

4 Takeaways as Lawmakers Probe Diversity, Equity, Inclusion at Pentagon

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President Joe Biden has extensively promoted diversity, equity, and inclusion as the focus of government agencies, including the Defense Department and its armed services.

The House Armed Services Committee held a subcommittee hearing Thursday to address whether these programs are making the military stronger or actually are wasting resources, creating more division, and contributing to record-low recruitment numbers.

Here are four takeaways from the hearing.

1. Rise of DEI Administration, Fall of Meritocracy

Rep. Jim Banks, R-Ind., chairman of the Armed Services subcommittee on military personnel, spoke about the problems with diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in his opening statement.

Banks said that the meritocratic nature of the military, which allows people of diverse backgrounds to succeed, is an important principle to uphold. However, he warned, this ethos may be waning under Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Biden's appointee.

“We are now in danger of losing those meritocratic principles to the politicization of our armed forces, thanks first and foremost to the ever-expanding bureaucracy of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies, regulations, and trainings,” Banks said.

The Indiana Republican then said this growing effort is based on “faulty science and misguided principles,” and that anti-bias training used by the military in fact may be causing more bias.

“In a review of 418 prejudice-reduction experiments, [Princeton psychology professor] Elizabeth Levy Paluck and co-authors concluded that much of the anti-bias training is, quote, misguided,” Banks said. “And even in the few studies that showed any effect at all in reducing bias, those effects disappeared over a short period of time. Yet the Department of Defense and the [armed] services have embraced DEI training full cloth.”

Banks then noted that Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had said in a Senate hearing that the Defense Department “expended 5,359,311 man hours for Secretary Austin’s extremism standdown and an additional 529,711 man hours for DEI-specific training.”

DEI is an acronym for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

“That is a lot of training hours spent away from honing warfighting capabilities, knowledge, and skills,” Banks said.

2. Recruitment Challenges

Diversity programs are necessary to boost the military, Alex Wagner, the Air Force’s assistant secretary for manpower and reserve affairs, said in his opening statement.

“Intentional diversity and inclusion efforts allow us to tap into the full talents of the American people and then leverage those talents to defend the nation,” Wagner said.

“Our diversity and inclusion initiatives are focused on talent acquisition and development and informed by science and business best practices, congressional mandates, data-focused policy reviews and assessments and the lived experiences of airmen and guardians working together every single day.”

The armed services face a severe recruitment crisis, the worst since the military became an all-volunteer force in 1973. The Army recently dropped physical and aptitude requirements to bring in more recruits.

Rep. Jack Bergman, R-Mich., said readiness needs to be the primary focus of the military. He asked the committee witnesses whether diversity programs have a positive or negative effect on recruitment. They all answered “positive” or “very positive.”

“So why haven’t we made our numbers?” Bergman asked.

After a short period of silence, Bergman pressed the panelists on the question, asking whether diversity, equity, and inclusion programs are solving the problem.

Gilbert Cisneros Jr., under secretary of defense for personnel and readiness, said: “I think DEI is going to give us a larger pool to pull from.”

“I will look forward to the numbers, [since] we see Sept. 30 whether we hit our numbers or not,” Bergman said, referring to the end of fiscal year 2023.

Bergman asked the same question about the effects of diversity programs on retention and promotion in addition to recruitment, to which, again, all the witnesses on the panel replied that there were positive effects.

“The reason I wanted to ask you all those questions is that we’re going to have the same questions next year,” Bergman said. “I’m going to ask it exactly the same way and what I expect when you say ‘positive,’ I want to see numbers.”

3. A Top Diversity Official Who Disparages Whites

Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., asked about Kelisa Wing, the Pentagon’s newly reassigned diversity, equity, and inclusion chief, who has made racially disparaging remarks on Twitter.

Wing, whose Defense Department role since 2021 had been to oversee the Pentagon’s diversity education programs, tweeted this out on July 23, 2020:

I’m so exhausted at these white folx in these [professional development] sessions this lady actually had the CAUdacity to say black people can be racist too. I had to stop the session and give Karen the BUSINESS ... we are not the majority and don’t have) why ask for assistance.

The disparaging term “caudacity” refers to “Caucasian audacity,” while “Karen” is a disparaging term for white women.

Stefanik asked Cisneros whether this was an acceptable statement from a Defense Department employee.

“I do agree that that is not acceptable,” Cisneros replied.

Cisneros said Wing had been reassigned to another division without responsibilities for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

4. Political Ideology Invading Military

A significant theme of the House hearing was the injection of political ideology into military practices.

Banks pressed the Pentagon's Cisneros on how political ideology and political bias are becoming significant problems in the military, fueled by DEI training.

"How do you eliminate political bias or partisan politics from DEI training?" Banks asked.

Cisneros responded that the Pentagon's DEI training sessions don't have a political bias.

"For us, it's about ensuring that people are treated with respect and dignity," Cisneros said.

"Do you have a discussion on your team on how to eliminate partisan politics and ideology from DEI trainings? Does that discussion ever occur?" Banks asked.

Cisneros responded that it didn't

Democrats on the House subcommittee insisted that Republicans are politicizing the military by how they call diversity programs into question.

"I feel that the conversation we're having right now, by its literal nature and its words, is divisive and politicizing of the military," Rep. Chrissy Houlahan, D-Pa., said. "And I feel as though one of the reasons why—not *the* reason why—recruiting may be seeing a sag is that people don't see themselves in the military, don't see their nation in the military, and I'm embarrassed by the tone and tenor of this conversation."

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