

Secretary Mark T. Esper Message to the Force on DOD Diversity and Inclusiveness

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Secretary of Defense Dr. Mark T. Esper

Hello. I am Secretary of Defense Mark Esper. Today, I want to speak to all members of the Department about a subject that is timely, important, and absolutely essential to the morale, cohesion, and readiness of the military: ensuring that our ranks reflect and are inclusive of the American people we have sworn an oath to protect and defend.

For over 200 years, the United States military has fought to defend the nation and our interests abroad, and we have been very successful in doing just that.

Over the last several decades, we have defined ourselves as the greatest military force in history. We have reached this apex not just because of our doctrine and technology, or our tactics and warfighting skills. We have reached it because we are an all-volunteer force of patriots who believe in America and what she stands for; we believe in the Constitution and the rights it guarantees all Americans; and we believe in values such as courage, honor, commitment, duty, and teamwork – all of which are hallmarks of our men and women in uniform.

The United States military is sworn to support and defend these rights and freedoms that make our country special, and we internalize these values and behaviors that make each of you so special as well. That's why we are willing to lay down our lives and risk everything for the Constitution, the American people, and each other.

Our military has also reached this level of excellence because we attract the best America has to offer: young men and women across the land and beyond our shores who not only love our country and share these values, but who also represent a wide range of creeds, religions, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and other attributes that not only distinguish us as individuals, but also make us stronger when combined together.

I, myself, am keenly aware of how diversity is inherent in the foundations of this country. I am a second generation American whose paternal grandparents emigrated from Lebanon around the turn of the last century, and whose Irish ancestors from my mother's side came to this country decades before them. Both halves of my family brought together different cultures, different languages, and different strands of the same faith from their homelands, but each saw America as a land of hope and equal opportunity. I also saw a duty to serve, which is why I went to West Point, and then spent over two decades in uniform.

I recently shared with you my pride in being a member of an institution – the United States military – that embraces diversity and inclusion, and rejects hate, bigotry, and unlawful discrimination in all forms.

More often than not, we have led on these issues.

However, we are not immune to the forces of bias and prejudice – whether visible or invisible, conscious or unconscious. We know this bias burdens many of our Service members, and has direct and indirect impact on the experiences of our minority members, the cultural and ethnic diversity of the force, and representation in our officer ranks. These things have no place in our military; they have no place in our country.

Leaders across the Department and the services are determined to make a difference on this front, and we take this responsibility seriously. It is now time for us to lead once again, as we have done many times in the past. It is time to lead not just because it's consistent with our values and our legacy, and it's the right thing to do, but also because this is how we will become even greater than we are today.

Removing bias and prejudice in all its forms, and ensuring equal opportunity and respect for all will make us stronger, more capable, and more ready as a joint force.

A diverse and inclusive DoD draws out and builds upon the best in each of us; it builds esprit de corps, forges teamwork, and brings out the best between us. In short, it brings out the best in America.

Over the past week, I have had the opportunity to speak with the senior civilian and military leadership – both officer and enlisted – on the topic of racial diversity. We all agree that it is time to lead once again on this issue as America’s most respected institution, and a globally-recognized leader when it comes to building diverse, winning teams, and creating opportunity for all.

As such, I want to announce three initiatives that will launch a new era, marked by a reinvigorated effort to build a better U.S. military that pursues equal opportunity and aspires to true meritocracy with greater vigor and purpose:

First, I am standing up a new, internal “Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion in the Military,” which will conduct a 6-month sprint to develop concrete, actionable recommendations to increase racial diversity and ensure equal opportunity across all ranks, and especially in the officer corps. The members of this Board will have the carte blanche and resources to chart their own course. They will report to me, and will be tasked to bring me their findings and recommendations in December.

Second, I will begin the process of standing up a “Defense Advisory Committee on Diversity and Inclusion in the Armed Services” that will mirror the well-regarded and successful Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services. This Committee will be a permanent structure, comprised of a diverse group of Americans committed to the task at hand. They will report to me, and will have the independence and resources necessary to get us where we need to be. My goal is to have this Advisory Committee formed and operating before the end of the year, and to build upon the work of the Defense Board I’m establishing today.

The approved initiatives that come out of the Board, and later the Advisory Committee that replaces it, will provide updates on action items, along with associated metrics, covered in the quarterly readiness briefings that are presented to me by the chain of command. In short, this issue will have my personal time and attention every step of the way.

Finally, I have directed the civilian and uniformed leadership of the Pentagon to bring me ideas in the next two weeks – by the end of June – that we can begin implementing NOW, such as removing photos from promotion, school, and command selection boards – this is something I pushed as Secretary of the Army, as we worked to overhaul our personnel system.

I am convinced that there are a number of great ideas already out there right now, large and small, that can help us make important strides in ensuring the Armed Forces look more like the broader society we serve.

Over the coming days and months, I will be out in the field to meet with our service members and hear their views and concerns about race in the military. I will have the chance to listen and learn from their personal experiences, and gain a better sense of where to focus our efforts.

And, in that spirit, I invite all of you to share with me your good ideas. I want to hear from you. I don't want anyone to think you do not have a role, or cannot play a part, in this conversation – one that is so critical to our esprit, our camaraderie, and our readiness. These are not problems that can be identified and solved from the Pentagon alone. We need your help.

My goal is to effect an enterprise-wide, organizational and cultural shift. The actions I have identified today are just the first steps, but there is more to be done. Over the next few months, I will be working across the Department to identify additional ways to foster lasting change, from recruiting, career track selection, and retention; to assignments, schools, and promotions; to military justice and everything in between and beyond.

While we pursue these initiatives, I ask each and every one of you to reflect upon the issues of race, bias, and inequality in our ranks, and have the tough, candid discussions with your superiors, your peers, and your troops that this issue demands. This is an added responsibility for our Officers and NCOs, who must also double down on your mentorship of up-and-coming minority leaders, and make diversity and inclusion a priority. This is what I expect of leaders.

In the meantime, take care of one another and talk to each other. Have pride in being an integral part of the greatest military force in the world, and have confidence that we will continue to lead on issues that impact all of us. And at all times, keep in your heart and your mind the oath you swore to the Constitution of the United States, and the rights and freedoms it promises for us and our fellow Americans.

Thank you.

