
CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

Meritocracy in the Military Services: Accession, Promotion, and Command Selection

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My name is Robert Greenway. I am the Director of the Center for National Defense at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation, the Department of Defense, the United States Army, or any other organization.

Woke ideologies and the politicians who promote them are eroding the effectiveness of our military by discarding the meritocracy which ensures it is led by the most qualified and replacing it with policies that seek to promote based on criteria other than performance and potential. These policies have undermined the trust and confidence between leaders and those they are responsible for and produced the lowest trust the American people have held in our U.S. military since 1988.¹ This reduces readiness and degrades effectiveness and has resulted in recruiting and retention challenges at a time of persistently high suicide rates within our military and among our veterans. We depend on our armed forces to protect and defend our nation against a growing number of global threats. We must fulfill our Constitutional obligation to ensure a strong national defense and preserve the trust and confidence the all-volunteer force requires within its ranks and among its fellow citizens from whom it draws its members.

The U.S. military has faced periods of personnel turbulence and crisis before. Since the adoption of the all-volunteer forces in 1973 our military has faced three crises in morale and personnel management. In 1978-9, following the withdrawal from Vietnam, corporate policies corrupted military ethics, recruitment and retention rates rapidly declined, and the force was in danger of losing

¹ Muhamed Younis, "Confidence in U.S. Military Lowest in Over Two Decades," Gallup, July 21, 2023, [Confidence in U.S. Military Lowest in Over Two Decades \(gallup.com\)](https://www.gallup.com) (accessed September 2023).

its competitive edge to the Soviet Union². A similar crisis occurred in 1994-5 following the withdrawal from Somalia, the introduction of controversial policies like social engineering, efforts to increase diversity, and the largest defense budget cuts since the end of the Second World War resulting in rapid decline in retention and recruiting. From 1992 to 2001, the quality of recruits went down from 74% "high quality" to 61%.³ The current crisis bears the hallmarks of those which precede it and are striking in similarity.

War is an unforgiving enterprise. Competence alone can ensure success. Without a doubt, the best policy for promotions and personnel management in the military is to use the quality of the candidate's skills, experience, and character, and how those factors correspond to the demands of the job as the only criteria for advancement. This approach ensures the highest quality personnel enter and progress to positions of greater responsibility, enhancing the overall quality of the force. This commonsense approach is reflected in DoD policy. DoD's official promotion criteria and process (DoD Directive 1320.14) was implemented on December 16th, 2020. DoD promotion criteria requires that candidates be the "best qualified" and "fully qualified" to receive promotions. Specific documents are allowed to be considered by promotion review boards, and specific criteria are used to judge candidates. Criteria include both performance and character considerations such as professionalism, integrity, and ability to treat others fairly.⁴ However, the statements and actions of President Biden and senior military leaders contradict the focus on performance, in favor of identity politics.

Rather than emphasizing merit and performance, President Biden and the senior leaders he has appointed choose to focus on the race and gender of candidates, attempting to use the military to promote their ideology. President Biden's Executive Order on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce requires Federal departments and agencies to adopt DEI plans. It forces agencies to "strongly consider for employment, to the extent permitted by applicable law, qualified applicants of any background who have advanced diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in the workplace", thereby making it a factor in employment. The Executive Order implies that this is applicable to promotions as well.⁵ This basically amounts to a demand to sign a political loyalty oath not just to one party, but to the extreme left wing of one party as a condition of employment and promotion. Using and promoting such criteria directly undermines the principle of merit as the best criteria for promotions and selecting the best candidate for the job based on performance.

This thinking is not only held by the president but has also been espoused by his senior defense leaders. Air Force Chief of Staff and current CJCS nominee General CQ Brown, along with Undersecretary of the Air Force Gina Ortiz Jones, Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall, and Chief of Space Operations John Raymond all signed a memorandum detailing new diversity and inclusion goals for

² Richard Gabriel and Paul Savage, *Crisis in Command: Mismanagement in the Army* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1979), (accessed September 2023).

³ Congressional Research Service, "Recruiting and Retention in the Active Component Military: Are There Problems?," Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, February 25, 2002, [Recruiting and Retention in the Active Component Military: Are There Problems? \(congress.gov\)](#) (accessed September 2023).

⁴ Department of Defense, "DoD Commissioned Officer Promotion Program Procedures," DoDI 1320.14, December 16, 2020, [DoDI 1320.14, "DoD Commissioned Officer Promotion Program Procedures," December 16, 2020 \(whs.mil\)](#) (Accessed September 2023).

⁵ President Joseph Biden, "Executive Order on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce," Executive Order 14035, June 25, 2021, [Federal Register :: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce](#) (Accessed September 2023).

Air Force officers. These new goals would reduce the quota of white officers from 80% (as dictated in 2014) to 67%. More specifically, white men would be capped at 43%. White officers in the Air Force are currently around 77%, and 86% of pilots are white men.⁶ In 2021, the Acting Secretary of the Navy, Thomas Walker, released a memorandum calling for the Navy to “continue making transformative and meaningful steps that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in our policies, programs, and operations across the enterprise.”⁷ This indicates a clear preference for using DoD policy to reshape the DoD to a more diverse and inclusive organization, as opposed to the most effective and capable organization. It does not require a stretch of the imagination to believe that diversity considerations are an increasingly strong criteria for advancement in a military run by these leaders.

This approach of prioritizing candidates based on diversity rather than merit can be seen in the President’s choices for leadership positions. President Biden recently decided to nominate Admiral Lisa Franchetti for the position of Chief of Naval Operations, against the advice of Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin. Secretary Austin recommended Admiral Samuel Paparo, the Commander of the Pacific Fleet,⁸ whose appointment would have sent a strong message to China that America is serious about confronting its challenges at sea in the Indo-Pacific. However, the president chose Admiral Franchetti instead. An Administration official said, “Biden understands the historical nature of the nomination and believes that Franchetti will be an inspiration to sailors, both men and women.”⁹

The issue is that senior leaders are confusing true performance and merit for the perceived benefits of a diverse society. Assistant Secretary of the Air Force Alex Wagner implies that DEI efforts are needed to compete with China, rather than more emphasis on training and/or technology. “As the People’s Republic of China seeks to increasingly compete with us technologically in the air and space domains, I believe that the diversity of the United States—including racial and gender, but also regional, cultural, socioeconomic, and intellectual diversity—is what distinguishes our force and provides us unique advantages on today’s battlefield as well as the battlefield of the future.”¹⁰ He also sees diversity and inclusion as key to recruitment.¹¹

Testimony from witnesses at the March 2023 Military Personnel Subcommittee hearing indicated that the service branches were using DEI to make themselves more attractive employers to younger generations, who they claim highly value DEI. In other words, they believe DEI can serve as a tool to

⁶ Air Force Chief of Staff General Brown, et.al, “Officer Source of Commission Applicant Pool Goals,” Department of the Air Force, August 9, 2022, [Officer_Source_of_Commission_Applicant_Pool_Goals_memo.pdf \(af.mil\)](#) (Accessed September 2023).

⁷ Thomas Harker, “Department of the Navy Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Planning Actions,” Memorandum for Assistant Secretaries for the Navy, Chief of Naval Operations, Commandant of the Marine Corp, May 3, 2021, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/May/17/2002645340/-1/-1/0/DON%20DIVERSITY%20EQUITY%20AND%20INCLUSION%20PLANNING%20ACTIONS.PDF/DON%20DIVERSITY%20EQUITY%20AND%20INCLUSION%20PLANNING%20ACTIONS.PDF> (Accessed September 2023).

⁸ Lolita Baldor, “Biden picks female admiral to lead Navy. She’d be first woman on Joint Chiefs of Staff,” AP News, July 21, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/navy-chief-first-woman-franchetti-3508e41a3e9ff0e17782de81299acf13> (Accessed September 2023).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Alex Wagner, Opening statement, Subcommittee on Military Personnel, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, 118th Congress, 1st Session, March 23, 2023, <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Wagner%20Testimony.pdf> (accessed September 2023).

¹¹ Ibid.

boost recruitment.¹² “In 2015, 18.6% of young, white Democratic men expressed a desire to serve in the military (only slightly lower than the 19.9% of non-Democratic men who wanted to serve). By 2021, that number had dropped to only 2.9%...and young, white Republican men (25.3%) were all at least 4 time more likely than young, white Democratic men in 2021 to “want” to serve in the armed forces. Young Democratic white men were also significantly less interested in military service than young black women (9.5%) and young white Republican women (10.9%).”¹³ These policies do not appeal to the groups of people most likely to join.

Readiness and Effectiveness of the Joint Force have been negatively impacted. In just two years, the active-duty Army has shrunk from 485,000 to only 452,000 troops. This directly impacts both readiness and effectiveness as the Army is unable to fully man its formations. The Army had planned to increase its End Strength to 500,000 around 2028 by adding 2,000 soldiers to the force every year. However, the recruitment shortfalls meant that number slid in the opposite direction, and the Army cut End Strength further by 12,000 in FY 2023. This has meant the 31 Brigade Combat Teams that currently make up the Army’s active-duty force must support all of the mission requirements, and growing the force will be exceptionally difficult as the Army will simply not have the soldiers to fill the uniforms.¹⁴

Navy ships are undermanned. While the Navy needs to grow to support the larger fleet it is trying to build, its end strength is moving in the wrong direction. It has gone from 347,677 personnel in FY 2021 to 346,300 in FY 2023, and is in danger of slipping further, with projections showing it could hit 336,600 personnel in FY 2027. When the Navy had almost 600 ships in the 1980’s, it was able to sustain about 100 deployed at any one time, with a deployment rate of 17%. As of June 2022, the U.S. had approximately 94 ships deployed at any given time, out of a fleet of 298 total ships, a deployment rate of 31.5%. The operations tempo for Navy ships is about double what it was during the Cold War.¹⁵ This results in crews that are not getting the training time they need to execute their missions, and a force that is generally worked too hard, leading to lower morale. The combined effect of too few ships and sailors is reducing the Navy’s effectiveness and leading to increased wear and tear on both the equipment and personnel.

Air Force operational readiness rates are abysmal, in large part due to the sustained pilot deficit. In 2022, it was short 650 pilots, coupled with incredibly low sortie rates and flying hours that have resulted in a situation where combat-coded fighter squadrons would not have the competency to execute most of the wartime missions they would be asked to accomplish. Air Force flight schools only fail .27% of candidates for competency, meaning that it is almost impossible to wash out based

¹² Hearing, *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Impacts to the Department of Defense and the Armed Services*, Military Personnel Subcommittee, 118th Cong., 1st session, March 23, 2023, [Military Personnel Subcommittee Hearing: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Impacts to the Department of Defense and the Armed Services | Armed Services Republicans \(house.gov\)](#) (accessed September 2023).

¹³ Kevin Wallsten, “What the Data Says About the Military’s Recruiting Crisis,” RealClearDefense, February 23, 2023, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2023/02/23/what_the_data_says_about_the_militarys_recruiting_crisis_883427.html#! (Accessed September 2023).

¹⁴ Thomas Spoehr, “U.S. Army,” The Heritage Foundation, October 18, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/assessment-us-military-power/us-army> (accessed September 2023).

¹⁵ Brent Sadler, “U.S. Navy,” The Heritage Foundation, October 18, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/assessment-us-military-power/us-navy> (accessed September 2023).

on poor performance. This passes incompetent pilots to the operational units, contributing to the degradation of the effectiveness of the force. The service has avoided directly addressing readiness rates for years, but in 2017, the Secretary of the Air Force informed Congress that it was the lowest in the service's history. Based on the negative trends in mission capable rates and pilot sorties, it can be inferred that the situation has not improved. While maintenance manning remains healthy, the deficits in funding for flying hours and spare parts contribute to the low mission capable rates.¹⁶

A record number of Americans have indicated declining trust in the military which is adversely impacting all services recruiting goals as they compete for fewer qualified candidates. According to research, 77% of young Americans are unfit to join the military due to obesity, drug use, health issues or criminal activity¹⁷. Of those 23% that are eligible to serve, even fewer are willing to serve. Polls showed a drop in Americans' confidence in the military to 60%, the lowest since 1988 with the exception of one lower score in 1997.¹⁸ Another poll showed 57% of young Americans worry their mental health would be damaged by serving.

Since the adoption of the all-volunteer force, recruiting for the force in FY2022 was the worst on record,¹⁹ and 2023 is not likely to be any better. In 2022, the Army missed its recruitment goal by about 25%.²⁰ Admiral Franchetti testified that the Navy will miss its recruitment goals by 7,000 sailors in 2023.²¹

If the services cannot recruit enough new personnel into the force, then they will need to increase retention as a means of sustained required personnel. For retention, the Army turnover rate in 2021 was 29.7%, versus 18.6% for the Marine Corps; other branches were between the two. For comparison, only one NATO country has a lower retention rate. The private sector turnover rate is 26%.²² Unless the recruitment situation improves quickly, additional effort will be required to increase retention rates, particularly in the initial enlistment term.

Taken as a whole, current policies prioritizing DEI and related ideologies over merit are not only degrading recruitment and retention, trust and confidence, readiness and effectiveness, but may also

¹⁶ John Venable, "U.S. Air Force," The Heritage Foundation, October 18, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/assessment-us-military-power/us-air-force> (accessed September 2023).

¹⁷ Thomas Spoehr, "The Administration and Congress Must Act Now to Counter the Worsening Military Recruiting Crisis," July 28, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/the-administration-and-congress-must-act-now-counter-the-worsening-military> (accessed September 2023).

¹⁸ Muhamed Younis, "Confidence in U.S. Military Lowest in Over Two Decades," Gallup, July 21, 2023, [Confidence in U.S. Military Lowest in Over Two Decades \(gallup.com\)](https://www.gallup.com/confidence-in-us-military-lowest-in-over-two-decades) (accessed September 2023).

¹⁹ Thomas Spoehr, "The Administration and Congress Must Act Now to Counter the Worsening Military Recruiting Crisis," July 28, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/the-administration-and-congress-must-act-now-counter-the-worsening-military> (accessed September 2023).

²⁰ Thomas Spoehr and Dr. Ken Hartman, "Biden's Pentagon Can't Recruit New Soldiers and That Threatens Us All," Fox News, June 13, 2023, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/bidens-pentagon-cant-recruit-new-soldiers-and-threatens-us-all> (accessed September 2023).

²¹ Diana Correll, "Navy will miss recruiting goals by 7,000 sailors this year," Navy Times, September 14, 2023, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2023/09/14/navy-will-miss-recruiting-goals-by-7000-sailors-this-year/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWe're%20going%20to%20be,years%20to%20hit%20that%20mark> (accessed September 2023).

²² Bol Ring, "Scientific Approach to Solving Army Retention and Recruiting Problem – Self-Determination Theory and authentic Leadership Theory" Small Wars Journal, September 10, 2022.

be contributing to another unprecedented crisis in the force. Suicide rates for the 18-34 general population have risen by 30% (18/100k) since 2005, versus 50% for veterans and 150% for veterans of post 9-11 wars (45.9/100k).²³ Alarming, these rates have not improved along with the reduction of deployments, but have remained high, despite the reduction in combat deployments. 30,177 active duty and veterans of post-9/11 wars have died by suicide in comparison to 7,057 KIA.²⁴ For comparison, suicide rates among U.S. Army personnel in World War II until 9/11 measured in the mid-teens per 100,000, while after 2008 exceeded 20 per 100,000, sometimes approaching as many as 30 per 100,000.²⁵

Recommendations:

All military personnel should be held to the highest standards, and promotions should be based entirely on performance and merit. Congress must hold the Biden administration accountable for any substitution of merit-based promotions which degrade readiness, effectiveness, recruiting, retention, and the trust and confidence the American people must have in their military. Military personnel appropriations should, as appropriate, be correlated to merit based promotions and successful recruiting and retention rates reflecting effective application of resources.

The Department of Defense and Government Accountability Office should provide Congress with an objective detailed assessment of the challenges to recruitment, retention, readiness, and the alarming suicide rates within the military and among our veterans providing specific recommendations to address each.

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²³ Thomas S. Howard, “High Suicide Rates Among United States Service Members and Veterans of the Post 9-11 Wars”. Watson Institute International and Public Affairs. 21 June, 2021 (Pages 5 and 6).

²⁴ Thomas S. Howard, “High Suicide Rates Among United States Service Members and Veterans of the Post 9-11 Wars”. Watson Institute International and Public Affairs. 21 June, 2021 (Page 1).

²⁵ Jeffrey Smith PhD et al, “A Historical Examination of Military Records of US Army Suicide, 1819 to 2017”. JAMA Netw Open, December 2019, [A Historical Examination of Military Records of US Army Suicide, 1819 to 2017 | Depressive Disorders | JAMA Network Open | JAMA Network](#) (accessed September 2023).

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