

The Pentagon Lost Its War Against Flu Shots in Less than Two Months

The flu managed to outlast the Department of Defense even quicker than Iran did.

By [Jim Vorel](#) | June 25, 2026 | 11:50am
Photo via Unsplash, Ed Us [Splinter vaccines](#)



It would seem that the noble experiment of telling fresh-faced Army and Air Force recruits that they could simply not bother protecting themselves and each other from communicable disease has come to an end, derailed by—get this—communicable disease. Less than two months after Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth sounded a resounding blast on the horn of liberty—which he [referred to at the time](#) as “medical autonomy”—declaring that flu shots would be optional for all incoming military personnel, the Pentagon is pulling an about face and [making the shots mandatory once again](#) for all new recruits headed to boot camp, following a major (and entirely preventable) flu outbreak at an Air Force base in Texas.

I must say, it’s impressive to see the Department of Defense fold quite so quickly on this one, given that, for one, *it’s not even flu season*, and the virus is typically circulating in warmer months at its lowest levels. Gather enough 18-year-old impressionable youths in a boot camp, however and stick them in giant bunks to marinate, shower and train together on low levels of sleep for weeks, and watch as the entire area becomes a petri dish for whatever pathogens they might encounter. It’s almost as if there’s a reason we until recently required vaccinations against easily spread pathogens like the flu? Regardless, “pestilence” is apparently the vibe these days at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, where influenza has been ripping through every unprotected human host it can find, sickening nearly 300 people already. The infections were confirmed online by U.S. House Rep. Joaquin Castro, whose district includes the air force base.

Mandatory vaccination programs within the U.S. armed forces literally stretch all the way back to the Revolutionary War era and George Washington [requiring inoculations against smallpox](#) among his soldiers. Despite the approval of our founding fathers, however, Hegseth decided to take a different tack when it came to the flu shot, despite this having just been an unusually severe flu season. As he declared that the flu vaccine was now entirely optional, Hegseth [made the following proclamation](#): “The notion that a flu vaccine must be mandatory for every service member, everywhere, in every circumstance at all times is just overly broad and not rational. Your body, your faith and your convictions are not negotiable.”

Except two months later ... it suddenly turns out that Hegseth now believes a new recruit’s body, faith and convictions are in fact *very negotiable*, and downright malleable. The recruits will surely be happy to hear this, given that apparently only 40% of the new trainees moving through the boot camp at Lackland Air Force Base elected to receive the optional flu shot. Turns out, when you give a bunch of dumb, young kids autonomy over whether they should mildly inconvenience themselves or not by getting a flu shot, a whole hell of a lot of them decide that they’re invincible and have no need to protect themselves. Teenagers being overconfident about their durability? Who could possibly have predicted that?

This is, suffice to say, a particularly piquant instance of the Trump administration fucking around, finding out and then quietly reversing direction with its tail planted firmly between its legs. Expect to see absolutely no coverage of the move in MAGA-friendly circles, given the embarrassment it clearly represents. Vaccination advocacy organizations such as Families Fighting Flu naturally took a victory lap on the news. As [the organization’s statement put it](#): “For decades, the military prioritized the health and safety of troops and the public by requiring flu vaccine for recruits. It’s unfortunate that more than 200 individuals at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas became ill when that requirement was rescinded. This updated guidance from the military will save lives.” In the wider Trump administration, meanwhile, the broader war against attempting to convince Americans to protect themselves and protect others from communicable disease continues to drag on. The intended general of *that* war, Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., also known as [the single saddest man within the Trump administration](#), has watched his early [successes on behalf of diseases such as measles](#) turn increasingly into failure. When entering the office, he fired the entire 17-member Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices and installed his own group of yes men with no relevant vaccine experience, only to see that entire plan undone by a federal judge [who ruled that the committee’s findings](#) were “arbitrary and capricious,” effectively nullifying everything RFK Jr. attempted to achieve for more than a year. The White House has subsequently chilled on RFK Jr.’s entire anti-vaccine platform, finding it to be broadly unpopular, leaving Kennedy without much of anything to do, besides posing for the occasional shirtless picture with Kid Rock.

Perhaps RFK Jr. can start touring Army and Air Force boot camps, to personally dispense the now mandatory flu shot and convince recruits of the effectiveness of a vaccine that has now been used for roughly 80 years? It is, after all, his job. Seems like the least he could be doing for our brave servicemen.