

PROVOCATIONS #7

Will Thibeaudeau

IDENTITY IN THE TRENCHES

*The Fatal Impact of Diversity, Equity,
and Inclusion on U.S. Military Readiness*



CLAREMONT INSTITUTE
CENTER FOR THE AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE



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In August 2021, the world watched as American forces scrambled to evacuate Afghanistan as the Taliban reclaimed power. The panicked withdrawal reached a tragic climax on August 26, when 13 American service members (and more than 100 Afghan civilians) were killed by a suicide bomber in the Kabul airport, where security was a U.S. responsibility. Four days later, when the last military planes took off from that same airport, hundreds of American citizens were left behind. A month later still, when the Secretary of Defense, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and the CENTCOM commanding general were called before Congress to account for the failure, they neither offered explanations nor accepted responsibility. The message was clear: Incompetence would be the new norm for the U.S. military—a predictably lethal status quo.

The Afghanistan debacle was dramatic, but it was only one small part of a much larger picture. The United States Armed

Forces were once the envy of the world, in large part because we selected the best of the best, and instilled in our fighting men an unshakeable military ethos. Both the ethos and the selection, however, have been in steady decline as the Department of Defense succumbs to a dangerous ideology: that of group quotas, or forced outcome equality for identity groups based on race and sex.

Critics of the current state of affairs in our Armed Forces waste precious breath on disturbing but minor issues like reading lists, drag shows, and TikTok trends. This book serves as a call for focus and precision on the prevalence of race and sex-based quotas, and the accompanying collapse in professional standards, in the fight to reclaim the integrity of the institution of the military.

Quotas, by one name or another, have been defense policy since 1965, when Secretary Robert McNamara decided to make the Pentagon the leading edge of the effort to adhere to the principles and policies of the Civil Rights Act. This history is important to understand because it clarifies the mission ahead.

The military is often perceived by well-meaning Americans as the last holdout in the progressive march through the institutions. In reality, however, it was among the *first* American institutions to formally embrace the radical logic of group quotas: that anybody must proportionally represent the demographics of the nation, or else enjoy the presumption of wrongdoing and discrimination.

To recover from this institutional overreach, Congress and the executive branch need to commit to a few specific policy changes alongside a bold reorganization of the military personnel process and the structure of the Joint Staff. The policy solutions in this paper do not amount to an exhaustive list of the range of actions to confront DEI; instead, they define the minimum necessary action to rebuild the military's institutional health.

Before we can recommend policy, or even analyze history,

we must come to understand the military as an institution. The prevailing consensus seems to regard our warfighting forces as just one more institution in civil society, bound by every social norm of the country they stand to defend. This is the logic by which group quotas are justified. The United States military, however, cannot serve its basic purpose unless it is set apart.

The Military as an Institution, Defined

When a citizen enlists in any of the service branches, he goes through a period of intensive training meant to melt away the effects and the mindset of civilian life, and to forge Americans into soldiers, sailors, airmen, or marines ready to devote their lives to the mass application of violence on behalf of American interests.¹ This training must sweat and bleed the individual who reported for duty, because the DoD knows the life of American citizens, formed in individualism and liberalism, does not make for an easy transition to military service. Policymakers would do well to acknowledge this civil-military distinction.

The American military is a professional fighting force built on competencies and values not commonly found in civil society—thankfully so, for we do not raise our children under the presumption of a violent life, and most do not even consider joining the military.²

Because the stakes of military operations are so high, the military must define itself by a commitment to the professional factors that make servicemembers and units more effective. Even though the years of all-out war are beyond our memory, the perils of an uncertain future make the stakes of military policy unquestionably high.

Some would have us believe that a diverse military is somehow the cornerstone of our national security,³ all the while minimizing any effect of DEI in practical application for men and women in uniform.⁴ This position contradicts itself: either the military's efforts at diversity serve a critical national need,

or they are so insignificant that they are not worth their costs to the services' culture and the government's bottom line.

When it comes to policy, the military must maintain a strict separation between values unrelated to the military profession and those values necessary to maintain an effective force. Like a drop of ink in a glass of water, the faintest hint of ideology outside the scope of the military profession will degrade the whole force's effectiveness.⁵ Historical examples from eighteenth-century France to the Soviet Army of the late Cold War attest to the reality of this threat.

At issue here is much more than the relative quality of military units. A military consumed by politics and identity threatens the very integrity of our republic. In other sectors of society, the consequences of shirking the primacy of merit amount to a bad hire as university president, or maybe a missed revenue projection for a given fiscal quarter. In the military, the stakes are obviously higher.

Nowhere are the consequences of hiring anyone but those selected for their professional qualifications higher than in the wars our military may soon fight. In May of this year, the *Daily Caller* reported on the Air Force's efforts to diversify flight school.⁶ The Air Force created classes that mirrored the race and gender demographics of the nation. This manipulation of the most critical talent of our military produced consecutive flight school classes below sustainable levels, far below average. This brutal case study is a harbinger of things to come in a military whose organizing principle is diversity rather than merit.

DEI is just that in the military: an organizing principle with specific manifestation in the prevalence of identity-based quotas and the attendant collapse in standards. Future defense officials, lawmakers, and interested Americans must have a clear understanding of the current personnel and policy landscape to meaningfully effect change.

The Role of Quotas in Institutional Erosion

Race and sex-based quotas are the driving force behind the U.S. military's turn to wokeness. These policies may not be as dramatic as drag shows hosted on Navy vessels, nor as direct and undeniable as DoD-mandated diversity seminars, but they are by far the most consequential of the military's missteps away from merit and toward political ideology.

A “quota” can be any policy that sets metrics, goals, or standards meant to artificially alter the race or sex composition of an organization. In practice, quotas are rarely as explicit as we might expect: DoD leadership rarely, if ever, admits to making this or that personnel decision based on race or sex. It is, however, the only logical conclusion of the principles on which the DoD operates—principles that have long been held dear by the military bureaucracy but are readily dismissible if we consider the sole purpose of our Armed Forces to be fighting and winning our nation's wars. In today's military, the success or failure of a unit in the eyes of the DoD is often determined not just by mission readiness (the old standard of competence) but by the new, political mandate of “proportional representation.”

The Department of Defense Strategic Management Plan for Fiscal Years 2022–2026 makes this clear, touting the Pentagon's intent to base personnel policy on the “breadth and depth” of the nation.⁷ The Strategic Management Plan was compiled and promulgated by Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen H. Hicks—a Biden appointee, and herself the highest-ranking female in DoD history.

Though the provisions of the Strategic Management Plan are never explicitly admitted to as “quotas,” the implications are clear. Performance Goal 4.2.3 for the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (USD P&R) is to “inculcate DEIA principles” throughout the entire Department of Defense. In Performance Goal 4.1.2, the Office of the Secretary of Defense mandates that DoD components increase the representation of “racial/ethnic minorities and women” in “underrepresented ca-

reer fields” in order to meet stated objectives.

In an institution where many critical units are composed almost entirely of white men, it would not be hard to find “underrepresentation” in numerous career fields—and, in seeking to correct it, to undermine military readiness.

The planning and policy obligations for subordinate commands associated with DEI goals throughout Hicks’s plan amount to a Pentagon mandate for demographic change across the military. The Department of Defense promoted these orders with a blanket mandate for “equity”⁸ and no mention of a necessary adherence to the system of merit DoD leaders purport to uphold.

In evaluating the “total workforce” of the DoD, Deputy Secretary Hicks’s report puts the quotas in the fine print. It is apparently important that the DoD promote women and racial minorities at certain percentages. Strategic Objective 3.2 for a “Safe and Supportive” environment outlines the importance of meeting these numeric standards for the sake of “progress.” Here, again, clear targets for numerical representation are shrouded in obfuscation to provide deniability for Pentagon leadership.

In the military, individual and unit performance reviews depend on adherence to all kinds of policies dictated from above. It is all but certain that every component and military department have established mechanisms of adherence to Deputy Secretary Hicks’s new “DEIA” mandates. Policymakers and concerned Americans should not let an absence of Congressional oversight, reasonable reporting standards, or public disclosure obscure these realities.

Performance Goal 3.2.1 leaves no room for doubt. The DSD directive states that there should be specific promotion and selection quotas for racial minorities and women. There is no nuance based on duty position or mission requirements—only a department-wide directive to select critical personnel policy to fulfill diversity objectives.

The Results of Quotas After 50 Years

Whatever the reasons, it cannot be said that the U.S. military is naturally diverse. This is not a fact to celebrate or mourn, but a reality to observe. Considering the extent of DEI efforts in the last 10 years alone, and the stubborn persistence of these disproportionate demographics, it follows logically that actually moving from the status quo to the DoD's desired race and sex quotas—that is, direct proportionality with the broader population—would require intensive DEI practices at an almost unimaginable scale.

As of the 2020 United States Census, men make up 49.6% of the overall population.⁹ The 2022 U.S. Military Demographic Report, meanwhile, counts over 82% of the active military as male.¹⁰ In the officer classes of all branches of the military in 2022, just over 80% were male, along with 82.9% of enlisted personnel.

As of 2022, the branch that exhibited the greatest gender disparity is the Marine Corps, where just over 90% of active service members were male. The gap is even wider in the highest ranks: In the Marine Corps specifically, over 96% of the highest-ranked generals were male. The Navy had the next highest disparity, with over 93% of its highest-ranking officers as male. The Air Force had the lowest percentage of male generals with an O7–O10 rank at just over 88%.

Similar disparities exist among the top ranks when it comes to race. In the United States at large, 75.3% identify as white, compared with 68.8% of uniformed service members. When organized into the enlisted and officer classes, white members of the military make up 75.1% of all officers and 67.4% of all enlisted members.

Within the highest ranks of the generals, the O7–O10 pay grade, over 87.9% across all the branches identify as white. At these ranks, only 12.1% consider themselves as minorities, with blacks being the most substantial at 7.7%. Compare this against the 31.2% of the force at large that identifies with a mi-

nority group, and the 17.3% of all service members who identify as black.

Those who argue for group quotas see these realities and assume they must result from some kind of built-in racism. They argue that consideration of race, rather than merit alone, is necessary to correct this perceived injustice. In practice, the military leadership's stated "diversity goals"—a now-popular byword for race- and sex-based quotas—by necessity become mandates for discrimination. Today, white men and women make up almost 80% of Air Force officers.¹¹ Current Air Force policy dictates reducing that proportion by almost 15%. How could that reduction possibly be achieved except by systematic application of racial prejudice?

Only in light of these facts can we understand just how radical the idea of a quota-based military really is. To achieve its desired end state, the DoD will not (and cannot) consider race or gender only in rare edge cases. It must be a whole-force strategy, leading to double-digit reductions in the male and white proportions among key military positions, especially at the highest, most consequential ranks. Merit, operational needs, and the military ethic will be, at best, secondary considerations.

If our Armed Forces continue down this path, it is all but guaranteed that the competency crisis will reach a breaking point. Given the nature of the institution, that break is certain to be lethal, and likely on a devastating scale. The fall of Kabul, the collapse of function in flight school, the now regular rehearsals of DEI ideology from unaccountable Pentagon leadership—these may be only the beginning of a new, and dangerous, era.

Responding to the Justification for Quotas and DEI in the Military

In 2008—under the Republican administration of George W. Bush—the Army Diversity Task force published a final report that outlined, in its second chapter, the seven reasons why “diversity” must become a primary consideration in military pol-

icy. Though it is now more than 15 years old, the 2008 report remains the most comprehensive and telling explanation of the logic of the woke military. Later efforts—including Hicks’s Strategic Management Plan, the 2020 final report of the DoD Board on Diversity and Inclusion,¹² and the 2011 report of the Military Leadership Diversity Commission¹³—focus only on *how* to remake the military in the image of the public, treating the *why* as a settled question.

Thus, the 2008 report is still our best resource for understanding the thinking behind quotas—and, presumably, the strongest possible case for imposing them on the military. Yet each of its seven points disintegrates under even the briefest scrutiny.

(1) **Accessions.** Talent is a distinguishing factor in organizational performance. As America becomes more diverse, our talent is increasingly distributed across that same diversity. The Army must understand America’s diverse citizenry and be able to recruit across that diversity to bring in the talented people we need. Valued, inspired employees working in an inclusive environment will help deliver a positive message to prospective Soldiers, Civilians, and their influencers.

The Army’s assumption is that demographic change will make race-based recruitment practices a necessity. That is, as the white population (historically overrepresented in uniform) declines nationwide, intentional outreach to minority groups will be the only way to sustain the necessary troop levels. DEI (we are told) will prevent our force numbers from falling off a demographic cliff.

This promise is belied by the facts of recent history. Last year, the Army fell short of its recruiting target by a full 10,000 enlistees, following a 2022 shortfall of 15,000.¹⁴ This brought the manpower of the largest and oldest of our uniformed services to the lowest level it’s seen since the start of World War II. The other services all report similar shortfalls—and have been for years. The shortfall across all services for 2023 totaled at

about 41,000.¹⁵ In 2024, there are fewer Americans serving in uniform than any year since 1940.

Despite failing to deliver the promised benefit, the DEI recruitment strategy has come at massive costs to our military, both financial and operation. In 2022, the DoD asked for \$66 million for spending on DEI initiatives, followed by \$86 million in 2023. This year, it is requesting \$114 million.¹⁶

While they are pumping all this money into DEI, the military branches are continually lowering their standards for admittance. In June 2022, the Army gutted the requirement for potential recruits to have a GED or equivalent; the Navy followed suit months after.¹⁷ Similar drop-offs can be observed in physical fitness and other crucial metrics. The promises of 2008 notwithstanding, the effect of DoD's diversity-centric recruitment strategy has been fewer enlistees, at lower levels of competency, at demonstrably higher cost.

(2) **Personnel Processes.** Attention to organizational diversity principles and practices creates in leaders an appreciation of the power of diverse contributions from inspired employees. This appreciation leads to personnel systems and processes for managing talent that ensure balanced opportunities and contribute to a high performance climate by enhancing individual capabilities.

At least since the Vietnam War, the Pentagon has gone to great lengths to ensure that racial dynamics will be accounted for in management practices.

Established in 1971, the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute's initial mandate was to address racial tensions and promote equal opportunity within the U.S. military. In 1979, it was reorganized to reflect its expanded mission beyond race relations to include gender, religion, national origin, and other areas of American diversity. In 2018, DEOMI embarked on a further mission expansion to become the DoD Center of Excellence (CoE) for human relations, encompassing MEO, EEO, Diversity and Inclusion (D&I), and Harassment Prevention. In 2020, Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher

C. Miller, a Trump appointee, codified DEOMI's expanded mission in a memorandum directing immediate steps to establish a Diversity & Inclusion Center for Excellence at DEOMI to develop and train DoD-wide curriculum on diversity, inclusion, and cultural awareness¹⁸. In 2022, the Biden administration established the new Defense Advisory Committee on Diversity and Inclusion, an additional entity to make even more recommendations to the Pentagon about diversity.¹⁹

Again, the proof is in the pudding. In practice, these measures do nothing but inject tension into the military ranks. They are profoundly counterproductive, ensuring by their very existence that race will be a major factor in every aspect of personnel management.

(3) **Education and Training.** The Army has a strong incentive for rank and file diversity education and training—most of our employees are likely to face cultural challenges through conflict or a multitude of other missions abroad. However, cultural understanding begins at home. The Army's future demographics will bring new language and cultural challenges within our own ranks. Understanding of our own cultural, personal, and other differences through training, education, and similar development opportunities will create in us a proclivity for understanding others, whether it be for a deployment mission or for recruiting a future generation.

In essence, the Pentagon hopes that the injection of new cultural dynamics into the ranks will compel service members to broaden their horizons: that “new language and cultural challenges” will become opportunities for growth for individual troops and for the services at large. In practice, the evidence suggests such “education” efforts are actually detrimental to the culture and effectiveness of our Armed Forces.

In 2021, Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR) and Rep. Dan Crenshaw (R-TX) established a website where members of the U.S. military could anonymously report incidents of DEI overreach within their branches. One Marine wrote that his unit's “man-

datory military history training was replaced with training on police brutality, white privilege and systemic racism.” In another incident, an airman reported that his unit was forced to conduct a “privilege walk” where troops separated themselves by race and gender to talk about their experiences with privilege.²⁰ These are particularly egregious examples, but this kind of thinking has found its way into the vast majority of military education and has caused disruptions all across the board.

Far from making our military stronger, this new educational focus leads to distrust and dissension in the ranks, and it detracts valuable time, resources, and energy from the actually essential tasks of military training. Would it not be better for troops to learn about the foundations of the institutions in which they serve, or to undergo additional skills training in their jobs, than to be lectured on the political perspective of the group quota regime? And how can we expect soldiers to put their lives on the line for one another in combat when we divide them along racial lines in training?

(4) **National Implications.** The Army draws its people from a diverse America – a nation that continues to evolve demographically. The Army defends and serves that same diverse population. Our understanding of America’s diversity will create new opportunities to influence diverse communities, support challenges related to youth preparation, and establish a brand that positively impacts the Army’s human capital strategy. As our Nation evolves demographically, the Army must be able to attract and retain highly capable people from diverse backgrounds.

Yes, America is a diverse nation, and there is nothing wrong with developing a public relations strategy that appreciates this fact. It is a great leap, however, from this lofty rhetoric to the DoD’s actual practice of imposing percentage-based composition goals for these “diverse” communities. This is what the Armed Forces’ diversity policy has been in practice: group quotas. This means active discrimination against recruits and service members not considered “diverse,” and an unfair advantage

afforded to those who are. This is both a moral failure to “serve that same diverse population” as promised, and a reduction of military excellence to a second-grade concern.

(5) **Global Engagement.** The anticipated nature of future global engagements calls for a diverse Army prepared for the human dimension of conflict. Due to current and future security environments, there is a need for a culturally astute and adaptive Army, capable of responding to American interests within any environment. A highly successful, long-term organizational diversity effort will give the Army an opportunity to become a national leader in diversity. Accomplishing this task will make a powerful statement to our workforce and the Nation. Success in understanding our internal cultural and other differences will create a predisposition for respecting differences that extends to preparation for global operations. Developing an appreciation for foreign cultures before appreciating our own cultures is inherently difficult. However, our internal success will enhance our ability to go beyond our own differences and become more receptive to cultures of others with whom we may interact.

The United States military exists to defend the United States of America—and, when necessary, to fight and win her wars. American service members must be able and willing to defend the people and Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic. No other consideration is valuable or welcome in the process.

One potential end state of this muddled text is the demand that the US Military expand military service to all persons in the United States, regardless of legal status. Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL), recently called for as much on the Senate floor, offering it as a potential solution to the DEI recruiting crisis: “Do you know what the recruiting numbers are at the Army, Navy, and the Air Force? They can’t reach their quotas each month. They can’t find enough people to join our military forces. And there are those who are undocumented who want the chance to serve and risk their lives for this country. Should we give them a chance? I think we should.”

Of course, understanding our allies and our enemies is invaluable in both war and peace. If this understanding comes at the cost of the de-Americanization of our own Armed Forces, however, it will be the ultimate Pyrrhic victory. Cultural competency is not, in itself, a negative. When it is used as a justification for race-conscious recruitment, however, it must be swiftly and decisively dismissed.

(6) **Retention.** From a diversity perspective, recruiting and retention prosper from the same inclusive environment. Valued employees who are inspired, fully engaged, and developing professionally in an environment of opportunity tend to stay and encourage others to stay.

Training and initiatives that prevent discrimination and harassment do more than enough to foster an environment in which people want to work. Military diversity initiatives are having the opposite effect. Internal Army data shows the share of white recruits has declined every year since 2018 to its lowest share in recorded history.²¹ Even more stunning, Blue Star Families reported that more than one third of active-duty military families would not recommend their children serve in the military. In the critical cohort of American veterans, who produce 80% of service members, over one third name politicized military leadership as the reason they would not want family members to serve.²² Quite simply, diversity initiatives *are not working* to diversify the fighting ranks; if anything, they have contributed to the political environment that is depressing a national ethic of service.

(7) **Performance.** High performing organizations are made up of high performing people. After we recruit America's talent, we can sustain high performing organizations by understanding the people we are leading and taking advantage of the diverse talents, skills, and attributes that derive from their backgrounds and experiences. Integration of individual talents into mission accomplishment in one area can lead to motivated personnel who perform better in other areas.

In implementing various diversity initiatives, the military bears the burden of proof to show each initiative would improve the lethality and readiness of its formations. In a September 2023 hearing in front of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel—15 years after the publication of this report—no senior personnel officer was able to provide a single piece of authoritative research to prove the case.

In fact, the idea that group quotas will lead to a higher-performing military can be disproved by simple logic, even in the conspicuous absence of evidence. If innate characteristics like race and sex are allowed to determine any part of personnel processes, then merit will be, at best, a secondary consideration. So long as “diversity” remains a goal in itself, there is no guarantee that the best person is picked for any job.

We can either have a military maximized for skill and qualification or we can have one composed by barely veiled group quotas; we cannot have both. Here, more than in any other field, merit is literally a matter of life and death.

If, as the DoD leadership itself claims, the goal is to create the best possible Armed Forces, capable of serving their mission as effectively and efficiently as can be, then there is only one way to achieve it: by selecting and training the best of the best, on considerations of merit alone. Anything else imperils not just the lethality of our forces but the integrity of our institutions, the morale of our troops, and the safety of the nation they are sworn to defend.

How the DoD Succumbed to Liberalism

The transformation of the United States Armed Forces over the last century has been as radical, as sudden, and as thoroughgoing as virtually any change experienced by a military body in all of recorded history. Over the course of two world wars, the demands of combat at unprecedented scale sped along the integration of both racial minorities—especially black Americans—and women across every branch of the Armed Forces.

It took less than a generation, however, for this integration (and the principles of color-blindness that emerged from it) to be overtaken by a new social imperative: proportional representation, enforced by group quotas and later the widespread framework of “DEI.” No longer would it be enough for the military to select the best of the best, regardless of race or other innate factors. Under the new regime, the Armed Forces became a representative institution, one whose political/racial composition—modeled on that of the nation at large—took priority over its warfighting capabilities.

This pivot was accomplished largely by successive commanders-in-chief, starting with Harry Truman and carrying on through the Johnson, Carter, Clinton, Obama, and Biden administrations. The transformation, however, cannot be blamed entirely on progressive presidents. Civil Rights-era Supreme Court decisions, racial conditions on funding imposed by Congress, initiatives by the military bureaucracy, interference by outside activist groups—all these and more were essential to turning the merit-based force that won two world wars into an identity-centric institution that has not seen a major victory since 1991.

Today, the drive for proportional representation colors every action of the military establishment. Recruiting strategies are crafted with racial targets front of mind, and the entire DoD approach to personnel now revolves around identity groups. Each branch now works actively to increase the representation of women and minorities in the most critical roles, including aviation, combat operations, and the highest echelons of command. This identity-based decision-making is mutually exclusive with the singular insistence on merit that undergirds any strong military force.

The danger of this status quo is clear. In order to chart a path forward, however, we must understand how we got here. The extent and coordination of the decades-long efforts to create this new military are remarkable and should remind us that any effort at reform must be every bit as deliberate and far-reaching.

The Racial Integration and Race Quota Distinction

President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948. E.O. 9981 established that there should be “equality of treatment and opportunity in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.”²³ According to modern advocates of race-based decision-making, President Truman started an uninterrupted progressive march to provide for proportional representation in the military. The reality of the military’s implementation of E.O. 9981 and the radical departure from such principles of equality in the 1960s tell a vastly different story.

Much of the immediate follow-on to E.O. 9981 is hard to believe in light of the turmoil of the 1960s and the race-obsessed culture that followed (and endures to the present day). The Army removed race designators from personnel files to ensure non-discrimination, and the military spent legitimate organizational energy seeking to choose and promote the best, regardless of race. If the common trope of race-blind decisions was ever a reality, it was in the years after Executive Order 9981.²⁴

As history goes, however, the Washington bureaucracy quickly planted the seeds of more aggressive racial policies. The first post-E.O. 9981 policy decision to officially implement racial quotas was Executive Order 10308, Improving Compliance in Federal Contracts. Issued in 1951, amidst the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement, E.O. 10308 was a response to growing demands for racial equality and non-discrimination.²⁵ This executive order aimed to improve compliance with non-discrimination provisions in federal contracts, setting a precedent for subsequent affirmative action policies.

Prior to this executive order, there were unofficial racial quotas dating back to 1918.²⁶ These unofficial quotas were put in place to limit the number of black enlistees. The general sentiment was that blacks should not exceed a certain percentage of the total military force, reflecting their percentage in the

general population, which was about 10% at the time.

During the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, the United States and the military saw a vast expansion of affirmative action laws. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed Executive Order 11246, which was meant to address the issue of equal employment in the military.²⁷ The focus on equal employment opportunity in the military was influenced by the ongoing debate about the role of blacks and other minorities in the Vietnam War, where they were disproportionately represented.²⁸

This executive order led to an overcorrection by Secretary McNamara in 1966.²⁹ In seeking to implement E.O. 11246, the DoD established an equal employment opportunity program, which represented a strategic effort to institutionalize affirmative action within the DoD. The Pentagon also introduced Special Emphasis Programs (SEPs)—that is, targeted initiatives designed to ensure equal opportunity and promote diversity and inclusion within the Armed Forces.³⁰ These programs focus on specific groups that have been historically underrepresented or faced discrimination. SEPs aim to address issues related to recruitment, retention, training, and career development of members from these groups, fostering a more inclusive and diverse military environment.

The most far-reaching racial initiative of this era was McNamara's Vietnam recruitment plan, Project 100,000.³¹ This project aimed to enlist individuals who previously did not meet the standard mental and physical criteria for military service by lowering the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) scores required for enlistment and by relaxing some physical standards. The program primarily targeted young men from inner cities, which led to an outsized proportion of minority recruits. It also raised concerns and criticisms regarding the preparedness and treatment of these lower-aptitude, newly eligible recruits, both during and after their service.

McNamara explicitly charged the military with leading the government-wide adoption of the spirit of the Civil Rights Act by ensuring the military's demographics mirrored those of the

nation. This started with a mandate, originating from the Defense Race Relations Board, that West Point select admissions classes that mirror the demographics of the nation.³² The nation heard little about this initiative until recent years, when various Army officials testified in Congress to the enduring existence of “class composition goals” for admissions—a direct continuation of McNamara’s policy.

Hot on the heels of Project 100,000, in 1971, the Supreme Court case *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.* addressed workplace discrimination, inventing the doctrine of disparate impact.³³ The principles established in *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.* significantly influenced military policies, ensuring that recruitment, promotions, and assignments would be evaluated for any potential racial disparities, even indirect and unintentional ones. This led to even more direct targeting and affirmative action practices in the military. No longer would the color-blindness of E.O. 9981 suffice. Under the doctrine of disparate impact, anything less than equality of *outcome* left an institution open to accusations of racism—effectively making group quotas, the guarantee of outcome equality, the military default.

The same year saw the establishment of the Defense Race Relations Institute (DRRI), later rebranded as the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI).³⁴ DEOMI is a U.S. Department of Defense joint services school, working in areas of equal opportunity, intercultural communication, religious, racial, gender, and ethnic diversity and pluralism.

In the 1972 NDAA, Section 2000d-1³⁵ prohibited discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, or religion in any program receiving federal financial assistance. Again, the nominal demand for color-blindness quickly gave way to policies explicitly favoring certain identity groups. The 1986 NDAA added Section 8058³⁶, requiring the Secretary of Defense to submit an annual report to Congress outlining the department’s efforts to promote minority and women-owned businesses in defense contracting. This provision expanded the

DEI revolution from the uniformed services to the private defense sector.

In 1992, Bill Clinton campaigned as an antagonist to the defense establishment in his pledges to open the military to homosexuals and other diversity initiatives. While initial resistance from the brass stalled the full extent of what Clinton promised on the campaign trail, the administration carefully crafted military policy to remake the institution in the image of the progressive Left.³⁷

This reconstruction began with the 1994 NDAA, where Section 809 required the Secretary of Defense to establish a mentor-protégé program to assist small, disadvantaged businesses in the defense industry.³⁸ The program aimed to enhance the participation of historically underrepresented groups in defense contracts by providing support and guidance from established defense contractors.

In 1995, the Military Equal Opportunity (MEO) program codified the previous 30 years of change in DoD policy.³⁹ The directive focused on diversity and inclusion within the military ranks. It addressed civil rights organizations advocating for equal treatment and opportunity for promotions in the military by ensuring every program, office, and personnel process was designed to serve the sacred cow of proportional representation.

The George W. Bush administration invested heavily in the military, but largely left the liberal direction of the institution unchanged as the nation grappled with Islamic terrorism at home and two wars abroad. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was famously antagonistic and ambivalent towards the generals, even during a significant period of growth for the military industrial complex.⁴⁰ It was during the Bush administration that the Army convened its Diversity Task Force, whose final report laid the theoretical and practical foundations for 21st-century military DEI.

During the first few months of the Obama administration, the Pentagon established yet another new program through

DoD directive 1020.02, emphasizing “Diversity Management and Equal Opportunity.”⁴¹ In many ways, this directive made explicit the distinction between Truman-era equal opportunity and Obama-era race radicalism. The rationale—the same one set forth by Bush’s Diversity Task Force—was that a diverse military is a stronger and more effective one. The increasing complexity of global military operations, the line of thinking went, necessitated a force that reflects and understands the diverse nature of global societies. Today, this principle remains at the center of DoD policy and strategy; it remains, more to the point, an assumption without any evidence to support it.

The Shift to Women's Rights and Military Readiness

The United States saw the first official enlistment of women in the military during World War I, when the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps allowed women to serve primarily in clerical positions. The Army Nurse Corps, established in 1901, also played a significant role during this time.

The Women’s Army Corps (WAC), the U.S. Navy’s Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), the Marine Corps Women’s Reserve, and the Coast Guard Women’s Reserve (SPARS) were all established during World War II.⁴² These organizations allowed women to serve in a wide range of non-combat roles, from clerical to mechanical to flight instruction, filling many traditionally male roles as men were needed on the front lines in unprecedented numbers.

Three years after the war’s end, the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act, signed by President Truman, made these emergency accommodations permanent. Women were authorized to serve as permanent, regular members of the Armed Forces, not just in auxiliary or temporary positions, though they were still limited to certain non-combat roles. An important aspect of this act was its impact on physical fitness requirements for women in the military.⁴³ The legislation necessitated a reevaluation of these standards to accommodate and fairly

assess women service members, acknowledging physical differences while also ensuring operational effectiveness.

In the 1960s, while affirmative action along racial lines became a key national cause, the revolution in the role of women in the military proceeded largely unnoticed. Signed by President Johnson in 1967, Executive Order 11375 expanded the object of affirmative action directives resulting from the 1964 Civil Rights Act to include sex as well as race.⁴⁴

Signed in 1979, Executive Order 12125 established the President's Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Services,⁴⁵ influenced by the ongoing women's liberation movement as much as by the momentum of Civil Rights and E.O. 11375. The Commission was tasked with reviewing policies and practices affecting the assignment of women in the military, addressing growing calls for gender equality as women's participation across many social spheres dramatically increased.

Issued in 1980 by President Jimmy Carter, Executive Order 12250 focused on the leadership and coordination of nondiscrimination laws by establishing a formal directive to pursue gender equality reflected in society.⁴⁶ It aimed to ensure effective implementation of civil rights laws across federal agencies, including those governing the military.

In *Rostker v. Goldberg* (1981), the Supreme Court upheld the male-only draft, answering a major question posed by Congress in the 1980 NDAA. Despite the result, the episode is remarkable: to even ask the question regarding women's eligibility for the draft indicated a sea change.

The Defense Manpower Commission, established to conduct a comprehensive study of the manpower requirements of the Department of Defense, often served as a readiness cover for achieving sex diversity in the military. With the explicit aim of recruiting more women, the commission pursued several initiatives:⁴⁷

Recruitment Methods and Techniques: Clause (6) focuses on the methods and techniques used to attract and recruit personnel.

This is crucial for women and minorities, as it offers a platform to address potential biases in recruitment and to develop strategies that ensure diverse and inclusive enlistment practices.

Socio-Economic Composition of Military Enlistees: Clause (7) addresses the implications of changes in the socio-economic composition of military enlistees since new recruiting policies.

In 1994, President Bill Clinton rescinded a long-standing rule that prevented women from serving in roles that exposed them to undue, combat-related risks. This effectively opened all roles other than those directly engaged in ground combat to female service members, radically altering the capacity in which they served and potentially opening a door to future combat service.

In another major case, *United States v. Virginia* (1996), the Supreme Court compelled the Virginia Military Institute to admit women for the first time since its founding in 1839, challenging long-standing male spaces in military education. *U.S. v. Virginia* not only impacted VMI but also set a legal precedent that drove policy changes across military academies and educational institutions.

Section 592 of the NDAA for fiscal year 1998⁴⁸ highlighted the increased role of women in the Armed Forces and acknowledged concerns about gender inequalities. This section endowed research focused on the characteristic mission of “disparate impact” inquiries, to find injustice wherever inequality is present.

ACLU v. Department of Defense (2004) was a pivotal case that challenged the policy excluding women from combat roles in the military. While the case itself did not directly lead to a policy change, it was part of a series of efforts and discussions that culminated in the Department of Defense lifting the combat exclusion for women in 2013. Notably, major activist groups like the ACLU were crucial in these efforts, lending resources, publicity, and credibility to the calls for transformation.

Prior to the 2013 NDAA, women were formally excluded

from serving in direct ground combat roles. Section 543 of that year's NDAA repealed this policy and directed the Department of Defense (DoD) to eliminate all gender-based barriers to service.⁴⁹

The 2016 NDAA (Section 533) required the DoD to provide Congress with a plan and timeline for integrating women into all combat positions. This section sought to ensure that gender-neutral standards were applied during the integration process.⁵⁰

Just 20 years after Clinton's opening all non-combat roles to women, and a mere 100 years after the arrival of the first enlisted nurses, the military is now obligated to ignore any differences between men and women, treating male and female service members as the same and interchangeable for any and all purposes. This requires the denial of natural, observable differences in physical ability, in temperament, and in all manner of relevant metrics and qualifications. In fact, to counteract these natural differences, the military again imposes group quotas to ensure that proportional representation is achieved regardless of disparities in merit. As with racial quotas, the obvious and inevitable effect is a less ready force and a less secure nation.

Context for Change

Looking back on 100 years of military history, it is all but impossible to point to a single moment and say with any confidence that "this is where it all went wrong." Racial integration and the introduction of female service members were driven by the pressing need to find and train the best of the best, but the transition to "representation" and "diversity" as military ideals in themselves ensured that this color-blind, merit-based military would be short-lived. An onslaught of court cases, legislative demands, and sweeping presidential reforms followed, ensuring over the course of decades that the military would be transformed.

There is no single policy or decision that can be reversed to

restore the primacy of merit in our Armed Forces. That would be too simple. The current state of affairs is the sum of dozens of policies, initiatives, and accidents spread over generations. A functional strategy must understand and address them all—and, most importantly, must be prepared to fight the ideology that underlies them, to tear out wokeness from our military root and branch.

The Solution: A Real Effort to Reclaim the Military as an Institution

If the United States Armed Forces are to become once again the envy of the world, it will be by returning to the rigorous standards and the ethics of individual and military excellence that once defined the culture in our ranks, from the newest enlistee to the highest echelons of the Pentagon.

To that end, the Department of Defense must end all consideration of race and sex in the evaluation of personnel, contracts, and programs. So long as these factors are evaluative, it is impossible for merit to win out. At present, our military establishment is rife with quotas, “diversity goals,” and all manner of race and sex metrics that place identity over performance in the selection and training of personnel. Explicit reporting requirements are imposed to ensure compliance. Every one of these requirements must be eliminated.

New Pentagon leadership must also end the bias towards women inherent in the formation and application of contemporary military standards. Politics and ideology must be set aside entirely in the interest of developing an optimized fighting force. This means the military must measure men and women on the same scales of fitness, competence, and character, without exception.

At the very least, the Pentagon should review the combat readiness of gender-integrated units. Every serious study of the subject has indicated grave risks, suggesting that these units’ preparedness and capacity to fight are undermined by this latest transformation. The next administration has an obligation

to update that literature, either confirming or revising those long-standing results.

As President Donald Trump discovered in his first term, however, the implementation of policy is contingent on an effective bureaucracy that follows the orders of politically accountable civilians. To this end, a number of important structural reforms in the Pentagon should accompany targeted efforts to dismantle the DEI bureaucracy at the Department of Defense. Without these changes to the way in which the military operates, even perfectly sound policy would be impossible to implement—and, therefore, meaningless.

Reforms to the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986

President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1942 to work with Great Britain's combined chiefs of staff and serve as the president's military advisors during World War II. Postwar, the JCS assumed the role of military advisors to the president, dependent on unanimous consent. In 1947, amidst an intense postwar malaise and perception of weakness, President Truman used the National Security Act to establish the position of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) to consolidate the advise-and-consent role of the Joint Chiefs and build military credibility. At the same time, the National Security Act brought the previously separate uniformed services together under the aegis of the DoD and the civilian leadership of the Secretary of Defense.

The increasing complexity of modern warfare, however, made interservice frictions a major challenge as the new DoD began to operate. It was not until 1986, however, that Congress took major action to reduce that friction. The Goldwater-Nichols Act represented the most substantial reforms to the DoD since its founding under the Truman administration. In addition to implementing other changes, Goldwater-Nichols cut both the Joint Chiefs and the service secretaries out of the chain of command, while formally uniting the responsibilities and power of

military advice in the single person of the chairman.

Section 3 of the Goldwater-Nichols Act of states: “In enacting this Act, it is the intent of Congress, consistent with the congressional declaration of policy in section 2 of the National Security Act of 1947 (50 U.S.C. 401)—(1) to reorganize the Department of Defense and strengthen civilian authority in the Department.” The actual effect was quite the opposite, empowering and emboldening the Joint Staff at the expense of civilian leadership.

It is important to be clear about what the role of the CJCS and, by extension, the entire Joint Staff might include, while always understanding that nothing in law provides for the CJCS to wield decision-making power.

Under 10 U.S.C. § 163, which governs the chairman’s role, the president may “direct that communications between the President or the Secretary of Defense and the commanders of the . . . combatant commands be transmitted through the Chairman” and may “assign duties to the Chairman to assist the President and the Secretary of Defense in performing their command function.” Additionally, “the Secretary of Defense may assign to the Chairman . . . responsibility for overseeing the activities of the combatant commands,” although “such assignment by the Secretary to the Chairman does not confer any command authority on the Chairman.” The chairman also “serves as the spokesman for the commanders of the combatant commands especially on the operational requirements of their commands.”

The 2017 National Defense Authorization Act included new language concerning the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Under the new law, the chairman should be responsible “in matters relating to global military strategic and operational integration” and in “advising the secretary on the allocation and transfer of forces among geographic and functional combatant commands” to address threats that exist across regions and arenas of war.

Congress is beginning to recognize the problem. The 2019 National Defense Strategy Commission's final report stated that "Civilian voices have been relatively muted on issues at the center of U.S. defense and national security policy, undermining the concept of civilian control," and that "It is critical that DOD—and Congress—reverse the unhealthy trend in which decision-making is drifting away from civilian leaders on issues of national importance."⁵¹

In an effort to enhance civilian control of the military, the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 marginalized politically appointed service secretaries by excising them from the operational chain of command. Although Congress simultaneously removed the JCS from that role, too, the establishment of the JCS as military advisors with specific "advise and consent" responsibilities in the chain of military decision-making ensured they would retain increasing power, resources, and influence.

The president and Congress should clarify and circumscribe the role of the Joint Staff in operational warfighting. The Joint Staff, and the CJCS himself, should not serve as a bureaucratic commentariat on the details of current warfighting. They can synchronize with combatant commands on capabilities and provide that advice to the president but they should not remain as a growing piece of the organizational chart themselves.

Much of the Joint Staff's expansionism is baked into the letter of the law. Consider 10 U.S. Code § 155:

In the joint arena, a body of senior flag or general officers assists in resolving matters that do not require JCS attention. Each Service Chief appoints an operations deputy who works with the Director, Joint Staff, to form the subsidiary body known as the Operations Deputies or the OPSDEPS. They meet in sessions chaired by the Director, Joint Staff, to consider issues of lesser importance or to review major issues before they reach the Joint Chiefs of Staff. With the exception of the Director, this body is not part of the Joint Staff. There is also a subsidiary body known as the Deputy Operations Deputies (DEPOPSDEPs), composed of the Vice Director, Joint Staff, and a two-star flag or

general officer appointed by each Service Chief. Currently, the DEPOPSDEPs are the Service directors for plans. Issues come before the DEPOPSDEPs to be settled at their level or forwarded to the OPSDEPs. Except for the Vice Director, Joint Staff, the DEPOPSDEPs are not part of the Joint Staff.⁵²

This massive bureaucracy of high-ranking uniformed officers cannot possibly be justified for the Joint Staff to serve its intended purpose. In practice, even as Congress has gestured at limiting its powers, the Joint Staff has grown dramatically without any parallel increase in operating civilian authorities. It can hardly have happened otherwise when this is the legal structure Congress chooses to set up.

Future conservative administrations should restrict the staff size of the Joint Staff to only those personnel assigned to the individual service chiefs themselves. With this still-significant staff, service chiefs would be well equipped to advise the JCS, SECDEF, and president on military matters—their actual statutory role. The responsibilities that merit DEPOPSDEPs and other extensive bureaucratic operations should fall under the purview of service secretaries themselves.

During World War II, there was one officer for every 6,000 troops. In 2017, there was one officer for every 1,400 troops.⁵³ Even Secretary Gates's 2017 NDAA Reduction of General Officers only reduced the total number by 5%.⁵⁴ This explosion in numbers can be explained in large part by a bureaucratic bloat among uniformed personnel that is overtaking responsibilities rightly held by civilian leadership. Reforming Goldwater-Nichols to clarify lines of authority will strengthen civilian control and can help ensure appropriate accountability and oversight. This oversight is essential to any effort at reform.

Accountability for General Officers

The president's authority to appoint and remove military officers is derived from Article II, Section 2 of the United States Constitution, which designates the president as the command-

er-in-chief of the Armed Forces.⁵⁵ Last century, this power was affirmed in practice when Congress examined President Harry S. Truman's controversial decision to relieve General Douglas MacArthur of his duties and determined it to be "within the constitutional power of the President."⁵⁶ Article II fully and exclusively grants the president broad powers to command and control the military, including the authority to appoint and remove officers to ensure the effective execution of military operations and the defense of the nation.

Three- and four-star generals only hold those grades when they are held to fill roles of "importance and responsibility." If the president terminates a three- or four-star assignment and the general does not apply for voluntary assignment, he will revert back to a two-star rank. If a former three- or four-star general is relieved from his position and reverts to the lower general rank and still refuses to request retirement, the president may be able to dismiss the officer from the Armed Forces entirely.⁵⁷

Presidents have been wary to exercise these powers, and understandably so. Politicians, even commanders-in-chief, are fearful of the perception that they are working to politicize the military. Given our extraordinary challenges, however, the full extent of the president's constitutional authority will be required to *roll back* such politicization. Three- and four-star ranks can no longer be viewed as sacrosanct, and even the highest-ranking officers must understand themselves as serving wholly under the constitutional authority of the elected commander-in-chief.

Any president who is serious about reform must be willing to enforce accountability among general officers. Those who refuse to recommit to a merit-first service, or those who prove unable to do so, are not entitled to extraconstitutional privileges.

In 2023, Senator Tommy Tuberville of Alabama placed a hold on all general officer military promotions over Secretary Austin's decision to use public money for service members' and dependents' abortion-related expenses. While Tuberville eventually backed down, his stance provided a crucial opportunity to examine the political state of our military leadership.

Research findings revealed concerning trends regarding the politicization of service and the conduct of senior officers. Firstly, the research indicated that a significant portion of military officers, approximately 42%,⁵⁸ engaged in behaviors that politicized their service in objectionable ways. These included controversial tweets from social media accounts that carried an identification of the user as a uniformed military officer, speeches at PRIDE or Equality Day events, Women's Equality Day presentations, and op-eds about "systemic racism."

Research also identified three to four dozen senior officers whose public conduct was deemed worthy of termination. These officers exhibited behavior or actions that were deemed inappropriate, unethical, or incompatible with the standards of conduct expected of military leaders. Admiral Shoshana Chatfield, for instance, publicly insisted that service members should be skeptical regarding laws from Congress because so many representatives and senators are white men.

Republicans and Democrats have defended this conduct by explaining the duty of military officers to follow the orders of politically appointed officials. That call for understanding is warranted, but it misses the mark. While uniformed officers must implement policy and follow orders, they are not required to be—and, in fact, must not be—parrots of the political ideology of civilian leaders. The tradition of military officership was born of an absolutely apolitical class of professionals. Leading generals, such as William T. Sherman and "Black Jack" Pershing, considered it absurd for officers to vote in American elections.

If it is to recover from the present crisis, the American military must salvage a sense of the profession removed from the “politics and ideologies” of the prevailing culture.⁵⁹ Of course, military leaders must not be ignorant of other, more political domains like diplomacy and economics. But they must be resolutely focused on and grounded in the military profession that undergirds U.S. grand strategy.

The only way to ensure this focus is to restore fully the constitutional mandate of civilian control. That restoration in turn will empower a motivated commander-in-chief to clean house in the Pentagon, and to reorient our Armed Forces around the singular standard of professional excellence. This roadmap, if followed carefully, could save our military and our nation from a far greater crisis when the next conflict arrives.



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