet Secretaries should cosplay as armed agents," the conservative radio host Erick Erickson wrote on X above Noem's video of herself with the poorly placed gun. "You're a politician, not one of our heroes."

When I called Erickson this week, he told me Trump's subordinates understand that the president is "an image guy" who looks to surround himself with people who appear to be out of "central casting." But, he said, looking the part on TV also serves a useful purpose for Trump—it "distracts the voters from: *Is stuff actually going well behind the scenes?*"

"It's like hiring the guy who plays a doctor on *Grey's Anatomy*," Erickson told me. "You don't actually want that guy to do your heart surgery. He's an actor. You hire the people who sound competent because they use the polysyllabic words. But can they actually do the job?"

Trump, of course, may be the ultimate cosplayer. His quixotic political rise was fueled, in part, by Americans who knew him as a successful businessman, not through any of his actual business exploits (or bankruptcies), but through the high-flying mogul he played in their living room every Thursday night on *The Apprentice*.

During his most recent campaign, he sported various working-class costumes to troll his political rivals. In October, mocking then-Vice President Kamala Harris's claim that, as a college student, she had

spent a summer working at a McDonald's, Trump tied on a navy-and-gold apron and served fries through a Philadelphia-area McDonald's drive-through window. Later that month, in response to mumbled comments then-President Joe Biden made seeming to liken Trump supporters to "garbage," Trump wore a neon-orange reflective vest and hopped into a white trump-branded trash hauler in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

"How do you like my garbage truck?" Trump crowed, as reporters looked on.

The ethos seems to have trickled down to his Cabinet secretaries and other top officials, whose public pronouncements and social-media posts sometimes give the impression that they view government work more as a game than as true public service. In 2022, Kash Patel, now the FBI director, shared a post featuring himself—chain saw in hand and "Bad to the Bone" thrumming in the background—lopping off chunks of a log emblazoned with images of alleged enemies, a group that included Biden, CNN, "Fake News," and Representative Nancy Pelosi. Patel can often appear as interested in the public perks of his job as in the actual job itself. This month, he flew with Trump on Air Force One to Miami to attend a Saturday-night Ultimate Fighting Championship event, and he has also appeared in the owner's suite at Capitals games, photographed alongside Hockey Hall of Famer Wayne Gretzky.

#### [From the October 2024 Issue: The man who will do anything for Trump](#)

Elon Musk, the world's wealthiest man, is the administration's designated disassembler of the federal bureaucracy. For the assignment, Musk has consciously cast himself into the role of a plucky IT guy, regularly wearing a tech support T-shirt under his blazer. No matter that his self-styled "tech support" has failed to deliver on the \$1 trillion in government-spending cuts that he and his DOGE bros overpromised. He was still able to boast on X that he had spent an early-February weekend feeding USAID "into the wood chipper."

"It looks like a lot of them are sort of showing up at a government costume party in which they get to wear the costume of being the secretary of defense or the costume of being the director of national intelligence, but they don't have the qualification for those roles," Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island, a Democrat, told me. "Part of it is they know the point of entry to the costume party is you have to suck up ferociously to Trump every minute, and to get on his radar, images help. He likes the fake macho imagery, and so that's just part of the deal."

Hegseth, who served as a U.S. Army National Guard infantry officer, has posted more than a dozen photos and videos in the past month alone of him working out with troops. "It's not that long ago that I was right there with them," Hegseth explained when asked in Germany about his early-morning workout. "I'll probably connect more with those guys than I do with four-star generals." Hegseth seems to naturally intuit that the rank-and-file troops generally respect a Pentagon chief willing—and able—to train with them.

But Hegseth's constant posting of his athletic feats has given them an overly eager, thirsty quality. In some ways, he reminds me of my spy-obsessed 6-year-old, who, desperate to be a covert operative, is constantly whispering into her oversize spy-gadget watch and shouting staticky instructions into her walkie-talkies. But unlike my daughter, who is in kindergarten and is decidedly not a real-life spy, Hegseth is *actually* the defense secretary, making his constant performance of the role feel gratuitous.

“Every rep, every drop of sweat, reminds us of the toughness and tenacity that defend our nation,” he wrote last week, above photos and video of him and Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard working out with troops at a Virginia military installation. (Not to be outdone, Gabbard, a former lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army Reserve, found time to fit in a Muay Thai training session during a recent stop in Bangkok.)

### Elaine Godfrey: What everyone gets wrong about Tulsi Gabbard

In an attack-planning Signal group chat, to which Jeffrey Goldberg, the editor in chief of *The Atlantic*, was accidentally added, Hegseth again appeared like an excited boy—eager to show off his cool new tools of war to his important friends—as he prepared for an imminent military operation against the Houthis in Yemen. He wrote, “TIME NOW (1144et): Weather is FAVORABLE. Just CONFIRMED w/CENTCOM we are a GO for mission launch,” before continuing with a series of jargony specifics:

- “1215et: F-18s LAUNCH (1st strike package)”
- “1345: ‘Trigger Based’ F-18 1st Strike Window Starts (Target Terrorist is @ his Known Location so SHOULD BE ON TIME—also, Strike Drones Launch (MQ-9s)”
- “1410: More F-18s LAUNCH (2nd strike package)”
- “1415: Strike Drones on Target (THIS IS WHEN THE FIRST BOMBS WILL DEFINITELY DROP, pending earlier ‘Trigger Based’ targets)”
- “1536 F-18 2nd Strike Starts—also, first sea-based Tomahawks launched.”

“We are currently clean on OPSEC,” Hegseth boasted—incorrectly, it turned out—in reference to operational security, before concluding: “Godspeed to our Warriors.”

This week, *The New York Times* reported that, in addition to last month’s Signalgate, Hegseth had also shared detailed attack plans on a second Signal group chat that included his wife, his brother, and his personal lawyer—again giving the impression of someone eager to brag about his important new job.

Here, Whitehouse warned, is where the real risk comes in. “If you’re not a serious person, and you’re in a serious job, there’s this enormous gap of competence through which terrible things can happen,” he told me.

Other cosplaying occurs on a lesser scale. In the first Trump term, the Santa Monica–raised, Duke-educated Stephen Miller—Trump’s point person on immigration—was photographed in aviator Ray-Bans and an Army-green U.S. Border Patrol hat during a visit to the border wall in Texas. More recently, early last month, Attorney General Pam Bondi sported an FBI jacket and a green camouflage cap when traveling with other senior officials to spotlight the arrest of the terrorist charged with planning the deadly suicide attack at the Kabul airport during the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. And Education Secretary Linda McMahon, who’d trained to be a teacher but never became one, emerged instead from the ultimate cosplaying world of World Wrestling Entertainment.

Even the more serious Cabinet secretaries sometimes appear to be playacting, if not cosplaying—all scrambling to embody whatever it is they think Trump wants them to be. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, for instance, seems to be masquerading as an isolationist, at least compared with foreign-policy

positions he previously held as a senator. And Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, a former hedge-fund manager, is now playing the role of a tariff hard-liner who actually believes that Trump's recent tanking of the stock market was all part of the art of the ultimate deal.

Hegseth's wife, meanwhile, has prompted concerns and criticism by accompanying her husband to at least two meetings with foreign-military counterparts where sensitive information was discussed, The Wall Street Journal reported last month.

But it's clear that Jennifer Hegseth, a former Fox News producer, is not actually a Defense Department official; if she were, she likely would have advised her husband that perhaps he should spend less time publicly bench-pressing, and more time getting his fast-fraying department under control.